

Caleb Conover, Railroader

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"I always have a lot of respect for folks who keep their mouths shut," observed Cobb, "I've a kind of sneaking respect for lears, too - folks who guard what's in their brains by making a false trail with their mouths."

"The public's got no more right to the contents of a man's brain than it has to the contents of his safe. And the man who ain't ashamed to lock his safe needn't be ashamed to tell a lie."

"Is that your own philosophy?" queried Amie, "It's a dangerous one."

"Oh, I'm not talking of the man who lies for the fun of it. Telling a lie, when you don't need to, is tempting Providence."

Albert Payson Terhune

(FACSIMILE PAGE OF MANUSCRIPT FROM CALEB CONOVER, RAILROADER)

**CALEB CONOVER,
RAILROADER**

CHAPTER I

CALEB CONOVER RECEIVES

“The poor man!” sighed Mrs. Greer. “He must think he’s a cemetery!”

The long line of carriages was passing solemnly through a mighty white marble arch, aglare with electric light, leading into the “show place” of Pompton Avenue.

Athwart the arch’s pallid face, in raised letters a full foot in length were the words:

“CALEB CONOVER, R.R., 1893.”

In the ghastly, garish illumination, above the slow-moving procession of sombre vehicles, the arch and its inscription gave gruesome excuse for Mrs. Greer’s comment. She herself thought the phrase rather apt, and stored it away for repetition.

Her husband, a downy little man, curled up miserably in the other corner of the brougham, read her thought, from long experience, and twisted forward into what he liked to think was a commanding attitude.

“Look here!” he protested. “You’ve got to stop that. It’s bad enough to have to come here at all, without your spoiling everything with one of those Bernard Shawisms of yours. Why, if it ever got back to Conover’s ears——”

“He’d withdraw his support? And then good-by to Congress for the unfortunate Talbot Firth Greer?”

“Just that. He’ll stand all sorts of criticism about his start in life. In fact, he revels in talking of his rise to anyone who’ll listen. But when it comes to guying anything in his present exalted——”

“What does the ‘R. R.’ at the end of his name over the gate stand for? I’ve seen the inscription often enough, but——”

“‘Railroader.’ He uses it as a sort of title. Life for him is one long railroad, and——”

“And now we’re to do him honor at the terminus?”

“If you like to put it that way. Perhaps ‘junction’ would hit it closer. It was awfully good of you, Grace, to come. I——”

“Of course it was. If I didn’t want a try at Washington I’d never have dared it. It will be in all the papers to-morrow. He’ll see to that. And then—I hate to think what everyone will say. I suppose we’re the first civilized people who ever passed under that atrocious hanging mortuary chapel, aren’t we?”

“Hardly as bad as that. If it’s any comfort to you, there are plenty more in the same box as ourselves, to-night.”

“But surely everybody in Granite can’t want to run for Congress?”

“No. But enough people have axes of their own to grind to make it worth their while to visit the Conover whetstone. When a man who can float companies at a word, boom or

smash a dozen different stocks, swing the Legislature, make himself heard from here to Washington, and carries practically every newspaper in the Mountain State in his vest pocket; when——”

“When such a man whistles, there are some people who find it wise not to be deaf. But what on earth does he *want* us for?”

“The world-old ambition that had its rise when Cain and Abel began moving in separate sets. The longing to ‘butt in,’ as Caleb himself would probably call it. He has everything money and political power can give. And now he wants the only thing left—what he terms ‘social recognition.’”

“And we are to help——”

“No. We’re to let him *think* we help. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men, assisted by a score of Conover’s own freight derricks, couldn’t hoist that cad into a decent crowd. He’s been at it ever since he got his first million and married poor little Letty Standish. She was the fool of her family, and a broken family at that. But still it was a family. Yet it didn’t land Caleb anywhere. Then, when that unlicked cub of a son of his grew up, he made another try. But you know how that turned out. Now that his daughter’s captured a more or less authentic prince, I suppose he thinks the time has come. Hence to-night’s——”

“What a blow to his hopes it must have been to have the girl marry in Paris instead of here at Granite! But I suppose the honeymoon in America and this evening’s reception are the next best thing. Are we never to get there?”

“Soon enough, I’m afraid. Conover boasts that he’s laid out his grounds so that the driveway is a measured half-mile. We’ll be there in another minute or so.”

Mrs. Greer laughed a little nervously.

“It’ll be something to remember anyway,” said she. “I suppose all sorts of horrible people will be there. I read a half-page account of it this morning in the *Star*, and it said that ‘while the proudest families of Granite would delight to do Mr. Conover honor, the humbler associates of political and business life would also be present.’ Did you ever hear anything more delicious? And in the *Star*, too!”

“His own paper. Why not? I suppose *we’re* the ‘proudest families’; and the ‘humbler associates’ are some of the choice retinue of heelers who do his dirty work. Lord! what a notice of it there’ll be in to-morrow’s papers! Washington will have to be very much worth while to make up for this. If only I—”

“Hush!” warned Mrs. Greer, as the carriage lurched to a halt, in the pack before a great *porte-cochère*. “We’re actually here at last. See! There goes Clive Standish up the steps with the Polissen girls and old Mr. Polissen. There are a *few* real human beings here, after all. Why do you suppose—?”

“H’m!” commented Greer, “Polissen’s ‘long’ on Interstate Canal, the route Conover’s C. G. & X. Road is threatening to put out of business. But why young Standish—”

“Why not? Letty Conover’s own nephew. Though I did hear he and the Conovers were scarcely on speaking terms. He—”

“I fancy that’s because Standish’s ‘Mayflower’ back is too stiff to bend at the crack of Caleb’s whip. He could have made a mighty good thing of his law business if Conover had backed him. But I understand he refuses to ally himself with his great relative-in-law, and prefers a good social position and a small law practice——”

“Rather than go to Congress?” finished his wife with such sweet innocence that Greer could only glare at her with flabby helplessness. Before he could think of an apt retort, the brougham was at the foot of the endless marble steps, and its late occupants were passing up a wide strip of velvet between rows of vividly liveried footmen.

Caleb Conover, Railroader, was standing just within the wide doorway of a drawing-room that seemed to stretch away into infinity. Behind rose an equally infinite vista of heads and shoulders. But the loudly blended murmur of many voices that is the first thing to strike the ear of arriving guests at such functions was conspicuously absent. The scarce-broken hush that spread through the chain of rooms seemed to bear out still further Mrs. Greer’s mortuary simile.

But the constraint in no way extended to the host himself. The strong, alert face, with its shrewd light eyes and humorous mouth, was wreathed in welcoming smiles that seemed to ripple in a series of waves from the close-cut reddish hair to the ponderous iron jaw. The thickset form of the Railroader, massive of shoulder and sturdily full of limb, was ever plunging forward to grip some favored newcomer by the hand, or darting to one side or the other as he whispered instructions to servant or relative.

“I congratulate you on your friend’s repose of manner!” whispered Mrs. Greer, as she and her husband awaited their turn. “He has all the calm self-assurance of a jumping jack.”

“But there are springs of chilled steel in the jumping jack,” whispered Greer. “He’s out of his element, and he knows it. But he isn’t so badly confused for all that. If you saw him at a convention or a board meeting, you wouldn’t know him for the same——”

“And there’s his poor little wife, looking as much like a rabbit as ever! She’s a cipher here; and even her husband’s figure in front of her doesn’t raise the cipher to the tenth power. I suppose that is the daughter, to Mrs. Conover’s left? The slender girl with the rust-colored hair and the brown eyes? She’s prettier and more of a thoroughbred in looks than I should have——”

“That’s not his daughter. That’s Miss Lanier, Conover’s secretary. His daughter is the——”

“His secretary? Why, is she receiving?”

“She is his secretary and everything else. She came here three years ago as Blanche’s governess. To give the poor girl a sort of winding-up polish before Caleb sent her to Europe. She made all sorts of a hit with Conover. Principally because she’s the only person on earth who isn’t afraid of him, so I hear. And now she is secretary, and major domo, and ‘right-hand man,’ and I don’t know what not else. Mrs. Conover’s only a ‘cipher,’ as you say, and Miss Alice Lanier—not Caleb—is the ‘figure’ in front of her. That’s the new-made

princess, to the right. The tall one with the no-colored hair. I suppose that's the Prince d'Antri beside her."

"He's too handsome to be a very real prince. What a face for a sculptor or——"

"Or a barber. A beard like that——"

A gorgeously appressed couple just in front of the Greers, in the line, moved forward within the zone of Conover's greeting. Caleb nodded patronizingly to the man, and more civilly to the woman.

"Mr. Conover," the latter was murmuring in an anguish of respectful embarrassment, "'tis a great honor you do me and the man, askin' us here to-night with all your stylish friends, an'——"

"Oh, there's more than your husband and me, here, who'd get hungry by habit if they heard a noon whistle blow," laughed Conover, as with a jerk of his red head and a word of pleasant welcome, he passed them on down the reception line. Then the Railroader's light, deep-set eyes fell on Greer, and he stepped forward, both hands outstretched.

"Good evening, Greer!" he cried, and there was a subcurrent of latent power in his hearty voice. "Good evening! Pleased to see you in my house. Mrs. Greer, I presume? Most kind of you to come, ma'am. Proud to make your acquaintance. Letty!"—summoning with a jerk of the head an overdressed, frightened-looking little woman from the line behind him—"Letty, this is my very good friend, Mr. Talbot Firth Greer—Mrs. Conover—Mr. and Mrs. Greer. Mr. Greer is the next Congressman from the Eleventh District. (That's a little

prophecy, Mr. Greer. You can gamble on its coming true.) My daughter, Princess d'Antri—Mr. and Mrs. Greer. Prince Amadeo d'Antri. My secretary, Miss Anice Lanier—Mr. and Mrs.—”

A new batch of guests swarmed down the hall toward the host, and the ordeal was over. The Greers, swept on in the rush, did not hear Conover's next greeting. This was rather a pity, since it differed materially from that lavished upon themselves.

Its recipient was a big young man, with a shock of light hair and quiet, dark eyes. He wore his clothes well, and looked out of place in his vulgar, garish surroundings. Caleb Conover, Railroader, eyed the newcomer all over with a cold, expressionless glance. A glance that no seer on earth could have read; the glance that had gained him more than one victory when wits and concealment of purpose were rife. Then he held out a grudging hand.

“Well, Mr. Clive Standish,” he observed, “it seems the lion and the lamb lie down together, after all—a considerable distance this side of the millennium. And the lamb inside, at that. To think of a clubman and a cotillon leader, and a first-families scion and a Civic Leaguer and all that sort of thing condescending to honor my poor shanty——”

“My aunt, Mrs. Conover, wrote, asking me especially to come, as a favor to her,” replied the younger man stiffly. “I thought——”

“And you were O. K. in thinking it. I know Letty wrote, because I dictated the letter. I wanted to count you in with

the rest to-night, and I had a kind of bashful fear that your love for me, personally, might not be strong enough to fetch you. You've got too much sense to think the invite will score either way in our feelings to each other, or that I'm going back on what I said to you four years ago. Now that you're here, chase in and enjoy yourself. This place is like heaven, to-night, in one way. You'll see a whole lot of people here you never expected to, and you'll miss more'n a few you thought would sure belong. Good-by. Don't let me block your job of heavenly recognition."

The wilful coarseness and brutality of the man came as no surprise to Standish. He had expected something of the sort, and had braced himself for it. To please his aunt, whom he sincerely pitied, he had entered the Conover house to-night for the first time since the Homeric quarrel, incident on his refusal to avail himself of Caleb's prestige in his law work, and, incidentally to enroll himself as one of the Railroader's numberless political vassals. That the roughness to which Conover had just subjected him was no more a part of the former's real nature than had been the nervous effusiveness of his greeting to the Greers, Clive well knew. It had been intended to cover any embarrassing memories of a former and somewhat less strained acquaintanceship; and as such it—like most of Conover's moves—had served its turn.

So, resisting his first impulse to depart as he had come, Standish moved on. The formal receiving phalanx was crumpling up. He paused for a moment's talk with little Mrs. Conover, exchanged a civil word or two with his cousin Blanche and her prince, and then came to where Anice Lanier was trying to make conversation for several awed-

looking, bediamonded persons who were evidently horribly ill at ease in their surroundings.

At sight of the girl, the formal lines about Clive's mouth were broken by a smile of very genuine pleasure. A smile that gave a younger aspect to his grave face, and found ready answer in the brown eyes that met his.

"Haven't you toiled at a forlorn hope long enough?" he asked, as the awed beings drifted away into the uncomfortable crowd, carrying their burden of jewels with them.

"A forlorn hope?" she queried, puzzled.

"You actually seemed to be trying to galvanize at least a segment of this portentous gathering into a semblance of life. Don't do it. In the first place you can't. Saloonkeepers and Pompton Avenue people won't blend. In the second place, it isn't expected of you. The papers to-morrow will record the right names just as jealously as if every one had had a good time. Suppose you concentrate all your efforts on me. Come! It will be a real work of charity. For Mr. Conover has just shown me how thoroughly I'm the prodigal. And he didn't even hint at the whereabouts of a fatted calf. Please be merciful and make me have a good time. It's months since I've seen you to talk to."

"Then why don't you come here oftener?" she asked, as they made their way through the press, and found an unoccupied alcove between two of the great rooms. "I'm sure Mrs. Conover——"

"My poor aunt? She'd be frightened to death that Conover and I would quarrel. No, no! To-night is an exception. The

first and the last. I persuaded myself I came because of Aunt Letty's note. But I really came for a chat with you."

She looked at him, doubting how to accept this bald compliment. But his face was boyish in its sincerity.

"You and I used to be such good friends," he went on, "and now we never see any more of each other. Why don't we?"

"I think you know as well as I. You no longer come here—you have not come, I think, since a year before I arrived. And I go almost nowhere since——"

"Since you gave up all your old world and the people who cared for you and became a drudge in the Conover household? If you were to be found anywhere else, you would see so much of me that I'd bore you to extinction. But it would be even unpleasant for you than for me if I were to call on you here. I miss our old-time talks more than I can say."

"I miss them, too. Do you remember how we used to argue over politics, and how you always ended by telling me that there were two things no woman could understand, and that politics was one and finance the other?"

"And you would always make the same retort: That woman's combined ignorance of politics and finance were pure knowledge as compared with the men's ignorance of women. It wasn't especially logical repartee, but it always served to shut me up."

"I wish we had time for another political spat. Some day we must. You see, I've learned such a lot about politics—and

finance, too—*practical* politics and finance—since I came here.”

“Decidedly ‘practical,’ I fancy, if Mr. Conover was your teacher. He doesn’t go in much for idealism.”

“And you?” asked Anice, ignoring the slur. “Are you still as rabid as ever in your ideas of reform? But, of course, you are. For I read only last week that you had been elected President of the Civic League. I want to congratulate you. It’s a splendid movement, even though Mr. Conover declares it’s hopeless.”

“Good citizenship is never quite hopeless, even in a boss-ridden community like Granite, and a boss-governed commonwealth like the Mountain State. The people will wake up some day.”

“Their snores sound very peaceful and regular just now,” remarked Anice, with a flippancy whereof she had the grace to be ashamed.

“Perhaps,” he smiled, “the sounds you and Conover mistake for snores may possibly be groans.”

“How delightfully dramatic! That would sound splendidly on the stump.”

“It may have a chance to.”

“What do you mean? Are you going to——”

“No. I am going to run for governor this fall.”

“WHAT?”

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