

# CARAVAN TO MECCA

BY WARD GREENE

**T**wo puffs of white smoke became mere horizon, a last toot wandered back through heat and silence, and only a banana peel fresh among the cinders told Sycamore that a train had come and gone.

There was, however, one other deposit. On the steps of the deserted station a girl sat fork-legged, rubbing her feet and glowering at a pig runting in the dust a hundred yards along the road, the sole life Sycamore presented to its Maker at noon of a weekday. She had on a red hat, a dirty calico dress and silk stockings; a pair of purple slippers with large glass buckles reposed on the planking beside her; and these, with the stockings and the hat, gave her a raffish elegance that clanged arrestingly against her other garment and the face with its pout of dirt and disgust.

The girl's feet hurt, for until an hour before they had never known store shoes. To physical pain she traced part of her present unhappiness; more to the calamity of her ejection from the Peachburg train because she had lacked fare. Keenly she desired Peachburg, where were more hats, shoes, stockings, and—one hoped—ways to acquire them.

Back in the other direction, some scores of miles over the sky's rim, was a hole called Catamount, which she hated because it was just such another hole as this, and in it her father's buggy whip, which she feared because she had stolen thirty-two dollars and forty cents, his all. Back

there, too, but a score of miles nearer, was Caneyville, first pause in her flight; a camp-meeting, unexpectedly stirring; and a youth who had conquered more under the grape-vines than Heaven could win among the hymns and the shouters. Well, she did not regret that surrender; her virtue, she had resolved, she was good and shut of along with her family and her hope of salvation. But she did mourn the impulse that had driven her from the train at the first stop that morning and caused her, in the market-place, to squander recklessly, with the result that, once aboard another Argo, she was dismayed to find her resources short a good three dollars of the sum necessary to bring her to the bright fleece.

And so the conductor had put her off. . . .

"The durn skunk," said Cora Potts.

She glared at Sycamore, and Sycamore, forever bogged in lethargy, yawned back.

## II

Some distance away, but blowing closer every second, sounded the sharp blat-blat of an automobile horn. Cora calculated the driver must be making all of thirty miles an hour over the treacherous red clay passing for a highway in those parts. She wiggled her toes into the slippers and yanked her skirt down; then waited intently, for it seemed to her she could hear other horns echoing faintly the first.

The car approached Sycamore from the south, coming explosively. Up the hill, across the railroad tracks—bump, rattle, blat—and a blat and a renewed burst of gas for Sycamore's hello and goodbye.

Cora had but a twinkle of big wheels, two men in goggles and something like a flag lashing the wind. Well, sir, she thought, you couldn't pass the time of day with those buglopers. She settled herself for the echoes. Here they came, not so fast, not so impertinently, but automobiles all right, scads of them, a regular parade.

Automobiles were no longer a sensation to the wiregrass in 1906, though most farmers hung on to wagons and buggies and a few still drove oxen. Cora had never ridden in an automobile, but she had seen aplenty and what fascinated her now, eclipsing her personal woes, was not so much the number and magnificence of the cars as their purpose. Placards festooned them along with the baggage piled and roped on their running-boards: "Good Roads Make Good Times" . . . "Gangway For Good Roads Tourists" . . . "Get Right With Good Roads and God." Banners referring to "bond issues" were even more puzzling. . . . The sign that interested Cora said simply: "Peachburg or Bust!"

She got up and walked a few steps to the edge of the road, and there she leaned negligently against a sapling, inspecting the occupants of the cars, who shouted and waved as they were jolted past. At first she waved back, but after a bit her attitude changed. She did not wave, she tilted the red hat to one side, her right hand dangled on her hip, occasionally she "switched herself" in the manner of a dog wagging.

Here and there in the procession, Cora noticed, was a female form bundled in duster, goggles and hat with veil flying, but most of the cars held men only: ample,

red-faced men; men with song in their hearts, booming ahead of them, floating back as they vanished; and all with a smirk and a yell for the girl by the road.

"Hello, baby!" they yelled. . . .

"Hello, kiddo!"

"Where did you get that hat?"

Cora, though her switching and tossing increased, was not displeased, even by the question about the hat. Actually she was wishing, in the intervals between cars, that she could yell back for a hitch, and realizing that it wouldn't do much good, so swift they whooshed by. Hence she was gratified when a car finally bounced over the hill, whipped into the glade across from her, and stopped.

Two dirty shoes gave Cora, approaching, her only clue to the driver. They protruded from beneath what was unquestionably the tour's smallest, filthiest, shakiest vehicle, not only lacking the impressive signs but piled high with bags and suitcases so that it looked like a pygmy moving-van. Here was no sumptuous chariot for stranded beauty. Nevertheless, Cora bided the din of a hammer until it ceased and the shoes began to kick. She smiled radiantly on the young man who emerged.

Through streaks of black oil, he blinked his surprise.

Cora swizzled her hips.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," said the young man.

"Gimme a ride?"

"Sure. How far you goin'?"

"Oh, down the road a piece."

"Hop in, then. We gotta ball the jack."

They balled the jack. To Cora, wedged among luggage, feet hoisted, knees doubled, her first automobile ride was thrilling only with terror that any instant would be her last. Eating dust, holding on with both hands, she had no time to wonder how in

the nation the young man did it. Not only did he pass other cars, hurdle canyons and charge without pause at torrents, but he managed to sing, too.

"Oh, the little brown bull came down from the mountains—hey, laddie! hi, laddie!" sang the young man.

"They say that old Peachburg she ain't got no style, but she's style all the while, style all the while!" he sang.

"If you," he sang, "can live with a face like that, then I'm gonna get well!"

Cora bridled. What if her face was dirty? So was his. Still, maybe he didn't mean it personal—it was only a song. Certainly his expression had not altered a dot; he stared dead ahead and sang tonelessly at the top of his voice. Song after song. And driving like Sam Hill.

Suddenly the car stopped, so suddenly that Cora all but pitched out.

The young man regarded her. With his hand on the wheel, he sang, "And another little drink wouldn't do us no harm!"

He produced a bottle.

"How 'bout ya?"

Cora drank and shuddered.

"What's that?" she demanded.

"Rye. Judge Buck's best. . . . Down the hatch, baby!"

"I don't like it. Who's Judge Buck?"

"He's my boss—and the biggest guy on this little ole tour. That's his coat you're sittin' on. All this stuff's his. He's some guy. Come on, kid, let's ball the jack!"

They balled the jack some more. Then a town leaped out of the cotton fields, and with it cheering and bright colors. Cora's jehu brought his cyclone to rest among the dusty squadrons lining the public square.

"I gotta look up the Judge," he said.

He stared at her, for the first time seeming to realize possibilities in his passenger.

"Say," he inquired, "you got where you was goin'?"

Cora's wiggle was half irresolution. She said, "Naw—I reckon it's quite a piece yet. You keep on towards Peachburg, don't you?"

"Sure. Peachburg or bust by tomorrow night. You wait here till I find the Judge. Then we'll ball the jack, huh, baby?"

She was gazing beyond him across the shimmering square where bunting fluttered and people milled about long tables and a film of smoke betokened barbecue pits.

"Sure, but don't fret yourself, I'll be all right," said Cora.

### III

On a platform under trees a man perspired and shouted huskily. Good roads. More bonds. Our fair State. Pep, progress and prosperity. Around him a lot of farmers stood and listened. Occasionally they spat. Cora wondered why none of the tourists listened; they were all over at the tables, eating barbecue and emptying pitchers of beer, or else clubbed in little groups, fiercely discussing their cars and this hill and that mudhole on the road behind.

Cora had mingled with them casually. The pork and the Brunswick stew had been excellent and the beer refreshing. She had eaten three platters of the stew, drunk a little beer and much lemonade, and topped off with two pieces of frosted chocolate cake. Now, grazing on a third slice, she felt fine; she even tried to listen to the man. But her eyes kept trailing toward the tourists.

They were, she decided, not so much. A passel of city folks, and putting on airs like all city folks do. Especially the women. If they weren't the homely bunch!—all doodled out in those veils and coats, and fussing with their hair and faces like they would look any better if the dirt did come

off, and hollering at the men for water and barbecue and all whataill. The men must be glad the women hadn't come along more'n they did.

The men weren't so bad. They looked jolly, even if they were kind of fat and old; most of them thirty or forty, she bet; except those fellows over in the Franklin. But, outside the ones the women pestered, they were having them a time—you could see that, whooping and laughing and carrying on; and the way they were pouring out that beer, and the stuff in their bottles, too, was a caution!

Cora kept her eye on the Franklin. The car, one of the few makes she knew, was by no means the grandest in the assembly. Yet it certainly beat, she thought, that little rattletrap with all those grips in it. She finished the cake and slowly wiped her hands.

Somebody on her left tittered. Cora glared. The durned old hen. . . . But the direction of the woman's glance perturbed her.

Of the fact that her dress, though surely good enough for any company hereabouts, scarcely equaled the glory of her head and feet, Cora had been aware, vaguely promising herself something in pink satin when circumstances should smile. She had not realized amid the showers of food and oratory that considerable of the former had fallen on herself; now, to her chagrin, she saw beer and gravy stains topping previous grime; furthermore, across each sleeve, four rich chocolate furrows saluted her and shook her poise.

Cora quickly folded her arms. She appeared, for a little, to be simply a young woman absorbed by eloquence; then as the speaker ended, a young woman idly strolling, innocently projecting her attention toward the automobiles. One, deserving her admiration the least, drew her close.

She leaned over and lackadaisically made a few passes.

The Judge's coat, it developed, was just a light duster like the women's. It was a little big, but it would do. Thoughtfully, as she sauntered away, Cora applied to her face a silk handkerchief she found in one pocket.

The fellow in the front seat of the Franklin didn't look twice before he grinned. He was an up-and-comer, she bet.

"We-e-ll! Hello, baby! Where you been on this straw-ride?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" sauced Cora. "That's a nice car you got."

"You tell 'em, baby! Want to see her ball the jack? We're gonna light out from here. Hey, Ed!—you an' Ernie—we gotta passenger! Come on, kid, let's hit the grit!"

Cora swung the coat left and right as Ed and Ernie galloped up. She laughed.

"I'll ride with you-all a little piece," she conceded. "In front?"

"In front, baby—and watch us go from here. 'Oh, the little brown bull came down from the mountains—hey, laddie! Hi, laddie! . . .'"

#### IV

The trouble with good roads tours—mused Cora Potts—was that you stopped too much. All these little hick towns. They were laying for you like a cat for a mouse. Something called a pilot car was ahead, and every time you hit a town the whole caboodle was out to meet you, waving flags and yelling and honing for you to spend a couple of weeks. Then you had to get out and eat some more and drink some more, and usually the same man made the same speech, and you had to laugh and cheer at the place where he said the folks against the bond issue ought to be bored for the hollow horn.

It was pretty good fun between stops. Their automobile went lickety-split, Ed and Ernie in the back seat sang "She's style all the while, style all the while!" and Jimmy tried to get fresh but, on account of him steering, you didn't have to shove him off much. Sometimes other cars passed you and the people in them waved and whooped, and sometimes you passed other cars and gave those people the ha-ha. When Ernie handed up the bottle, you could tilt it and just pretend to drink; if a little trickled in, what the hell! the taste went away in a minute and you felt fine. The land fled behind, the sun and the wind licked your face, and if you were full of sand and grit, why, what the hell! so was everybody else, and in that coat a calico dress was as good as a ball gown. You looked like the other women, or a darn sight better. You could even kick your slippers off your hot feet and the boys just laughed.

"We'll take 'em off and leave 'em off, kid!" Jimmy said.

Only the towns were a bother. Cora had to talk then, though, thank goodness, nobody asked where she came from or whither she fared. She had to get out, too, and that meant putting on her slippers and maybe meeting the fellow she'd ditched. Finally, she had to eat and drink, and though after while she stuck to lemonade and learned to drop fried chicken in her pockets till she could throw it out on the road, she began to feel disquietingly uncomfortable.

That was about six o'clock in the afternoon, and Jimmy said the next town, Vulcania, was where the tour stopped for the night.

"And then—Oh, baby!—'Where was Moses when the light went out?'—"

He put an arm around her and squeezed.

"Watch out!" said Cora. "Drive careful—hon."

Jimmy was pretty drunk. So were Ed and Ernie. They were drinking corn, some stuff a fellow gave them at the last town, and it was terrible stuff to smell, let alone swallow. Cora gagged on it once, and after that she just shook her head when Ernie handed up the bottle.

The boys didn't pester her to drink. "Down the hatch!" they said. They scarcely noticed Cora's temperance. Ed was singing the little brown bull song, Ernie was singing 'If you can live with a face like that,' and Jimmy was sort of singing and sort of mumbling. She couldn't hear much of what Jimmy said, so she just smirked and artfully grabbed his hand when necessary. Soon she didn't have to do that because darkness fell and Jimmy switched on his lights and stuck to driving. Edged to her side of the car, Cora let her head slump where the wind struck. Her head felt a mile big. She wished she could get sick.

Vulcania's lamps, jiggling out of the night, roused her. Another town—but it looked bigger than most. Jimmy went by a lot of cars in the square, and stopped in front of a long porch all lit up.

"Down a hatch!" he said. "I'll get room."

He said something about another little drink.

"—wouldn't do us any harm!" sang Ed and Ernie.

Cora stood in the gassy glare from the porch, watching Ed and Ernie squabbling over the way to unstrap the bags and not thinking about anything but how big her head was. When Jimmy returned, she followed him up the steps and down a corridor with matting on it.

He entered the room, staggering. Cora limped along. She sat down on the bed. Her head whirled. Then Jimmy lurched

out of a bathroom, he fell half on top of her, and she was drowned in a miasma of corn liquor.

"Watch out!" gasped Cora. Blindly, she threw him off. . . .

Nobody was there when Cora emerged from the bathroom. She felt tons better. On the floor was Jimmy's hat, in the middle of the bed an empty pint bottle. But that was all. The room was bare, clean—and hers.

She stood on the threshold, listening to distant singing, before she turned the key in the latch. Once, deep in the night, someone pounded on her door, but when she waited soundlessly, whoever it was went away.

## V

The world had risen with the sun. At five Cora was bright-eyed, and before six she was in the hotel dining-room, hungry, she confessed to the darky waiter, as a bear. Though the room was empty, she hobbled to a table in the corner favorable to the disposal of footwear; as she sat there, face scrubbed ruddy, hat pulled tight, her coat neat from ears to ankles, she looked a praiseworthy example of the American woman's ingenuity under stress of travel.

The waiter was impressed.

"Yas'm," he said. "I'll bring de breakfus' right away!"

Cora made a straight march through eggs, ham, fried chicken, hot biscuit, preserves and other staples of a country hotel breakfast in the South. She topped off with buckwheat cakes and sorghum.

Touring, remarked the waiter to the cook, suttinly made white ladies bust down on de vittals. . . .

When she saw the old gentleman, Cora was mopping the last of the buckwheats and, for the first time, doing a little wor-

rying. Who was to pay for this meal? She had, wrapped in the silk handkerchief, coins enough, yet to relinquish them seemed a shame. Moreover—what then? She was hot for touring; were touring and tourists, particularly Jimmy, this morning hot for her? She wished she knew some of the folks in those other cars. And then the old gentleman came in.

He came in stormily, white whiskers snapping and red cheeks puffing. In the glint of his eye could be read the need for audience, and Cora alone was there to fill it.

"Good morning, ma'am!" She raised speculative eyes, and the old gentleman, resolutely seating himself, was off. . . . This tour was an outrage and a disgrace to the State. By Godfrey Mighty, if they ever got him on another they would have to hog-tie him and drag him. Bad roads, bad weather, bad management, bad food—and damn bad drink. She'd forgive his French, ma'am, if she'd tasted the vile stuff they forced on him last night. Not fit for a dog! Bad people on this tour, too. A regiment of thieves. "Damn thieves, I repeat, ma'am!" Why, confound 'em, they'd steal the tires off your automobile, and it running, if you gave 'em half a chance. He'd be lucky if he got to Peachburg with enough clothes to bury him in. Look at 'em—present company always and particularly excepted, was there one in the crowd worth the shot and powder to kill 'em? His own boy was as bad as any. Here he'd raised that damn boy like a son, and if he left him alone for a second with the baggage, somebody walked off with it lock, stock and barrel!

The old gentleman was considerably riled, judged Cora. She didn't know what to say, so she said, "It's a sin and a shame!" and the old gentleman declared it was, indeed, a sin and a shame, and if that damn



waiter didn't bring his coffee pretty quick, he'd have the hide off him.

"Yas, suh! Yas, suh!" said the waiter, and the old gentleman told him to get the devil out of there.

But his explosion, or Cora's sympathy, appeared to have mollified him, for he bowed gallantly for no reason at all and, after eyeing her sharply, remarked that he did not recall seeing her before.

"I been with my own crowd," said Cora.

"It was the rest of humanity's loss, ma'am!" declared the old gentleman.

Cora could not help a giggle. She cut a glance across the table to discover the old gentleman still staring at her. Deliberately, then, she winked.

"You ole devil!" said she.

It was at this moment the door banged open and another gentleman bustled in whom Cora recognized as the fellow who always made the speech. He crossed the room at a trot, nodded and grinned at Cora as though she were a lifelong friend, and clapped her companion on the shoulder.

"The top of the morning, Judge!"

The old gentleman roared, "Godfrey damn you, Joe, get out of here and never speak to me again!"

Joe merely clapped the old gentleman once more; he nodded and grinned at Cora, and said to her, "He's always this way before he's had a nip," and to the old gentleman, "Cheer up, Judge, what you need is the hair of the dog!"

The Judge looked up, of a sudden wistful as a child.

"You got any?" he whispered.

"Have I got any? Did you hear him, ma'am?—Say, what kind of a tour do you think this is? What kind of a manager do you think Joe Bascom is? What kind of folks do you think go on good roads tours, anyhow, Judge?"

Slowly, at each question, the Judge had begun to rise, little beads glistening on his temples, on his nose. But halfway up he halted, steadying himself by the table. Cora was conscious of watery pupils gyrating between rheumy lids. It dawned on her that the Judge was winking.

"Madam," he said, "your servant! Will you—ah—join us?"

The gentlemen waited as for the marquesa's whim.

"Well," simpered Cora Potts, "I don't care if I do!"

Joe Bascom took care of the waiter. Cora took care of her slippers. In Bascom's room, the Judge raised his glass.

"To our fair recruit!" he toasted.

"She's style all the while!" pronounced Joe Bascom.

Cora's hips waggled.

"Down the hatch!" she directed.

## VI

Five miles out of Peachburg, Mrs. Wellington Minor's curiosity could restrain itself no longer.

"George Minor," she said for the fiftieth time, "if you don't get out of this automobile, and walk up there, and see what they're *doing*, I'll get right out and go myself!"

"Aw, mama, they're not doing anything—they're just having a good time—like all the rest of us—they're singing—can't you hear 'em?"

Through the noon sunshine, from the head of the stalled procession, bellowed appeals to take one bottle from the bottles on the wall.

"Do you think I'm deaf? I've heard 'em for the last fifty miles! I want to know what they're *doing*! Is Judge Buck in that car?"

"Sure—him and Joe Bascom and that

crowd—the Mayor's with 'em now—he just drove up to head the grand entry.”

“Well, I want you to go up there.”

“But why, mama? They don't want to see me!”

“I'll wager they don't.” Mrs. Wellington Minor's lips met grimly. “I'll wager they don't want to see anybody. George Minor, I want to know who that girl is!”

“But Mama, I don't know—I told you I didn't know!” He added feebly: “Some friend of Judge Buck's, I reckon. Leastways, Roy said she was.”

“Roy! What does Roy know about it? He said she stole the Judge's coat, too, didn't he?”

“Well, he said that before he said it to the Judge back there where we stopped. You heard what the Judge said, didn't you? I guess nobody's going to forget what

he said—I guess Roy ain't going to forget it!”

Young George's grin was too much for retort. His mother could only bounce angrily.

Far up in front, a megaphonic moo resounded, “All abo-o-o-a-a-rd! All abo-o-o-a-a-rd!” Gears ground, brakes shrieked. All along the line of cars was a flutter of pennants, a sudden pall of dust. Two men in a Franklin prodded the third awake. A small car at the tailend began to shake horribly. . . .

The king of the herd, the big Pierce, zoomed on.

“They say,” roared its happy crew, “that Miss Cora she ain't got no style, but she's style all the while—all the while!”

Peachburg, minarets aflame, rushed toward them.



# HASH-HOUSE VISIONARIES

BY RAYMOND S. TOMPKINS

THE new industrial idealism, in the process of making the United States a finer place to skin competitors in, is jumping from business to business and from trade to trade like a conflagration, and nothing will ever stop it save dynamiting several blocks of idealists. Since nobody has yet shown any sign of wanting to stop it, it was inevitable that it should eventually reach the business of feeding the public.

The practice of this worthy and ancient trade, until recent years, involved simply the sensible cooking and polite serving of square meals at fair prices in decent surroundings. But to the idealist such simplicity was naturally revolting, and his first move toward getting rid of it was to make all the simple things complicated. Today, his bosom swells with pride at the splendid conceptions that have come to him as in a dream, and he will not rest until he has implanted these conceptions in the bosom of the old-time hash-house man, who believed that his customers called his place the Greasy Spoon because they loved it, and who was proud of its reputation.

The trouble is that after such ideas have been implanted in the soul of the old-timer, it is not his bosom but his head that swells, and not with pride but with a headache. He hears, for example, from a Modernist leader of his art in Toledo, that "the ability to prepare a meal is only one of the minor operations in the restaurant business," and beholds hundreds of fellow

grub merchants applauding the sentiment as if they thoroughly understood and approved it. And a moment later he hears from the Hon. Carl G. Stoddard, sometime president of the National Restaurant Association, in words as crisp and crackling as pie-crust, that

The restaurant man of tomorrow will be first of all a man of vision. He will be a man of action, of civic consciousness, a man with a heart, a man of leisure, a man using science and knowing art, a man of business acumen, a man believing in Service, and a man proud of his job.

Are these the words of hope or of doom? The old-time eating-house man does not know, but he fears the worst. All the things that Dr. Stoddard says the Restaurant Man of Tomorrow should be this old-timer thought he was already. Yet his daily takings dwindle and his customers become puzzles of steadily increasing toughness. Thus a Modern Restaurant Problem rears itself—and simultaneously there appears the idealist with his big, blond, shining face upturned to the rains, seeing lovely visions of some celestial ham-and-eggery beyond the ken of other mortals. It is very bewildering to the old-timer.

Millions of Americans now eat downtown every day. Almost past numbering, like clouds of gnats, in every town and city, they swarm into lunchrooms, drug-stores, tearooms, restaurants, cigar-stores, sandwich shops and cafeterias. With every sardine sandwich and every plate of salad