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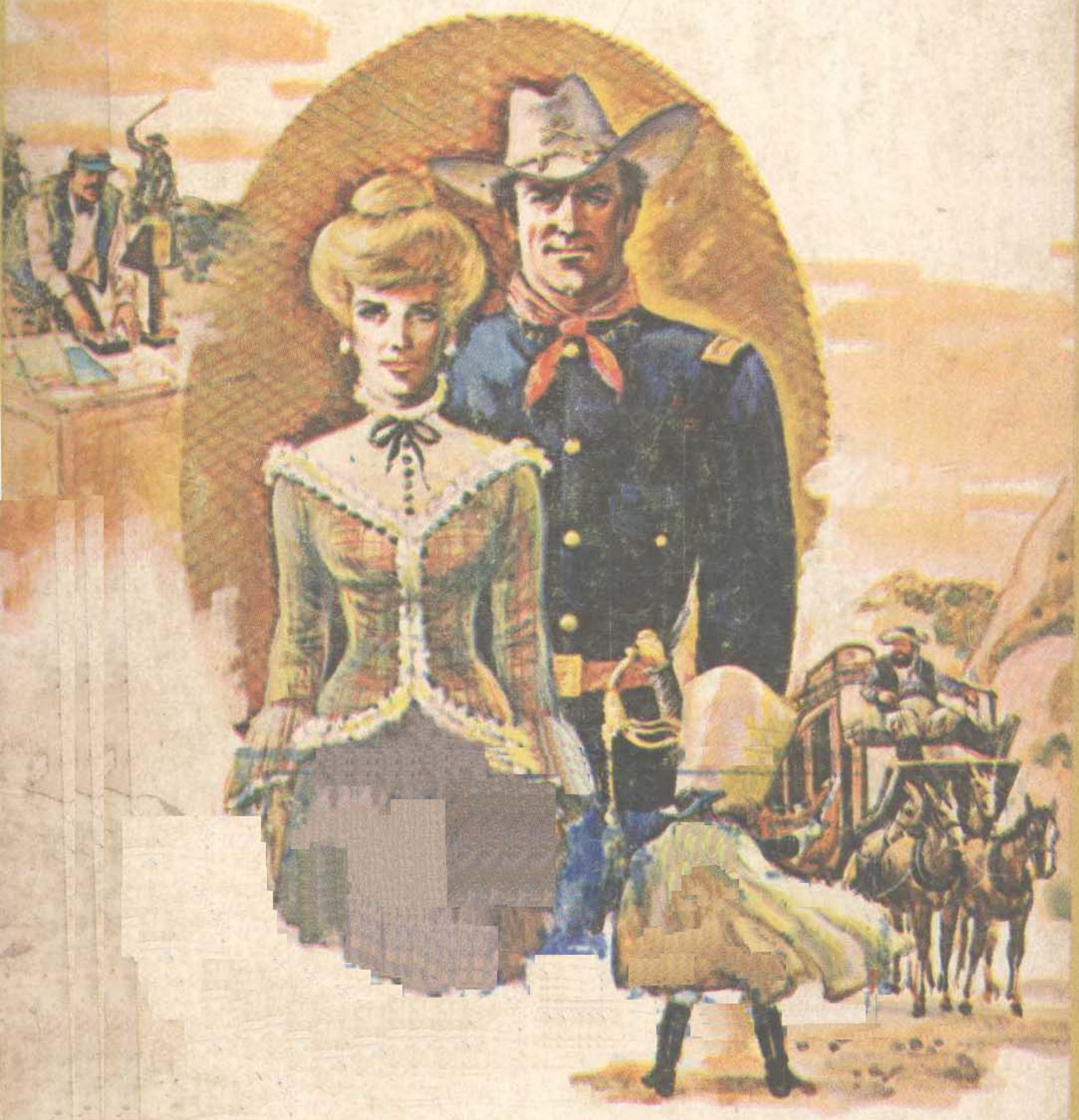
RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

RANSON'S FOLLY

And Other Stories



Introduction by Benjamin Franklin, V *Complete and Unabridged*

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

RANSON'S FOLLY

and other stories

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

An Airmont Classic
specially selected for the Airmont Library
from the immortal literature of the world

PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE DOMINION OF CANADA
BY THE RYERSON PRESS, TORONTO

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RICHARD HARDING DAVIS

Richard Harding Davis (1864-1916) was the son of parents involved in literary pursuits: his father, L. Clark Davis, was editor of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, and his mother, Rebecca Harding Davis, was a writer whose most important work, "Life in the Iron Mills," appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1861. After attending Lehigh and Johns Hopkins Universities, the young Davis began his own newspaper career in 1866 with the Philadelphia *Record* and thereafter gained considerable fame as a correspondent as he covered every war from the Cuban-Spanish to the early part of World War I (see his *Notes of a War Correspondent*, 1910).

Davis' journalistic techniques are present in much of his fiction. The stories in this collection, for example, are all technically sound, stylistically uncluttered, and easy to read, but they focus on the surface and not on the depths of human emotions. Despite this deficiency that the sophisticated reader finds disconcerting, Davis was in his time one of the most popular writers of short fiction, and that was no mean achievement when one considers that two of his contemporaries writing in the short story genre were Jack London and O. Henry. His works have been collected at least five times, and they were occasionally illustrated by Frederic Remington. Four of the stories in this collection were made into motion pictures, and two, "The Bar Sinister" (in 1904) and "In the Fog" (in 1918), were made into books for the blind.

Each of the five selections in this volume represents a different sub-genre of the short story—western, dog, war and journalism, love, and mystery stories. While the majority of them are too romantic and sentimental for today's reader, they are all well crafted and well told stories whose general appeal almost seventy years ago one may readily understand. But on

occasion Davis was more than a mere craftsman turning out stories as if by formula. "A Derelict" is an example of Davis at his best, and "In the Fog" is a story that should endure.

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RANSON'S FOLLY

Ranson's Folly

Part I

THE junior officers of Fort Crockett had organized a mess at the post-trader's. "And a mess it certainly is," said Lieutenant Ranson. The dining-table stood between hogsheads of molasses and a blazing log-fire, the counter of the store was their buffet, a pool-table with a cloth, blotted like a map of the Great Lakes, their sideboard, and Indian Pete acted as butler. But none of these things counted against the great fact that each evening Mary Cahill, the daughter of the post-trader, presided over the evening meal, and turned it into a banquet. From her high chair behind the counter, with the cash-register on her one side and the weighing-scales on the other, she gave her little Senate laws, and smiled upon each and all with the kind of impartiality of a comrade.

At least, at one time she had been impartial. But of late she smiled upon all save Lieutenant Ranson. When he talked, she now looked at the blazing log-fire, and her cheeks glowed and her eyes seemed to reflect the lifting flame.

For five years, ever since her father brought her from

the convent at St Louis, Mary Cahill had watched officers come and officers go. Her knowledge concerning them, and their public and private affairs, was vast and miscellaneous. She was acquainted with the traditions of every regiment, with its war record, with its peace-time politics, its nicknames, its scandals, even with the earnings of each company-canteen. At Fort Crockett, which lay under her immediate observation, she knew more of what was going forward than did the regimental adjutant, more even than did the colonel's wife. If Trumpeter Tyler flatted on church call, if Mrs. Stickney applied to the quartermaster for three feet of stovepipe, if Lieutenant Curtis were granted two days' leave for quail-shooting, Mary Cahill knew it; and if Mrs. "Captain" Stairs obtained the post-ambulance for a drive to Kiowa City, when Mrs. "Captain" Ross wanted it for a picnic, she knew what words passed between those ladies, and which of the two wept. She knew all of these things, for each evening they were retailed to her by her "boarders." Her boarders were very loyal to Mary Cahill. Her position was a difficult one, and had it not been that the boy-officers were so understanding, it would have been much more difficult. For the life of a regimental post is as circumscribed as life on a ship-of-war, and it would no more be possible for the ship's barber to rub shoulders with the admiral's epaulets than that a post-trader's child should visit the ladies on the "line," or that the wives of the enlisted men should dine with the young girl from whom they "took in" washing.

So, between the upper and the nether grindstones, Mary Cahill was left without the society of her own sex, and was of necessity forced to content herself with the society of the officers. And the officers played fair. Loyalty to Mary Cahill was a tradition at Fort Crockett, which it was the duty of each succeeding regiment to sustain. Moreover, her father, a dark, sinister man, alive only to money-making, was known to handle a revolver with the alertness of a town-marshal.

Since the day she left the convent Mary Cahill had held but two affections: one for this grim, taciturn par-

ent, who brooded over her as jealously as a lover, and the other for the entire United States Army. The Army returned her affection without the jealousy of the father, and with much more than his effusiveness. But when Lieutenant Ranson arrived from the Philippines, the affections of Mary Cahill became less generously distributed, and her heart fluttered hourly between trouble and joy.

There were two rooms on the first floor of the post-trader's—this big one, which only officers and their women-folk might enter, and the other, the exchange of the enlisted men. The two were separated by a partition of logs and hung with shelves on which were displayed calicoes, tinned meats, and patent medicines. A door, cut in one end of the partition, with buffalo-robes for portières, permitted Cahill to pass from behind the counter of one store to behind the counter of the other. On one side Mary Cahill served the Colonel's wife with many yards of silk ribbons to be converted to german favors, on the other her father weighed out bears' claws (manufactured in Hartford, Conn., from turkey-bones) to make a necklace for Red Wing, the squaw of the Arrephao chieftain. He waited upon everyone with gravity, and in obstinate silence. No one had ever seen Cahill smile. He himself occasionally joked with others in a grim and embarrassed manner. But no one had ever joked with him. It was reported that he came from New York, where, it was whispered, he had once kept bar on the Bowery for McTurk.

Sergeant Clancey, of G Troop, was the authority for this. But when, presuming on that supposition, he claimed acquaintanceship with Cahill, the post-trader spread out his hands on the counter and stared at the sergeant with cold and disconcerting eyes. "I never kept bar nowhere," he said. "I never been on the Bowery, never been in New York, never been east of Denver in my life. What was it you ordered?"

"Well, mebbe I'm wrong," growled the sergeant.

But a month later, when a coyote howled down near the Indian village, the sergeant said insinuatingly, "Sounds just like the cry of the Whyos, don't it?" And Ca-

hill, who was listening to the wolf, unthinkingly nodded his head.

The sergeant snorted in triumph. "Yah, I told you so!" he cried, "a man that's never been on the Bowery, and knows the call of the Whyo gang! The drinks are on you, Cahill."

The post-trader did not raise his eyes, but drew a damp cloth up and down the counter, slowly and heavily, as a man sharpens a knife on a whetstone.

That night, as the sergeant went up the path to the post, a bullet passed through his hat. Clancey was a forceful man, and forceful men, unknown to themselves, make enemies, so he was uncertain as to whether this came from a trooper he had borne upon too harshly, or whether, in the darkness, he had been picked off for someone else. The next night, as he passed in the full light of the post-trader's windows, a shot came from among the dark shadows of the corral, and when he immediately sought safety in numbers among the Indians, cowboys, and troopers in the exchange, he was in time to see Cahill enter it from the other store, wrapping up a bottle of pain-killer for Mrs. Stickney's cook. But Clancey was not deceived. He observed with satisfaction that the soles and the heels of Cahill's boots were wet with the black mud of the corral.

The next morning, when the exchange was empty, the post-trader turned from arranging cans of condensed milk upon an upper shelf to face the sergeant's revolver.

He threw up his hands to the level of his ears as though expressing sharp unbelief, and waited in silence. The sergeant advanced until the gun rested on the counter, its muzzle pointing at the pit of Cahill's stomach. "You or me has got to leave this post," said the sergeant, "and I can't desert, so I guess it's up to you.

"What did you talk for?" asked Cahill. His attitude was still that of shocked disbelief, but his tone expressed a full acceptance of the situation and a desire to temporize.

"At first I thought it might be that new 'cruity' in F Troop," explained the sergeant. "You came near making me kill the wrong man. What harm did I do you by say-

ing you kept bar for McTurk? What's there in that to get hot about?"

"You said I run with the Whyos."

"What the h—l do I care what you've done!" roared the sergeant. "I don't know nothing about you, but I don't mean you should shoot me in the back. I'm going to tell this to my bunky an' if I get shot up, the Troop'll know who done it, and you'll hang for it. Now, what are you going to do?"

Cahill did not tell what he would do; for, from the other store, the low voice of Mary Cahill called, "Father! Oh, father!"

The two men dodged, and eyed each other guiltily. The sergeant gazed at the buffalo-robe portières with wide-opened eyes. Cahill's hands dropped from the region of his ears, and fell flat upon the counter.

When Miss Mary Cahill pushed aside the portières Sergeant Clancey, of G Troop, was showing her father the mechanism of the new regulation-revolver. He apparently was having some difficulty with the cylinder, for his face was red. Her father was eying the gun with the critical approval of an expert.

"Father," said Miss Cahill petulantly, "why didn't you answer? Where is the blue stationery—the sort Major Ogden always buys? He's waiting."

The eyes of the post-trader did not wander from the gun before him. "Next to the blank books, Mame," he said. "On the second shelf."

Miss Cahill flashed a dazzling smile at the big sergeant, and whispered, so that the officer in the room behind her might not overhear, "Is he trying to sell you Government property, dad? Don't you touch it. Sergeant, I'm surprised at you tempting my poor father." She pulled the two buffalo-robes close around her neck so that her face only showed between them. It was a sweet, lovely face, with frank, boyish eyes.

"When the major's gone, sergeant," she whispered, "bring your gun around my side of the store and I'll buy it from you."

The sergeant nodded in violent assent, laughing noise-