

SCENIC BYWAYS

EPISODE 6

"CONQUERORS OF THE USEFUL"

by Ben Sembler

LOOKING BACK

The recorder switches on, truck drives on.

NARRATOR

Conquerors of the useless. That's what they used to call 'em. 'Course, it ain't useless now, not here anyway. The climbers are the only ones of any use for miles and miles. The mountains are young here. After the collapse they started sproutin' up like the breeze. Like a great wall stretched across the country. Separatin' the two sides, dividin' friends, families. Lovers. 'Course, wouldn't be obstacles if there weren't the will to overcome 'em. And, well, you know what they say. Where there's a will, there's bound to be a way.

MUSIC UP

CREDITS

TRUCK ROLLS ON

PRESENT, DRIVING TRUCK

NARRATOR

(anxious)

Slow and steady, now. There you go, Old Stars. I don't want to be hauling this anymore than you, but we're almost there. And it's not like we had a lot of options.

A LOUD EXPLOSION REVERBATES

NARRATOR

Easy there. That must be them in the valley. And would you look at this sign. "Commercial truckin' through Yosemite is prohibited." Well, if you're looking to trade with the

East, Yosemite Valley's the only place to do it. Through ain't the issue, though, and it doesn't say anything about into. 'Course, even if it did, it ain't like there's anyone lookin' to enforce that particular old rule, anyway.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER SWITCHES ON

NARRATOR

I'd been followin' the road south for a ways before Old Stars and I found ourselves in Frisco. Big rig trucks were just as out of place there as New Seattle, and for good reason. Food, clothes, supplies, everything they need comes from the immediate area. Well, almost everything. Seems there's something that some of them lack, something only possessed by a people they call the Gongsis. Whatever it is they trade in return is too valuable to trust with outsiders, though. They have their own people to transport it to the valley. They trust me enough to take the Gongsis' goods back to town, though, when I'm loaded up with whatever it is. After I've dropped my current cargo. Thirty wooden boxes, stuffed with packing paper shreds, meant to cushion the contents. Cushionin' don't instill me with much confidence, though. Every bump feels like it might be my last.

RECORDER SWITCHES OFF

PRESENT, DRIVING TRUCK

NARRATOR

Comin' up on a tunnel. Keep catchin' glimpses of Half Dome, must be pretty close to the valley by now.

TRUCK DRIVES

NARRATOR

There's the light, and...

NARRATOR WHISTLES IN ADMIRATION

TRUCK STOPS

NARRATOR HOPS OUT

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

NARRATOR

Well I'll be. Yosemite Valley. I knew she was a beauty, but I could never have imagined. There's El Cap. And Half Dome. Look at that waterfall...

SFX DYNAMITE BLAST

NARRATOR

There they are. The dynamite blasters. Guess that's where I'm going, then. Can't say I want to be near the tunnelin' efforts, but I'll be glad to get all that dynamite out of Old Stars.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

When they first told me the cargo was dynamite I wasn't to keen on haulin' it. But there weren't any other options for work. And it would be a short haul. If I made it.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, OUTSIDE TRUCK

NARRATOR

What the-- Eyes are playin' tricks on me, I could swear I saw that mountain... grow. Like it were shorter a moment be-- there it goes again. It's... well it's bubblin' up. Gettin' taller. Like lava, only... not black, but grey. If I weren't lookin' straight at it I would think I was losin' my mind. It's still growin'. Looks like a desert mirage, shimmerin' there. Strangest thing... Wait, it's stoppin' now. Huh. Well, no wonder they need so much dynamite. Best be gettin' it to them, then. Wait a second... Almost looks like... people, maybe. Yeah, people, climbin' up that sheer rock face. Carryin' something. Something big. Yeah, I can see the ropes now. Only... my eyes really must be playin' tricks, it looks like that one doesn't have any ropes at all. How are they climbin' up without ropes? And why are they separated from the others?

SFX DYNAMITE BLAST

NARRATOR

Right. Got other things need worryin' about.

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I tore myself away from those views, hard as it was. Still one of the most beautiful sights I've seen on these roads. Headed down into the valley to the dynamiters camp. More a settlement than a camp, really, with log cabins made from the nearby trees. Sun was settin' behind me as I drove down, paintin' the unbroken line of mountains at the far side of the valley in a golden hue. The dynamitin' had stopped, and I was thankful for that. The dynamiters who'd worked that day were trudgin' back to the settlement, drop-pin' empty bags, pickin' up bowls, fillin' 'em with stew

and joinin' others gathered around a big fire. I parked Old Stars well away, takin' extra care with her highly flammable cargo, then joined the dynamiters at their fire. A bowl of stew in my hand as well.

SFX RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

DYNAMITER 1

Another shipment of dye-no-mite in, then, eh? We'll use it, alright, though it won't have much use.

DYNAMITER 1 LAUGHS, COUGHS

NARRATOR

How do you mean?

DYNAMITER 1

You haven't seen it, yet? The mountains here... they heal, grow back. Faster than we can blast through them, for sure.

NARRATOR

So I did see that. My eyes weren't playin' tricks, after all. So then... who were those people climbin' up the side of that mountain?

DYNAMITER 1

The Stone Spiders. While we try to make tunnels to the East, they climb the goods we should be transporting up and down the mountains.

DYNAMITE 1 SPITS

DYNAMITER 1

That they should all fall.

GASPS

DYNAMITER 1

What? Don't you know the old teachings? It's good luck to see a spider fall from its web.

OLD DYNAMITER

Leave off it, don't want to scare the stranger, do we?

DYNAMITER 1

How about a story, then, one of the old tales?

OLD DYNAMITER

Well, as long as we're talking of climbing, why not tell the Legend of the Ten Siblings and the Great Wall. Once upon a time in the old country...

LOOKING BACK

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

Once upon a time in the old country, there lived two families, each with five siblings. One family lived on the windswept steppes, grazing their herd. The other family lived in the rich rice fields, lush with water. Generations before, the people on the steppes and the people in the fields traded and lived side by side in harmony. Then a war broke out, and the people of the fields built a Great Wall to divide them from the people on the steppes. But the wall, as is often the case with such walls, didn't work, and the people of the steppes invaded time and time again. The people of the fields prayed to their gods, and they sent them five divine beings, siblings, quintuplets growing in the womb. The people on the steppes heard of this, and they prayed to *their* gods, and were delivered five divine beings as well. The steppe people fed the mother of the divine yak milk, and the babies grew strong in the womb, and were birthed before the siblings of the fields. The siblings of the steppes were all boys. Five brothers. And the siblings of the fields were all girls. Five sisters. As they grew it was clear to both peoples that the gods had blessed them indeed, as each sibling held great power. The first brother could see for miles, the second could hear for miles, the third could lift any object, the fourth

could stretch to any height, and the fifth. The fifth could fly. And the sisters. The first sister was the smartest person to ever live, the second could grow taller than anything, the third could tunnel underground, the fourth could shout so loud you'd hear it from the other end of the earth, and the fifth could cry a river, with tears that would heal any sickness or wound. And for a while, these siblings held the balance, and the people in the fields prospered, as did the people on the steppes. Then one day, as she patrolled the wall, the eighth to be born was looking to the sky, when she saw a magnificent being flying high above the wall. The fifth brother. She watched him for hours, days, and only rarely did he land, and then for such a short time. He was a nomad of the steppes, after all, and always had to move. But the eighth was mesmerized. She had to meet him. Only... he would only land on the steppes. So she steeled her nerves, and tunneled deep below the wall, to the steppes, right to where the fifth was. She rose from the ground just as he landed, they locked eyes, and without a single word spoken, they instantly fell in love. But the fifth could only stay grounded for so long before the sky called for him to return. So the eighth learned to climb. She climbed the wall to be closer to him, and as often as he could he flew down, and they were together atop the Great Wall, breaching the divide between their two peoples. But one day, as the eighth was climbing the Great Wall, the fifth saw something that almost made him fall from the sky. A young yak had gone missing, and when the steppe people tracked it, they found it had fallen into a large tunnel. The same tunnel the eighth had dug, which led straight to people of the fields. From high in the sky, the fifth saw the steppe people massing their armies by the tunnel, preparing to invade the fields. So he did the only thing he could. He swooped down to the eighth and told her everything. She quickly went to the ninth, who shouted across to the land to the tenth, who rushed to the tunnel from the fields, and wailed and wailed, crying a rushing river into the tunnel. It swept away the steppe people who had already entered, and saved the field people from invasion. But now everyone knew; the fifth and the eighth had betrayed both of their peoples. So they prayed to their gods, who punished the fifth and the eighth. As long as the fifth flew, the eighth couldn't tunnel or climb, and the reverse was true too. Only one substance could change the balance, known only to the siblings and the gods. The eighth was happy to never tunnel or climb again, as long as her love



could be free to fly. But the steppe people wouldn't let him. They captured him and placed him deep underground, far from the sky he longed for. Before they did, he used that secret substance, stripping his power and restoring the eighth's. And to this day still she tunnels to find her love, and climbs the Great Wall every day, hoping the gods lifted the curse, and that he might have returned, flying across his blue skies.

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

RECORDER OFF

SFX MORNING SOUNDS, BIRDS, FAR OFF WATERFALL

FAR OFF CHEERS AND WHOOPS

NARRATOR YAWNS

NARRATOR CLIMBS OUT OF BED (CREAKY WOOD)

NARRATOR

I wonder what all the fuss is about.

SFX STEPS ON CREAKY WOOD

NARRATOR

Huh, what's this. It looks like the valley view from up by that tunnel, only... Half the mountains ain't there. There's El Cap and Half Dome, but the others...

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I went to bed pretty quick after the story, not to say it

put me to sleep. It was quite the story. I tripped over something in the empty cabin they put me in before I reached the bed, leaned down to pick it up. A dusty old pair of binoculars. Whoever they belonged to hadn't used them in quite a while. I set them back down and went to bed, fell into a deep sleep. I finally woke to the sound of cheerin' in the valley. I was all set to check it out, the dusty binoculars in one hand, when I saw the yellowed photo in the light, tacked to the wall beside the door. Yosemite Valley, before the collapse. That same tunnel view, only without any of the mountains blockin' the other side, like there are now. They really are growin'. Brand new ones and all. I put it out of my mind as I stepped out of the cabin. The sooner I got that dynamite out of Old Stars, the better.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

BKG VALLEY FLOOR

NARRATOR

(in awe)

That one there. They don't have any ropes. How?

Dynamiter 1

That's Ba, the Black Widow, they call her. She's the queen of the stone spiders, the best climber of them all. She free solos. So no ropes. But that doesn't mean the others aren't good climbers. They've got to climb the goods up and down quick, before the mountain spits out their metal and heals itself.

NARRATOR

The Black Widow. Why's she climbin' so far from the others?

SFX FOOTSTEPS

DYNAMITER 1

She doesn't use ropes, but one day she'll fall. I can't wait to see that. It's good luck, you know.

NARRATOR

(wary)

So you've said.

DYAMITER 1

What have you got there?

NARRATOR

These? I found 'em in the cabin. Binoculars.

DYAMITER 1

Well, you're welcome to keep them, whoever they belonged to is long gone.

NARRATOR

Thank you, kindly. Say, you wouldn't mind takin' the dynamite out of my truck now, would ya? Been pretty antsy, what with it sittin' there all night.

DYNAMITER 1

Can do.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

They quickly unloaded the dynamite, takin' it toward their worksite. A lot quicker than I would have, that's for sure. My first thought was maybe a few months dynamitin' by their side and I'd lose a bit of caution myself. But watchin' them unload it, I knew they were every bit as cautious as they oughtta be. It was experience, then, that guided their hands as fast as they moved. Experience and skill. Skill that no matter how many months I spent with them, I may never gain. I wonder how that skill stacks up to the climbing. Hmmm.

(beat)

They finished unloadin' Old Stars just in time. A climber approached, the dynamiters eyein' her. A few more climbers joined the first, and the two groups regarded each other for more than a moment before the dynamiters silently headed back toward their settlement, the last boxes of dynamite in hand. As soon as they were gone the climbers relaxed, and the air shifted. They were almost joyous.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

CLIMBER 1

Come along driver, we've got the goods on the valley floor, waiting for you.

NARRATOR

Sure thing. Is the Black Widow there?

CLIMBER 2

No, and I wouldn't call her that. Besides, strictly speaking she isn't a widow. She sure doesn't feel like one today. You'll see, she's practically dancing on the wall.

NARRATOR

Now you mention it, everyone seems so... So joyful.

CLIMBER 2

It's a great day. Our contract with the Gongsis is up, and there's only way we'll sign another. After all of our trips, we finally have the Gongsis under *our* thumbs.

CLIMBER 1

The clearing is just up here.

SFX FOOTSTEPS INTO THE CLEARING

CLIMBER 2

What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.

NARRATOR

The *Gongsi*. These are *their* goods? You're sure?

CLIMBER 1

We sure are. *Gongsi* is the old language, though. They call themselves the Company. And what's a company without contracts?

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

In front of me were thirty sleek black boxes. The Company logo embossed on one side. Just my luck. The climbers started pickin' 'em up, carryin' 'em back to Old Stars. I just stood and watched. The climbers were still joyous, but they moved a lot slower with the boxes than the others did with the dynamite, and a lot more cautious. Climbin' rocks is one thing, dynamitin' is another, but the Company... Well, I was glad for the climbers' caution, at the least. Wouldn't want to be the bearer of bad news on that particular front. While they were workin' I gazed up from the clearing to the stone face of the mountain towerin' above us. The Black Widow was half way up that face, a sole speck on the granite. And darned if she weren't dancin' up the side, a pulsin' beat to her every move, pure elation drivin' her higher. That was happiness alright, I didn't need the others to tell me. The kind of happiness I hadn't seen in a while. Shame I wouldn't get to meet her. As soon as they finished loadin' I planned to leave. Contract or no, the Company waits for no man, after all, and the Company by any other name is still the Company.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

CLIMBER 1

That's the last of them. Good luck to you.

NARRATOR

Thanks, and to you as well.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I set off when they were done, the bumpy road beneath Old Stars makin' the climbers dance up and down in my side-mirror as I glanced at their shrinkin' figures every now and then. Their leader still dancin' up the granite mountain behind me. It was a happy day for them, but it would be a long drive back to Frisco for Old Stars and I. At least we didn't have the dynamite to worry about. I glanced at the valley in the side mirrors as I wound my way up to that tunnel. Figured it wouldn't hurt to stop one more time before I passed through to the other side, take in all of that valley's beauty. Good thing I did, too, otherwise I might have become a permanent part of it.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

DOOR OPENS

NARRATOR STEPS DOWN, WALKS TO EDGE

NARRATOR

(in awe)

Yosemite Valley. And there's El Cap. It looks like quite a lot of people on top. I wonder if Ba's up there.

RECORDER OFF

LOOKING BACK

NARRATOR

I raised the binoculars to my eyes to see if I could spot Ba. She was there all right, with her climbers by her side. Though that wasn't all who was there. Across from 'em stood a whole squad of company officers, dressed in their suits, the most unnatural of all in this natural landscape. But then I saw something that surprised even me. One of their own. Dressed to the nines, a sharp suit of his own, and... chains. Large, heavy ones, and massive weights as well. He looked about to buckle under all the weight, yet somehow was still standin'. Stranger than that, he seemed happy, joyous as the dancing spiders. Starin' straight at Ba. And she was starin' straight at him. Not a single word spoken. Just pure love, dancin' in both their eyes. A reunion how long in the makin' I couldn't know. Course it didn't last as long as they'd waited for it. Pretty soon one of the officers handed Ba some papers, and my new binoculars didn't reach that far, but I'd bet on 'em being new contracts. She read 'em, seemed fine for a bit, but then it all changed in an instant. Ba threw the papers to the wind, the company officers drawing weapons, the climbers looking fit to pounce on 'em before they could get a shot off. Ba stared at the chained man, gave him a smile, then did the unthinkable. She grabbed one of the other climber's ropes and leapt off the side of the cliff, swingin' down to where it was bolted in. Then she jumped once more, only this time, without the rope in her hands. Fallin' face down through the air, arms outspread, she looked an angel comin' to earth in slow motion. Until a real angel swooped down. The chained man, strainin' under all that weight, leapt up from beside the company officers after Ba. Only he didn't fall. He flew. Weren't any wings on him, but it was flight all the same. Before Ba hit the trees below El Capitan, the chained man had scooped her in his arms, and was carryin' her through the air across the valley. I smiled. The old dynamiter was right, I figured. A falling spider is good luck. That was before I saw what had become of the tunnel, though.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT, OUTSIDE TRUCK

Bubbling, oozing sounds.

NARRATOR

Huh. Well, I guess I won't be gettin' out of the valley on this road.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

Where the tunnel once was a new, light grey rock had bubbled up, closing the road and tunnel like it were never there to begin with, only a slightly darker, older stone around it givin' it away. I gazed out across the valley. The climbers were gone, as were the Company officers. Something was off, still. I listened for a moment before I heard it. Or didn't hear it, rather. There were no dynamite blasts. Just the noisy quiet of nature to keep me company, with all her sighs and breaths, chirps and rattles. I got back in Old Stars and added her thrummin' to that sonic tableau, then headed back into the valley. When I quieted Old Stars at the settlement I could hear plenty of sound.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

CLIMBER 1

It's for your own good, the tunnel will have closed by now.

DYNAMITER 1

Then we'll blast through it!

CLIMBER 1

And when the dynamite runs out?! Look, it's the driver. He'll tell you, the tunnel's closed.

DYNAMITE 2



Well?

NARRATOR

Sure is. Brand new rock, and all.

CLIMBER 1

We only need a single stick.

DYNAMITER 2

Well, if it's just a single--

DYNAMITER 1

No. For too long you've been taking *our goods* over the mountains. And whenever we blast a tunnel, the Black Widow weaves a stone web and closes it. The tunnel's closed, you say? Well good riddance. *We'll* blast a new one.

CLIMBER 1

You'll run out of dynamite trying and be stuck down here forever!

DYNAMITE EXPLOSION

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

It was as tense between the Dynamiters and Climbers on the valley floor as it seemed atop El Cap with the Company Officers. But when that massive blast came, far closer than any others, we were all knocked back for a moment before we recovered. Long enough for one of the climbers to approach me, one hand out to help me up. The other grippin' tight to a stick of dynamite.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

CLIMBER 2

(whispering)

Psst, hey. You want to get out of the valley, yeah?

NARRATOR

(whispering)

Sure do.

CLIMBER 2

(whispering)

Take me to our camp, and we'll get you out.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

The Dynamiters had run off towards the sound of the blast, not too far from their settlement, while the climbers scattered back into the forest. The one who had helped slinked back when everyone else had gone, the dynamite passed off to someone else. I drove 'em down a road, what must have once been the main way through the park. Not as chewed up as I'd have expected, all things considered. We reached a turn-off, a sign readin' 'Camp 4.' That's where we stopped.

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

RECORDER OFF

SFX FOOTSTEPS

CLIMBER 2

It's just up ahead.

SFX SMALL EXPLOSION

SFX CHEERS

CLIMBER 2

Here we are.

NARRATOR  
(impressed)  
Well I'll be.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR  
Flyin' there above us, hoverin' more like, was the chained company officer. Only he weren't chained any more, that small bit of dynamite the climber had stolen was used to blast the chains off. A dangerous gambit, but one that seemed to have worked. Hoverin' in the clearing, he was starin' straight at Ba, smiles lightin' up both their faces. Then the climber who had brought me stepped forward, and the two fixed their gaze on me.

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

RECORDER OFF

BA  
It's nice to meet you, stranger. My name is Ba. You've come at a great time.

NARRATOR  
(wary)  
I seem to be making a habit of that, lately.

WU  
Does my flying make you nervous?

NARRATOR  
It's less what you're doing, and more what you're wearing.

WU

Ah, yes. So you know the Company.

NARRATOR

That I do.

WU

Then you might not be as hard to persuade as I thought.

NARRATOR

That depends on the means, doesn't it.

WU

No, you misunderstand. I wouldn't hurt you. I need your help. I need one of those boxes you carry.

NARRATOR

You should know better than anyone what will happen to me if I don't deliver the Company goods.

WU

The Company has already delivered the goods, as far as they're concerned they're Frisco's now. And without us, there is no way out of the valley.

NARRATOR

I suppose this is the part where you tell me you could just take it from me if you wanted to.

BA

That's not who we are.

NARRATOR

I saw you climbin' before. It was something else, I'll tell you. You've got a real natural gift.

BA

(laughs)

Some might say supernatural, but I thank you still.

NARRATOR

Hmm. A Company box, then?

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

Didn't see as I had much of a choice, after all that. They were right. The Company man could have flown us out one by one, but I saw him struggle under those chains. There was no way of getting Old Stars out unless Ba dug us a tunnel. So I handed a box over, as delicate as I could. Didn't ask what they wanted it for, figured the less I knew the better. Though it was easy enough to piece it out, after the fact. Whatever Ba had done atop El Cap, after she'd done it Wu could fly, but she couldn't climb, and the tunnels she'd dug had all closed up. Course goes to reason she could of done it again, reversed whatever she had done, stripped Wu of his flight and returned her own diggin'. But I got the feelin' that was never really on the table. When they came back to the clearin' after a time, the box nowhere in sight, the Company man was still flyin', but now Ba was dancin' up the rock just like before, the both of 'em as powerful as ever. I guess some legends have their roots sunk in fact.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

BA

I can dig you a tunnel East, if you prefer. Some of the old roads that way lead out to the Company roads on the other side.

NARRATOR

East, huh? Away from Frisco. What should I do with the boxes?

WU

Bury them deep.

NARRATOR

I don't have a shovel.

BA

I'll dig you a hole.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

It was something else, that's for sure. Followin' behind Ba as she dug straight through the rock, old and new alike, crushing it up into the perfect road for Old Stars and I. By the time we reached the Company roads in the great basin out east I thought she'd be exhausted, but without missing a step she dug a great, big hole beside us, and one by one, as delicate as we could, we lowered the Company boxes in before she filled it up again.

RECORDER OFF

PRESENT OUTSIDE TRUCK

NARRATOR

Now he's free, what will you do?

BA

I'm not so sure. We have our whole lives to figure that out.

LOOKING BACK

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

She was happy, a rare happiness I hadn't seen in a long time. I have to admit, I envied her that. Some days after she had gone, closin' the tunnel behind her, how many days I couldn't say, I noticed a shadow over the road ahead of Old Stars. The Company man, flyin' over me, shepherdin' us down the road. When I stopped for the night he landed, and we spoke a spell. Turns out most of the dynamite had been lost or wasted tryin' to blast out of the valley. Now most of the dynamiters had started workin' with the climbers, learnin' slowly but surely how to haul themselves up the face of the mountains. I'm headed into the desert now, far from that lush valley and those granite faces. Yet I still can't keep from thinkin' about everything Ba did, in the face of so much pressure. Where there's a will, there's a way. She climbed mountains to be with him. Maybe I can brave an ocean to find you.