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"Wallie swung the frying pan with all his strength ... knocking the six-shooter from Boise Bill's hand as he jumped across the fire at him"

THE DUDE WRANGLER

BY
CAROLINE LOCKHART

FRONTISPIECE
BY
DUDLEY GLYNE SUMMERS

GARDEN CITY, N. Y., AND TORONTO
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
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Contents

THE DUDE WRANGLER

CHAPTER I

THE GIRL FROM WYOMING

Conscious that something had disturbed him, Wallie Macpherson raised himself on his elbow in bed to listen. For a full minute he heard nothing unusual: the Atlantic breaking against the sea-wall at the foot of the sloping lawn of The Colonial, the clock striking the hour in the tower of the Court House, and the ripping, tearing, slashing noises like those of a sash-and-blind factory, produced through the long, thin nose of old Mr. Penrose, two doors down the hotel corridor, all sounds to which he was too accustomed to be awakened by them.

While Wallie remained in this posture conjecturing, the door between the room next to him and that of Mr. Penrose was struck smartly several times, and with a vigour to denote that there was temper behind the blows which fell upon it. He had not known that the room was occupied; being considered undesirable on account of the audible slumbers of the old gentleman it was often vacant.

The raps finally awakened even Mr. Penrose, who demanded sharply:

"What are you doing?"

"Hammering with the heel of my slipper," a feminine voice answered.

"What do you want?"

"A chance to sleep."

"Who's stopping you?" crabbedly.

"You're snoring." Indignation gave an edge to the accusation.

"You're impertinent!"

"You're a nuisance!" the voice retorted. Wallie covered his mouth with his hand and hunched his shoulders.

There was a moment's silence while Mr. Penrose seemed to be thinking of a suitable answer. Then:

"It's my privilege to snore if I want to. This is my room—I pay for it!"

"Then this side of the door is mine and I can pound on it, for the same reason."

Mr. Penrose sneered in the darkness: "I suppose you're some sour old maid—you sound like it."

"And no doubt you're a Methuselah with dyspepsia!"

Wallie smote the pillow gleefully—old Mr. Penrose's collection of bottles and boxes and tablets for indigestion were a byword.

"We will see about this in the morning," said Mr. Penrose, significantly. "I have been coming to this hotel for twenty-eight years——"

"It's nothing to boast of," the voice interrupted. "I shouldn't, if I had so little originality."

Mr. Penrose, seeming to realize that the woman would have the last word if the dialogue lasted until morning, ended it with a loud snort of derision.

He was so wrought up by the controversy that he was unable to compose himself immediately, but lay awake for an hour framing a speech for Mr. Cone, the proprietor, which was in the nature of an ultimatum. Either the woman must move, or he would—but the latter he considered a remote possibility, since he realized fully that a multi-millionaire, socially well connected, is an asset which no hotel will dispense with lightly.

The frequency with which Mr. Penrose had presumed upon this knowledge had much to do with Wallie's delight as he had listened to the encounter.

Dropping back upon his pillow, the young man mildly wondered about the woman next door to him. She must have come in on the evening train while he was at the moving pictures, and retired immediately. Very likely she was, as Mr. Penrose asserted, some acrimonious spinster, but, at any rate, she had temporarily silenced the rich old tyrant of whom all the hotel stood in awe.

A second time the ripping sound of yard after yard of calico being viciously torn broke the night's stillness and, grinning, Wallie waited to hear what the woman next door was going to do about it. But only a stranger would have hoped to do anything about it, since to prevent Mr. Penrose from snoring was a task only a little less hopeless than that of stopping the roar of the ocean. Guests whom it annoyed had either to move or get used to it. Sometimes they did the one and sometimes the other, but always Mr. Penrose, who was the subject of a hundred complaints a summer, snored on victoriously. The woman next door, of course, could not know this, so no doubt she had a mistaken notion that she might either break the old gentleman of his habit or have him banished to an isolated quarter.

Wallie had not long to wait, for shortly after Mr. Penrose started again the tattoo on the door was repeated.

In response to a snarl that might have come from a menagerie, she advised him curtly:

"You're at it again!"

Another angry colloquy followed, and once more Mr. Penrose was forced to subside for the want of an adequate answer.

All the rest of the night the battle continued at intervals, and by morning not only Wallie but the entire corridor was interested in the occupant of the room adjoining his.

Wallie was in the office when the door of the elevator opened with a clang and Mr. Penrose sprang out of it like a starved lion about to hurl himself upon a Christian martyr. While his jaws did not drip saliva, the thin nostrils of his bothersome nose quivered with eagerness and anger.

"I've been coming here for twenty-eight years, haven't I?" he demanded.

"Twenty-eight this summer," Mr. Cone replied, soothingly. 7

"In that time I never have put in such a night as last night!"

"Dear me!" The proprietor seemed genuinely disturbed by the information.

"I could not sleep—I have not closed my eyes—for the battering on my door of the female in the room adjoining!"

"You astonish me! Let me see——" Mr. Cone whirled the register around and looked at it. He read aloud:

"Helene Spenceley—Prouty, Wyoming."

Mr. Cone lowered his voice discreetly:

"What was her explanation?"

"She accused me of snoring!" declared Mr. Penrose, furiously. "I heard the clock strike every hour until morning! Not a wink have I slept—not a *wink*, Mr. Cone!"

"We can arrange this satisfactorily, Mr. Penrose," Mr. Cone smiled conciliatingly. "I have no doubt that Miss—er—Spenceley will gladly change her room if I ask her. I shall place one equally good at her disposal—— Ah, I presume this is she—let me introduce you."

Although he would not admit it, Mr. Penrose was quite as astonished as Wallie at the appearance of the person who stepped from the elevator and walked to the desk briskly. She was young and good looking and wore suitable clothes that fitted her; also, while not aggressive, she had a self-reliant manner which proclaimed the fact that she was accustomed to looking after her own interests. While she was as far removed as possible from the person Mr. Penrose had expected to see, still she was the "female" who had "sassed" him as he had not been "sassed" since he could remember, and he eyed her belligerently as he curtly acknowledged the introduction. 8

"Mr. Penrose, one of our oldest guests in point of residence, tells me that you have had some little—er—difference——" began Mr. Cone, affably.

"I had a hellish night!" Mr. Penrose interrupted, savagely. "I hope never to put in such another."

"I join you in that," replied Miss Spenceley, calmly. "I've never heard any one snore so horribly—I'd know your snore among a thousand."

"Never mind—we can adjust this matter amicably, I will change your room to-day, Miss Spenceley," Mr. Cone interposed, hastily. "It hasn't *quite* the view, but the furnishings are more luxurious."

"But I don't want to change," Miss Spenceley coolly replied. "It suits me perfectly."

"I came for quiet and I can't stand that hammering," declared Mr. Penrose, glaring at her.

"So did I—my nerves—and your snoring bothers me. But perhaps," with aggravating sweetness, "I can break you of the habit."

"I wouldn't lose another night's sleep for a thousand dollars!"

"It will be cheaper to change your room, for I don't mean to change *mine*."

The millionaire turned to the proprietor. "Either this person goes or I do—that's my ultimatum!"

"I will not be bullied in any such fashion, and I can't very well be put out forcibly, can I?" and Miss Spenceley smiled at both of them. Mr. Cone looked from one to the other, helplessly. 9

"Then," Mr. Penrose retorted, "I shall leave *immediately!* Mr. Cone," dramatically, "the room I have occupied for twenty-eight summers is at your disposal." His voice rose in a crescendo movement so that even in the furthermost corner of the dining room they heard it: "I have a peach orchard down in Delaware, and I shall go there, where I can snore as much as I damn please; and don't you forget it!"

Mr. Cone, his mouth open and hands hanging, looked after him as he stamped away, too astonished to protest.

CHAPTER II

"THE HAPPY FAMILY"

The guests of the Colonial Hotel arose briskly each morning to nothing. After a night of refreshing and untroubled sleep they dressed and hurried to breakfast after the manner of travellers making close connections. Then each repaired to his favourite chair placed in the same spot on the wide veranda to wait for luncheon. The more energetic sometimes took a wheel-chair for an hour and were pushed on the Boardwalk or attended an auction sale of antiques and curios, but mostly their lives were as placid and as eventful as those of the inmates of an institution.

The greater number of the male guests of The Colonial had retired from something—banking, wholesale drugs, the manufacture of woolens. The families were all perfectly familiar with one another's financial rating and histories, and although they came from diverse sections of the country they were for two months or more like one large, supremely contented family. In truth, they called themselves facetiously "The Happy Family," and in this way Mr. Cone, who took an immense pride in them and in the fact that they returned to his hospitable roof summer after summer, always referred to them. 11

Strictly speaking, there were two branches of the "Family": those whose first season antedated 1900, and the "newcomers," who had spent only eight, or ten, or twelve summers at The Colonial. They were all on the most friendly terms imaginable, yet each tacitly recognized the distinction. The original "Happy Family" occupied the rocking chairs on the right-hand side of the wide veranda, while the "newcomers" took the left, where the view was not quite so good and there was a trifle less breeze than on the other.

The less said of the "transients" the better. The few who stumbled in did not stay unless by chance they were favourably known to one of the "permanents." Of course there was no rudeness ever—merely the polite surprise of the regular occupants when they find a stranger in the pew on Sunday morning. Sometimes the transient stayed out his or her vacation, but usually he confided to the chambermaid, and sometimes Mr. Cone, that the guests were "doodledums" and "fossils" and found another hotel where the patrons, if less solid financially, were more interesting and sociable.

Wallace Macpherson belonged in the group of older patrons, as his aunt, Miss Mary Macpherson, had been coming since 1897, and he himself from the time he wore curls and ruffled collars, or after his aunt had taken him upon the death of his parents.

"Wallie," as he was called by everybody, as the one eligible man under sixty, was, in his way, as much of an asset to the hotel as the notoriously wealthy Mr. Penrose. Of an amiable and obliging disposition, he could always be relied upon to escort married women with mutinous husbands, and ladies who had none, mutinous or otherwise. He was twenty-four, and, in appearance, a credit to any woman he was seen with, to say nothing of the two hundred thousand it was known he would inherit from Aunt Mary, who now supported him. 12

Wallie's appearance upon the veranda was invariably in the nature of a triumphal entry. He was received with lively acclaim and cordiality as he flitted impartially from group to group, and that person was difficult indeed with whom he could not find something in common, for his range of subjects extended from the "rose pattern" in Irish crochet to Arctic currents.

The morning on the veranda promised to be a lively one, since, in addition to the departure of old Mr. Penrose, who had sounded as if he was wrecking the furniture while packing his boxes, the return from the war of Will Smith, the gardener's son, was anticipated, and the guests as an act of patriotism meant to give him a rousing welcome. There was bunting over the doorway and around the pillars, with red, white, and blue ice cream for luncheon, and flags on the menu, not to mention a purse of $17.23 collected among the guests that was to be presented in appreciation of the valour which, it was understood from letters to his father, Will had shown on the field of battle. 13

The guests were in their usual places when Wallie came from breakfast and stood for a moment in the spacious double doorway. A cheerful chorus welcomed him as soon as he was discovered, and Mrs. C. D. Budlong put out her plump hand and held his. He did not speak instantly, for his eye was roving over the veranda as if in search of somebody, and when it rested upon Miss Spenceley sitting alone at the far end he seemed satisfied and inquired solicitously of Mrs. Budlong: "Did you sleep well? You are looking splendid!"

There were some points of resemblance between Mrs. Budlong and the oleander in the green tub beside which she was sitting. Her round, fat face had the pink of the blossoms and she was nearly as motionless as if she had been potted. She often sat for hours with nothing save her black, sloe-like eyes that saw everything, to show that she was not in a state of suspended animation. Her husband called her "Honey-dumplin'," and they were a most affectionate and congenial couple, although she was as silent as he was voluble.

"My rest was broken." Mrs. Budlong turned her eyes significantly toward the far end of the veranda.

"Did you hear that terrible racket?" demanded Mr. Budlong of Wallie.

"Not so loud, 'C. D.,'" admonished Mrs. Budlong. Mrs. Budlong ran the letters together so that strangers often had the impression she was calling her husband "Seedy," though the name was as unsuitable as well could be, since Mr. Budlong in his neat blue serge suit, blue polka-dot scarf, silk stockings, and polished tan oxfords was well groomed and dapper always. 14

"She's driven away our oldest guest." Mr. Budlong lowered his indignant voice a little.

"He *was* a nuisance with his snoring," Wallie defended.

"She could have changed her room," said Mrs. Budlong, taking her hand away from him. "She need not have been so obstinate."

"He was very rude to her," Wallie maintained stoutly. "Sleeping next door, I heard it all—and this morning in the office."

"Anyway, I think Mr. Cone made a mistake in not insisting upon her changing her room, and so I shall tell him." Mr. Budlong, who had made "his" in white lead and paint and kept a chauffeur and a limousine, felt that his disapproval would mean something to the proprietor.

"Oh, Wallie!"

Wallie felt relieved when he saw Mrs. Henry Appel beckoning him. As he was on his way to Mrs. Appel Miss Mattie Gaskett clutched at his arm and detained him.

"Did you see the robins this morning, Wallie?"

"Are they here?"

"Yes, a dozen of them. They do remind me so of my dear Southland." Miss Gaskett was from Maryland. 15

"The summer wouldn't be the same without either of you," he replied, gallantly.

Miss Gaskett shook a coquettish finger at him.

"You flirt! You have pretty speeches for everyone."

Wallie did not seem displeased by the accusation as he passed on to Mrs. Appel.

The Appels were among the important families of The Colonial because the richest next to Mr. Penrose. They were from Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania. Mr. Appel owned anthracite coal land and street railways, so if Mr. Appel squeezed pennies and Mrs. Appel dressed in remnants from the bargain counter their economies were regarded merely as eccentricities.

Mrs. Appel held up a sweater: "Won't you tell me how to turn this shoulder? I've forgotten. Do you purl four and knit six, or purl six and knit four, Wallie?"

Wallie laughed immoderately.

"Eight, Mrs. Appel! Purl eight and knit four—I told you yesterday. That's a lovely piece of Battenburg, Mrs. Stott. When did you start it?"

"Last month, but I've been so busy with teas and parties—so many, many things going on. Don't you think it will make a lovely dresser-scarf? What would you line it with?"

"Pink, absolutely—that delicate shade like the inside of a sea-shell."

"You *are* such an artist, Wallie! Your taste is perfect."

Wallie did not contradict her. 16

Strictly, Mrs. Stott did not belong in the group in which she was seated. She had been coming to The Colonial only eleven years, so really, she should have been on the other side of the veranda, but Mrs. Stott had such an insidious way of getting where and what she wanted that she was "one of them" almost before they knew it.

Mr. Stott was a rising young attorney of forty-eight, and it was anticipated that he would one day be a leading trial lawyer because of his aggressiveness.

Wallie's voice took on a sympathetic tone. He stopped in front of a chair where a very thin young lady was reclining languidly.

"How's the bad heart to-day, Miss Eyester?"

"About as usual, Wallie, thank you," she replied, gratefully.

"Your lips have more colour."

Miss Eyester opened a handbag and, taking out a small, round mirror which she carried for the purpose, inspected her lips critically.

"It does seem so," she admitted. "If I can just keep from getting excited."

"I can't imagine a better place than The Colonial." The reply contained a grain of irony.

"That's why I come here," Miss Eyester sighed, "though I'm *pining* to go somewhere livelier."

Wallie wagged his head playfully.

"Treason! Treason! Why, you've been coming here for—" Miss Eyester's alarmed expression caused him to finish lamely—"for ever so long."

"Wallie!" It was his aunt's voice calling and he went instantly to a tall, austere lady in a linen 17

collar who was knitting wash-rags with the feverish haste of a piece-worker in a factory.

He stood before her obediently.

"Don't go in to-day."

"*Why*, Auntie?" In his voice there was a world of disappointment.

"It's too rough—there must have been a storm at sea."

"But, Auntie," he protested, "I missed yesterday, taking Mrs. Appel to the auction. It isn't very rough——"

"Look at the white-caps," she interrupted, curtly, "I don't want you to go, Wallie."

"Oh, very well." He turned away abruptly, wondering if she realized how keenly he was disappointed—a disappointment that was not made less by the fact that her fears were groundless, since not only was it not "rough" but he was an excellent swimmer.

"The girl from Wyoming," as he called Miss Spenceley to himself, had overheard and was looking at him with an expression in her eyes which made him redden. It was mocking; she was laughing at him for being told not to go in bathing, as if he were a child of seven.

He sauntered past her, humming, to let her know that he did not care what she thought about him. When he turned around she had vanished and a few minutes after he saw her with her suit over her arm on the way to the bath-house on the exclusive beach in front of The Colonial.

CHAPTER III

PINKEY

The train upon which Will Smith was expected was not due until twelve-thirty, so, since he could not go swimming and still felt rebellious over being forbidden, Wallie went upstairs to put the finishing touches on a lemonade tray of japanned tin which he had painted and intended presenting to Mr. Cone.

The design was his own, and very excellent it seemed to Wallie as he stopped at intervals and held it from him. On a moss-green background of rolling clouds a most artistic cluster of old-fashioned cabbage roses was tossed carelessly, with a brown slug on a leaf as a touch of realism.

The gods have a way of apportioning their gifts unevenly, for not only did Wallie paint but he wrote poetry—free verse mostly; free chiefly in the sense that his contributions to the smaller magazines were, perforce, gratuitous. Also he sang—if not divinely, at least so acceptably that his services were constantly asked for charity concerts.

In addition to these he had manlier accomplishments, playing good games of tennis, golf, and shuffle-board. Besides, Mr. Appel was his only dangerous opponent on the bowling alley, and he had learned to ride at the riding academy.

Now, as he worked, he speculated as to whether he had imagined it or "the girl from Wyoming" really had laughed at him. He could not dismiss her from his mind and the incident rankled. He told himself that she had not been there long enough to appreciate him; she knew nothing of his talents or of his popularity. She would learn that to be singled out by him for special attention meant something, and he did not consider himself a conceited man either.

Yet Wallie continued to tingle each time that he thought of the laughter in her eyes—actual derision he feared it was. Then he had an idea, a very clever one it seemed to him. By this time she would have returned from bathing and he would go down and exhibit the cabbage roses. They would be praised and she would hear it. It was nearly time for Will Smith to arrive, and he had to stop painting, anyhow.

Bearing the lemonade tray carefully in order not to smudge it, Wallie stepped out of the elevator and stood in the wide doorway, agreeably aware that he was a pleasing figure in his artist's smock and the flowing scarf which he always put on when he painted.

No one noticed him, however, for everyone was discussing the return of the "Smith boy," and the five dollars which Mr. Appel, the railway magnate, had unexpectedly contributed to the purse that he was going to present to him on behalf of the guests.

Miss Spenceley was on the veranda as he had surmised she would be, and Wallie debated as to whether he should wait until discovered and urged to show his roses, or frankly offer his work for criticism.

While he hesitated, the clatter of hoofs and what appeared to be a serious runaway on the side avenue brought everyone up standing. The swaying vehicle was a laundry wagon, and when it turned in at the entrance to the grounds of The Colonial, the astonished guests saw that not only had the horse a driver but a rider!

It was not a runaway. On the contrary, the person on the horse's back was using his heels and his hat at every jump to get more speed out of the amazed animal.

The wagon stopped in front of the hotel with the driver grinning uncertainly, while a soldierly figure sprang over the wheel to wring the hand of Smith, the gardener. Another on the horse's back replaced his service cap at an extraordinary angle and waited nonchalantly for the greetings to be over.

Before he went to the army "Willie" Smith had been a bashful boy who blushed when the guests spoke to him, but he faced them now with the assurance of a vaudeville entertainer as he introduced his "buddy":

"Pinkey Fripp, of Wyoming—a hero, ladies and gentlemen! The grittiest little soldier in the A.E.F., with a medal to prove it!"

Followed an account of the deed of reckless courage for which Pinkey had been decorated, and the Smith boy told it so well that everyone's eyes had tears in them. Mrs. Appel, fumbling for her handkerchief, dropped her ball of yarn over the railing, where the cat wound it among the rose bushes so effectively that to disentangle it were an endless task. 21

The subject of the eulogy stared back unabashed at the guests, who stared at him in admiration and curiosity. Unflattered, unmoved, he sagged to one side of the bare-backed horse with the easy grace of one accustomed to the saddle. No one just like him ever had come under the observation of the august patrons of The Colonial.

Pinkey Fripp was about five feet four and square as a bulldog. "Hard-boiled" is a word which might have been coined specially to describe him. The cropped hair on his round head was sandy, his skin a sun-blistered red, and his lips had deep cracks in them. His nose did not add to his beauty any more than the knife-scar around his neck, which looked as if someone had barely failed in an attempt to cut off his head.

The feature that saved the young fellow's face from a look of unmitigated "toughness" was his pale gray eyes, whose steady, fearless look seemed to contend with a whimsical gleam of humour.

Pinkey listened, with the disciplined patience of the army, to the recital of the exploit that had won the War Cross for him, but there was a peculiar glint in his light eyes. As Smith drew to a conclusion, Pinkey slowly lifted his leg, stiffened by a machine-gun bullet, over the horse's neck and sat sideways.

The applause was so vociferous, so spontaneous and hearty, that nothing approaching it ever had been heard at The Colonial. But it stopped as suddenly, for in the middle of it Pinkey gathered himself and sprang through the air like a flying-squirrel, to bowl the Smith boy over. "You said you wouldn't tell about that 'Craw de gare,' ner call me a hero, an' you've gone and done it!" he said, accusingly, as he sat astride of him. "I got feelin's jest like grown-up folks, and I don't like to be laughed at. Sorry, Big Boy, but you got this comin'!" Thereupon, with a grin, Pinkey banged his host's head on the gravel. 22

The two were surrounded when this astonishing incident was over and it was found that not only was the Smith boy not injured but seemed to be used to it and bore no malice. The guests shook hands with the boys and congratulated them; they examined the War Cross that Pinkey produced reluctantly from the bottom of the flour-sack in which he carried his clothing, and finally Mr. Appel presented the purse in a speech to which nobody listened—and the Smith boy shocked everybody by his extravagance when he gave five of it to the driver of the laundry wagon.

"I was shore pinin' to step in the middle of a horse," was Pinkey's explanation of their eccentric arrival. "It kinda rests me."

While all this was happening Wallie stood holding his lemonade tray. When he could get close, he welcomed the Smith boy and was introduced to Pinkey, and stood around long enough to learn that the latter and Helene Spenceley knew each other.

Nobody, however, was interested in seeing his roses. Even Miss Mattie Gaskett, who always clung like a burr to woollen clothing with the least encouragement, said carelessly when he showed her the lemonade tray: 23

"As good as your best, Wallie," and edged over to hear what Pinkey was saying.

There was nothing to do but withdraw unobtrusively, though Wallie realized with chagrin that he could have gone upstairs on his hands and knees without attracting the least attention. For the first time he regretted deeply that his eyesight had kept him out of the army, for he, too, might have been winning war crosses in the trenches instead of rolling bandages and knitting socks and sweaters.

Wallie almost hated the lemonade tray as he slammed it on the table, for in his utter disgust with everything and everybody the design seemed to look more like cabbages than roses.

CHAPTER IV

THE BRAND OF CAIN

There never was a nose so completely out of joint as Wallie's nor an owner more thoroughly humiliated and embittered by the fickleness and ingratitude of human nature. The sacrifices he had made in escorting dull ladies to duller movies were wasted. The unfailing courtesy with which he had retrieved their yarn and handkerchiefs, the sympathy and attention with which he had listened to their symptoms, his solicitude when they were ailing—all were forgotten now that Pinkey was in the vicinity.

The ladies swarmed around that person, quoted his sayings delightedly, and declared a million times in Wallie's hearing that "he was a character!" And the worst of it was that Helene Spenceley did not seem sufficiently aware of Wallie's existence even to laugh at him.

As the displaced cynosure sat brooding in his room the third morning after Pinkey's arrival he wished that he could think of some perfectly well-bred way to attract attention.

He believed in the psychology of clothes. Perhaps if he appeared on the veranda in something to emphasize his personality, something suggesting strength and virility, like tennis flannels, he could regain his hold on his audience.

With this thought in mind Wallie opened his capacious closet filled with wearing apparel, and the moment his eyes fell upon his riding breeches he had his inspiration. If "the girl from Wyoming" thought her friend Pinkey was the only person who could ride a horse, he would show her!

It took Wallie only so long to order a horse as it required to get the Riding Academy on the telephone.

"I want a good-looking mount—something spirited," he instructed the person who answered.

"We've just bought some new horses," the voice replied. "I'll send you the pick of them."

Wallie hung up the receiver, fairly trembling with eagerness to dress himself and get down on the veranda. He looked well in riding togs—everyone mentioned it—and if he could walk out swinging his crop nonchalantly, well, they would at least *notice* him! And when he would spring lightly into the saddle and gallop away—he saw it as plainly as if it were happening.

Although Wallie actually broke his record he seemed to himself an unconscionable time in dressing, but when he gave himself a final survey in the mirror, he had every reason to feel satisfied with the result. He was correct in every detail and he thought complacently that he could not but contrast favourably with the appearance of that "roughneck" from Montana—or was it Wyoming?

"What you taking such a hot day to ride for?" Mrs. Appel called when she caught sight of Wallie.

The question jarred on him and he replied coolly:

"I had not observed that it was warmer than usual, Mrs. Appel."

"It's ninety, with the humidity goodness knows how much!" she retorted.

Without seeming to look, Wallie could see that both Miss Spenceley and Pinkey were on the veranda and regarding him with interest. His pose became a little theatrical while he waited for his mount, striking his riding boot smartly with his crop as he stood in full view of them.

Everyone was interested when they saw the horse coming, and a few sauntered over to have a look at him, Miss Spenceley and Pinkey among the others.

"Is that the horse you always ride, Wallie?" inquired Miss Gaskett.

"No; it's a new one I'm going to try out for them," Wallie replied, indifferently.

"Wallie, *do* be careful!" his aunt admonished him. "I don't like you to ride strange horses."

Wallie laughed lightly, and as he went down to meet the groom who was now at the foot of the steps with the horses he assured her that there was not the least cause for anxiety.

"Why, that's a Western horse!" Miss Spenceley exclaimed. "Isn't that a brand on the shoulder?"

"It looks like it," Pinkey answered, ruffing the hair then smoothing it. "Shore it's a brand." He stepped off a pace to look at it.

"Pardon me, but I think you're mistaken," Wallie said, politely but positively. "The Academy buys only thoroughbreds."

"If that ain't a bronc, I'll eat it," Pinkey declared, bluntly.

"Can you make out the brand?" asked Miss Spenceley.

Pinkey ruffed the hair again and stepped back and squinted. Then his cracked lips stretched in a grin that threatened to start them bleeding: "'88' is the way I read it."

She nodded: "The brand of Cain."

Then they both laughed immoderately.

Wallie could see no occasion for merriment and it nettled him.

"Nevertheless, I maintain that you are in error," he declared, obstinately.

"I doubt if I could set one of them hen-skin saddles," observed Pinkey, changing the subject.

Wallie replied airily:

"Oh, it's very easy if you've been taught properly."

"Taught? You mean," wonderingly, "that somebody *learnt* you to ride horseback?"

Wallie smiled patronizingly:

"How else would I know?"

"I was jest throwed on a horse and told to stay there."

"Which accounts for the fact that you Western riders have no 'form,' if you'll excuse my frankness."

"Don't mention it," replied Pinkey, not to be outdone in politeness. "Maybe, before I go, you'll give me some p'inters?" 28

"I shall be most happy," Wallie responded, putting his foot in the stirrup.

He mounted creditably and settled himself in the saddle.

"Thumb him," said Miss Spenceley, "and we'll soon settle the argument."

"How—thumb him? The term is not familiar."

"Show him, Pinkey." Her eyes were sparkling, for Wallie's tone implied that the expression was slang and also rather vulgar.

"He'll unload his pack as shore as shootin'." Pinkey hesitated.

"No time like the present to learn a lesson," she replied, ambiguously.

"Certainly—if there's anything you can teach me," Wallie's smile said as plain as words that he doubted it. "Mr. Fripp—er—'thumb' him."

"You're the doctor," said Pinkey, grimly, and "thumbed" him.

The effect was instantaneous. The old horse ducked his head, arched his back, and went at it.

It was over in less time than it requires to tell and Wallie was convinced beyond the question of a doubt that the horse had not been bred in Kentucky. As he described an aërial circle Wallie had a whimsical notion that his teeth had bitten into his brain and his spine was projected through the crown of his derby hat. Darkness and oblivion came upon him for a moment, and then he found himself being lifted tenderly from a bed of petunias and dusted off by the groom from the Riding Academy. 29

The ladies were screaming, but a swift glance showed Wallie not only Mr. Appel but Mr. Cone and Mr. Budlong with their hands over their mouths and their teeth gleaming between their spreading fingers.

"Coward!" he cried to Pinkey. "*You* don't dare get on him!"

"Can you ride him 'slick,' Pinkey?" asked Miss Spenceley.

"I'll do it er bust somethin'." Pinkey's mouth had a funny quirk at the corners. "Maybe it'll take the kinks out of me from travellin'."

He looked at Mr. Cone doubtfully: "I'm liable to rip up the sod in your front yard a little."

"Go to it!" cried Mr. Cone, whose sporting blood was up. "There's nothin' here that won't grow again. Ride him!"

Everybody was trembling, and when Miss Eyester looked at her lips they were white as alabaster, but she meant to see the riding, if she had one of her sinking spells immediately it was over.

When Pinkey swung into the saddle, the horse turned its head around slowly and looked at the leg that gripped him. Pinkey leaned down, unbuckled the throat-latch, and slipped off the bridle. Then, as he touched the horse in the flank with his heels, he took off his cap and slapped him over the head with it.

The horse recognized the familiar challenge and accepted it. What he had done to Wallie was only the gambolling of a frisky colt as compared with his efforts to rid his back of Pinkey. 30

Even Helene Spenceley sobered as she watched the battle that followed.

The horse sprang into the air, twisted, and came down stiff-legged—squealing. Now with his head between his forelegs he shot up his hind hoofs and at an angle to require all the grip in his rider's knees to stay in the saddle. Then he brought down his heels again, violently, to bite at Pinkey—who kicked him.

He "weaved," he "sunfished"—with every trick known to an old outlaw he tried to throw his rider, rearing finally to fall backward and mash to a pulp a bed of Mr. Cone's choicest tulips. But when the horse rose Pinkey was with him, while the spectators, choking with excitement, forgetting themselves and each other, yelled like Apaches.

With nostrils blood-red and distended, his eyes the eyes of a wild animal, now writhing, now crouching, now lying back on his haunches and springing forward with a violence to snap any ordinary vertebra, the horse pitched as if there was no limit to its ingenuity and endurance.

Pinkey's breath was coming in gasps and his colour had faded with the terrible jar of it all. Even the uninitiated could see that Pinkey was weakening, and the result was doubtful, when, suddenly, the horse gave up and stampeded. He crashed through the trellis over which Mr. Cone had carefully trained his crimson ramblers, tore through a neat border of mignonette and 31
sweet alyssum that edged the driveway, jumped through "snowballs," lilacs, syringas, and rhododendrons to come to a halt finally conquered and chastened.

The "88" brand has produced a strain famous throughout Wyoming for its buckers, and this venerable outlaw lived up to every tradition of his youth and breeding.

There never was worse bucking nor better riding in a Wild West Show or out of it, and Mr. Appel declared that he had not been so stirred since the occasion when walking in the woods at Harvey's Lake in the early '90's he had acted upon the unsound presumption that all are kittens that look like kittens and disputed the path with a black-and-white animal which proved not to be.

Mrs. C. D. Budlong was shedding tears like a crocodile, without moving a feature. Mr. Budlong put the lighted end of a cigar in his mouth and burned his tongue to a blister, while Miss Eyester dropped into a chair and had her sinking spell and recovered without any one remarking it. In an abandonment that was like the delirium of madness Mr. Cone went in and lifted Miss Gaskett's cat "Cutie" out of the plush rocker, where she was leaving hairs on the cushion, and surreptitiously kicked her.

Altogether it was an unforgettable occasion, and only Pinkey seemed unthrilled by it—he dismounted in a businesslike, matter-of-fact manner that had in it neither malice toward the horse nor elation at having ridden him. He felt admiration, if anything, for he said as he rubbed 32
the horse's forehead:

"You shore made me ride, Old Timer! You got all the old curves and some new ones. If I had a hat I'd take it off to you. I ain't had such a churnin' sence I set 'Steamboat' fer fifteen seconds. Oh, hullo——" as Wallie advanced with his hand out.

"I congratulate you," said Wallie, feeling himself magnanimous in view of the way his neck was hurting.

"You needn't," replied Pinkey, good-naturedly. "He durned near 'got' me."

"It was a very creditable ride indeed," insisted Wallie, in his most patronizing and priggish manner. He found it very hard to be generous, with Helene Spenceley listening.

"It seemed so, after *your* performance, 'Gentle Annie'!" snapped Miss Spenceley.

Actually the woman seemed to spit like a cat at him! She had the tongue of a serpent and a vicious temper. He hated her! Wallie removed his hat with exaggerated politeness and decided never to have anything more to say to Miss Spenceley.

33

CHAPTER V

"GENTLE ANNIE"

Wallie had told himself emphatically that he would never speak again to Helene Spenceley. That would be an easy matter since she had glared at him, when they had passed as she was going in for breakfast, in a way that would have made him afraid to speak even if he had intended to. To refrain from thinking of her was something different.

He sat on a rustic bench on The Colonial lawn watching the silly robins and wondering why she had called him "Gentle Annie." It was clear enough that nothing flattering was intended, but what did she mean by it? There was no reason that he could see for her to fly at him—quite the contrary. He had been very generous and gentlemanly, it seemed to him, in congratulating Pinkey when it was due to them that he, Wallie, was thrown into the petunias. His neck was still stiff from the fall and no one had remembered to inquire about it—that was another reason for the disgruntled mood in which the moment found him. The women were making perfect *fools* of 34

themselves over that Pinkey—they were at it now, he could hear them cackling on the veranda.

What he could not understand was why they should act as if there was something *amusing* about a woman who came from west of Buffalo and then make a hero of a man from the Wild and Woolly. Yet they always did it, he had noticed. Why, that Pinkey could not speak a grammatical sentence and they hung on his every word, breathless. It was disgusting!

Wallie picked up a pebble and pelted a robin.

He wished the undertow would catch that Spenceley girl. If he should reach her when she was going down for the third time she would *have* to thank him for saving her and that would about kill her. He decided that he would make a point of bathing when she did, on the very remote chance that it might happen.

"Gentle Annie! Gentle Annie! Gentle Annie!" The name rankled.

Wallie pitched a pebble at another robin and accidentally hit it. Stunned for an instant, it keeled over, and Wallie glanced guiltily toward the hotel to see if by any chance Mr. Cone, who encouraged robins, was looking.

Pinkey was crossing the lawn with the obvious intention of joining him.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, sinking down beside Wallie, "I've nearly sprained my tongue answerin' questions. 'Is it true that snakes shed their skin, and do the hot pools in the Yellowstone Park freeze in winter?' I'm goin' to drift pretty pronto—I can't stand visitin'."

"Do you like the East, Mr. Fripp?" inquired Wallie, formally. 35

"I'm glad they's a West," Pinkey replied, cryptically.

"You and Miss Spenceley are from the same section, I take it?"

"Yep—Wyomin'."

"Er—by the way"—Wallie's tone was elaborately casual—"what did she mean yesterday when she called me 'Gentle Annie'?"

Pinkey moved uneasily.

"Could you give me the precise significance?" persisted Wallie.

"I could, but I wouldn't like to," Pinkey replied, drily

"Oh, don't spare my feelings," said Wallie, loftily, "there's nothing *she* could say would hurt them."

"If that's the way you feel—she meant you were 'harmless'."

"I trust so," Wallie responded with dignity.

"I'd ruther be called a—er—a Mormon," Pinkey observed.

Shocked at the language, Wallie demanded:

"It is, then, an epithet of opprobrium?"

"I can't say as to that," replied Pinkey, judicially, "but she meant you were a 'perfect lady'."

"It's more than I can say of her!" Wallie retorted, reddening.

Pinkey merely grinned and shrugged a shoulder.

He arose a moment later as if the conversation and company alike bored him.

"Well—I'm goin' to pack my war-bag and ramble. Why don't you come West and git civilized? With your figger you ought to be good fer somethin'. S'long, feller!" 36

Naturally, Wallie was not comforted by his conversation with Pinkey. Now he knew himself to have been insulted, and resented it, but along with his indignation was such a feeling of dissatisfaction with his life as he had never known. His brow contracted while he thought of the monotony of it. Just as this summer would be a duplicate of every other summer so the winter would be a repetition of the many winters he had spent in Florida with Aunt Mary. After a few months at home they would migrate with the robins. He would meet the same people he had seen all summer. They would complain of the Southern cooking and knit and tat while they babbled amiably of themselves and the members of their family and their doings. The men would smoke and compare business experiences when they had finished flaying the Administration. Discontent grew within him as he reviewed it. Why couldn't he and Aunt Mary do something different for the winter? By George! he would suggest it to her!

He got up with alacrity, cheerful immediately.

She was not on the veranda and Miss Eyester was of the opinion that she had gone to her room to take her tonic.

"I have turned the shoulder, Wallie." Mrs. Appel held up the sweater triumphantly.

"That's good," said Wallie, feeling uncomfortable with Miss Spenceley within hearing.

"Wallie," Mrs. Stott called to him, "will you give me the address of that milliner whose hats you said you liked particularly? Somewhere on Walnut, wasn't it?" 37

"Sixteenth and Walnut," Wallie replied, shortly.

"What do you think I'm doing, Wallie?"

"I can't imagine, Mrs. Budlong."

"I'm rolling!"

"Rolling?"

"To reduce. C. D. says I look like a cement-mixer in action."

Wallie was annoyed by the confidence.

Miss Gaskett beckoned him.

"Have you seen Cutie, Wallie?"

"No," curtly.

"When I called her this morning she looked at me with eyes like saucers and simply *tore* into the bushes. Do you suppose anybody has abused her?"

Mr. Cone, who was standing in the doorway, went back to his desk hastily.

"I'm not in her confidence," said Wallie with so much sarcasm that they all looked at him.

Miss Spenceley was talking to Mr. Appel, who was listening so attentively that Wallie wondered what she was saying. They were sitting close to the window of the reception room and it occurred to Wallie that there would be no harm in stepping inside and gratifying his curiosity. The conversation was not of a private nature and in other circumstances he would have joined them, so, on his way to the elevator to find his aunt, he paused a moment to hear what the girl was saying. 38

Since she was speaking emphatically and a lace curtain was the only barrier, Wallie found out without difficulty:

"I have no use for a squaw-man."

"You mean," Mr. Appel interrogated, "a white man who marries an Indian woman?"

"Not necessarily. I mean a man who permits a woman to support him without making any effort on his part to do a man's work. He may be an Adonis and gifted to the point of genius, but I have no respect for him. He——"

Wallie did not linger. He remembered the ancient adage, and while he did not consider himself an eavesdropper or believe that Miss Spenceley meant anything personal, nevertheless the shoe fit to such a nicety that he hurried to the elevator, his step accelerated by the same sense of guilt that had sent Mr. Cone scuttling to his refuge behind the counter.

"Squaw-man"—the term was as new to him as "Gentle Annie."

As Miss Eyester had opined, Miss Macpherson was taking her tonic, or about to.

"I've come to make a suggestion, Auntie," Wallie began, with a little diffidence.

"What is it?" Miss Macpherson was shaking the bottle.

"Let's not go South this winter."

"Where then?" She smiled indulgently as she measured out the medicine.

"Why not California or Arizona?" he suggested. 39

"I don't believe this tonic helps me a particle." She made a wry face as she swallowed it.

"That's it," he declared, eagerly. "You need a change—we both do."

"I'm too set in my ways to enjoy new experiences, and I don't like strangers. We might catch contagious diseases, and there is no place where we could be so comfortable as in Florida. No," she shook her head kindly but firmly, "we will go South as usual."

"Oh—*sugar*!" The vehemence with which Wallie uttered the expletive showed the extent of his disappointment.

"Wallie! I'm surprised at you!" She regarded him with annoyance.

"I'm tired of going to the same places year after year, doing the same thing, seeing the same old fossils!"

"Wallie, you are speaking of my friends and yours," she reminded him.

"They're all right, but I like to make new ones. I don't want to go, Aunt Mary."

She said significantly:

"Don't you think you are a little ungrateful—in the circumstances?"

It was the first time she had ever reminded him of his dependency.

"If you mean I am an ingrate, that is an unpleasant word, Aunt Mary."

She shrugged her shoulder.

"Place your own interpretation upon it, Wallace." 40

"Perhaps you think I am not capable of earning my own living?"

"I have not *said* so."

"But you mean it!" he cried, hotly.

Miss Macpherson was nearly as amazed as Wallie to hear herself saying:

"Possibly you had better try it."

She had taken two cups of strong coffee that morning and her nerves were over-stimulated, and perhaps with the intuition of a jealous woman she half suspected that "the girl from Wyoming" had something to do with his restlessness and desire to go West. The time she most dreaded was the day when she would have to share her nephew with another woman.

Wallie's eyes were blazing when he answered:

"I shall! I shall never be beholden to you for another penny. When I wanted to do something for myself you wouldn't let me. You're not fair, Aunt Mary!"

Pale and breathing heavily in their emotion, they looked at each other with hard, angry eyes—eyes in which there was not a trace of the affection which for years had existed between them.

"Suit yourself," she said, finally, and turned her back on him.

Wallie went to his room in a daze, too bewildered to realize immediately what had happened. That he had quarrelled with his aunt, permanently, irrevocably, seemed incredible. But he would never eat her bread of charity again—he had said it. As for her, he knew her Scotch stubbornness too well to think that she would offer it. No, he was sure the break was final.

A sense of freedom came to him gradually as it grew upon him that he was loose from the apron-strings that had led him since childhood. He need never again eat food he did not like because it was "good for him." He could sit in draughts if he wanted to and sneeze his head off. He could put on his woollen underwear when he got darned good and ready. He could swim when there were white caps in the harbour and choose his own clothing.

A fine feeling of exultation swept over Wallie as he strode up and down with an eye to the way he looked in the mirror. He was free of petticoat domination. He was no longer a "squaw-man," and he would not be one again for a million dollars! He would "show" Aunt Mary—he would "show" Helene Spenceley—he would "show" *everybody!*

CHAPTER VI

"BURNING HIS BRIDGES"

Wallie opened his eyes one morning with the subconscious feeling that something portentous was impending though he was still too drowsy to remember it.

He yawned and stretched languidly and luxuriously on a bed which was the last word in comfort, since Mr. Cone's pride in The Colonial beds was second only to that of his pride in the hotel's reputation for exclusiveness. With especially made mattresses and monogrammed linen, silken coverlets and imported blankets, his boasts were amply justified, and the beds perhaps accounted for the frequency with which the guests tried to get into the dining room when the breakfast hours were over.

A bit of yellow paper on the chiffonier brought Wallie to his full sense as his eyes fell upon it. It was the answer to a telegram he had sent Pinkey Fripp, in Prouty, Wyoming, making inquiries as to the possibility of taking up a homestead.

It read:

> They's a good piece of ground you can file on if you got the guts to hold it.
>
> PINKEY.

Wallie grew warm every time he thought of such a message addressed to him coming over the wire. Though worse than inelegant, and partially unintelligible, it was plain enough that what he wanted was there if he went for it, and he had replied that Pinkey might look for him shortly in Prouty.

And to-day he was leaving! He was saying good-bye forever to the hotel that was like home to him and the friends that were as his own relatives! He had $2,100 in real money—a legacy—and his clothing. In his new-born spirit of independence he wished that he might even leave his clothes behind him, but he had changed his mind when he had figured the cost of buying others.

His aunt had taken no notice of Wallie's preparations for departure. The news of the rupture had spread quickly, and the sympathies of the guests were equally divided. All were agreed, however, that if Wallie went West he would soon have enough of it and be back in time to go South for the winter.

Helene Spenceley had left unexpectedly upon the receipt of a telegram, and it was one of Wallie's favourite speculations as to what she would say when she heard he was a neighbour—something disagreeable, probably.

With the solemnity which a person might feel who is planning his own funeral, Wallie arose and made a careful toilet. It would be the last in the room that he had occupied for so many summers. The hangings were handsome, the chairs luxurious, and his feet sunk deep in the nap of the velvet carpet. The equipment of the white, commodious bathroom was perfection, and no article of furniture was missing from his bedroom that could contribute to the comfort of a modish young man accustomed to every modern convenience.

As Wallie took his shower and dusted himself with scented talcum and applied the various lotions and skin-foods recommended for the complexion, he wondered what the hotel accommodations would be like in Prouty, Wyoming. Not up to much, he imagined, but he decided that he would duplicate this bathroom in his own residence as soon as he had his homestead going. Wallie's knowledge of Wyoming was gathered chiefly from an atlas he had borrowed from Mr. Cone. The atlas stated briefly that it contained 97,890 square miles, mostly arid, and a population of 92,531. It gave the impression that the editors themselves were hazy on Wyoming, which very likely was the truth, since it had been published in Mr. Cone's childhood when the state was a territory.

What the atlas omitted, however, was supplied by Wallie's imagination. When he closed his eyes he could see great herds of cattle—his—with their broad backs glistening in the sunshine, and vast tracts—his also—planted in clover, oats, barley, or whatever it was they grew in the country. For diversion, he saw himself scampering over the country on horseback on visits to the friendly neighbours, entertaining frequently himself and entertained everywhere. As for Helene Spenceley—she would soon learn the manner of man she had belittled!

This frame of mind was responsible for the fact that when he had finished dressing and gone below he spoke patronizingly to Mr. Appel, who paid an income tax on fourteen million.

It was a wrench after all—the going—and the fact that his aunt did not relent made it the harder. It was the first time he ever had packed his own boxes and decided upon the clothes in which he should travel. But she sat erect and unyielding at the far end of the veranda while he was in the midst of a sympathetic leave-taking from the guests of The Colonial. There were tears in Mrs. Budlong's eyes when she warned him not to fall into bad habits, and Wallie's were close to the surface when he promised her he would not.

"Aw—you'll be back when it gets cold weather," said Mr. Appel.

"I shall succeed or leave my bones in Wyoming!" Wallie declared, dramatically.

Mr. Appel snickered: "They'll help fertilize the soil, which I'm told needs it." His early struggles had made Mr. Appel callous.

Miss Macpherson, looking straight ahead, gave no indication that she saw her nephew coming.

"Will you say good-bye to me, Aunt Mary?"

She appeared not to see the hand he put out to her.

"I trust you will have a safe journey, Wallace." Her voice was a breath from the Arctic.

He stood before her a moment feeling suddenly friendless. "This makes me very unhappy, Aunt Mary," he said, sorrowfully.

Since she did not answer, he could only leave her, and her failure to ask him to write hurt as much as the frigidity of the leave-taking.

The motor-bus had arrived and the chauffeur was piling his luggage on top of it, so, with a final handshake, Wallie said good-bye, perhaps forever, to his friends of The Colonial.

They were all standing with their arms about each other's waists or with their hands placed affectionately upon each other's shoulders as the bus started, calling "Good-bye and good luck" with much waving of handkerchiefs. Only his aunt sat grim-visaged and motionless, refusing to concede so much as a glance in her nephew's direction.

Wallie, in turn, took off his girlish sailor and swung it through the bus window and wafted kisses at the dear, amiable folk of The Colonial until the motor had passed between the stately pillars of the entrance. Then he leaned back with a sigh and with the feeling of having "burned his bridges behind him."

CHAPTER VII

HIS "GAT"

"How much 'Jack' did you say you got?" Pinkey, an early caller at the Prouty House, sitting on his heel with his back against the wall, awaited with evident interest an answer to this pointed question. He explained further in response to Wallie's puzzled look: "Kale—dinero—the long green—*money*."

"Oh," Wallie replied, enlightened, "about $1,800." He was in his blue silk pajamas, sitting on the iron rail of his bed—it had an edge like a knife-blade.

There was no resemblance between this room and the one he had last occupied. The robin's egg-blue alabastine had scaled, exposing large patches of plaster, and the same thing had happened to the enamel of the wash-bowl and pitcher—the dents in the latter leading to the conclusion that upon some occasion it had been used as a weapon.

A former occupant who must have learned his art in the penitentiary had knotted the lace curtains in such a fashion that no one ever had attempted to untie them, while the prison-like effect of the iron bed, with its dingy pillows and counterpane and sagging middle, was such as 48
to throw a chill over the spirits of the cheeriest traveller.

It had required all Wallie's will power, when he had arrived at midnight, to rise above the depression superinduced by these surroundings. His luggage was piled high in the corner, while the two trunks setting outside his doorway already had been the cause of threats of an alarming nature, made against the owner by sundry guests who had bruised their shins on them in the ill-lighted corridor.

Pinkey's arrival had cheered him wonderfully. Now when that person observed tentatively that $1,800 was "a good little stake," Wallie blithely offered to count it.

"You got it with you?"

Wallie nodded.

"That's chancey," Pinkey commented. "They's people in the country would stick you up if they knowed you carried it."

"I should resist if any one attempted to rob me," Wallie declared as he sat down on the rail gingerly with his bulging wallet.

"What with?" Pinkey inquired, humorously.

Wallie reached under his pillow and produced a pearl-handled revolver of 32 calibre.

"Before leaving I purchased this pistol."

Pinkey regarded him with a pained expression.

"Don't use that dude word, feller. Say 'gun,' 'gat,' 'six-shooter,' anything, but don't ever say 'pistol' above a whisper."

A little crest-fallen, Wallie laid it aside and commenced to count his money. Pinkey, he could 49
see, was not impressed by the weapon.

"Yes, eighteen hundred exactly. I spent $250 purchasing a camping outfit."

Pinkey looked at him incredulously. He was thinking of the frying-pan, coffee-pot, and lard-kettle of which his own consisted. He made no comment, however, until Wallie mentioned his portable bath-tub, which, while expensive, he declared he considered indispensable.

"Yes," Pinkey agreed, drily, "you'll be needin' a portable bath-tub something desperate. I wisht I had one. The last good wash I took was in Crystal Lake the other side of the Bear-tooth Mountain. When I was done I stood out till the sun dried me, then brushed the mud off with a whisk-broom."

"That must have been uncomfortable," Wallie observed, politely. "I hope you will feel at liberty to use my tub whenever you wish."

"That won't be often enough to wear it out," said Pinkey, candidly. "But you'd better jump into your pants and git over to the land-office. We want to nail that 160 before some other 'Scissor-bill' beats you to it."

Under Pinkey's guidance Wallie went to the land office, which was in the rear of a secondhand store kept by Mr. Alvin Tucker, who was also the land commissioner.

The office was in the rear and there were two routes by which it was possible to get in touch with Mr. Tucker: one might gain admittance by walking over the bureaus, centre-tables, and 50
stoves that blocked the front entrance, or he could crawl on his hands and knees through a large roll of chicken-wire wedged into the side door of the establishment.

The main-travelled road, however, was over the tables and bureaus, and this was chosen by Pinkey and Wallie, who found Mr. Tucker at his desk attending to the State's business.

Mr. Tucker had been blacking a stove and had not yet removed the traces of his previous occupation, so when Pinkey introduced him his hand was of a colour to make Wallie hesitate for the fraction of a second before taking it.

Mr. Tucker being a man of great good nature took no offense, although he could scarcely fail to notice Wallie's hesitation; on the contrary, he inquired with the utmost cordiality:

"Well, gents, what can I do for you this morning?" His tone implied that he had the universe at

his disposal, and he also looked it as he tipped back his swivel chair and regarded them.

"He wants to file on the 160 on Skull Crick that Boise Bill abandoned," said Pinkey.

Tucker's gaze shifted.

"I'm not sure it's open to entry," he replied, hesitatingly.

"Yes, it is. His time was up a month ago, and he ain't even fenced it."

"You know he's quarrelsome," Tucker suggested. "Perhaps it would be better to ask his intentions."

"He ain't none," Pinkey declared, bluntly. "He only took it up to hold for Canby and he's never done a lick of work on it." 51

"Of course it's right in the middle of Canby's range," Tucker argued, "and you can scarcely blame him for not wanting it homesteaded. Why don't you select a place that won't conflict with his interests?"

"Why should we consider his interests? He don't think of anybody else's when he wants anything," Pinkey demanded.

"Your friend bein' a newcomer, I thought he wouldn't want to locate in the middle of trouble."

"He can take care of himself," Pinkey declared, confidently; though, as they both glanced at Wallie, there seemed nothing in his appearance to justify his friend's optimism. He looked a lamblike pacifist as he sat fingering his straw hat diffidently.

Tucker brought his feet down with the air of a man who had done his duty and washed his hands of consequences; he prepared to make out the necessary papers. As he handled the documents he left fingerprints of such perfection on the borders that they resembled identification marks for classification under the Bertillon system, and Wallie was far more interested in watching him than in his intimation that there was trouble in the offing if he made this filing.

He paid his fees and filled out his application, leaving Tucker's office with a new feeling of importance and responsibility. One hundred and sixty acres was not much of a ranch as ranches go in Wyoming, but it was a beginning. 52

As soon as they were out of the building, Wallie inquired casually:

"Does Miss Spenceley live in my neighbourhood?"

"Across the mounting!" Which reply conveyed nothing to Wallie. Pinkey added: "I punch cows for their outfit."

"Indeed," politely. Then, curiosity consuming him, he hazarded another question:

"What did she say when she heard I was coming?"

"She laughed to kill herself." Pinkey seldom lied when the truth would answer.

In the meantime, Tucker, in guarded language, was informing Canby of the entry by telephone. From the sounds which came through the receiver he had the impression that the land baron was pulling the telephone out by the roots in his exasperation at the negligence of his hireling whom he had supposed had done sufficient work to hold it.

"I'll attend to it," he answered.

Tucker thought there was no doubt about that, and he had a worthy feeling of having earned the yearly stipend which he received from Canby for these small services.

"We'd better sift along and git out there," Pinkey advised when they were back at the Prouty House.

"To-day?"

"You bet you! That's no dream about Boise Bill bein' ugly, and he might try to hold the 160 if he got wind of your filing."

"In that event?"

"In that event," Pinkey mimicked, "he's more'n likely to run you off, unless you got the sand to fight fer it. That's what I meant in my telegram." 53

"Oh," said Wallie, enlightened. "'Sand' and—er—intestines are synonymous terms in your vernacular?"

Pinkey stared at him.

"Say, feller, you'll have to learn to sling the buckskin before we can understand each other. Anyhow, as I was sayin', you got a good proposition in this 160 if you can hold it."

"If I am within my rights I shall adhere to them at all hazards," declared Wallie, firmly. "At first, however, I shall use moral suasion."

"Can't you say things plainer?" Pinkey demanded, crossly. "Why don't you talk United States? You sound like a Fifth Reader. If you mean you aim to argue with him, he'll knock you down with a neck-yoke while you're gittin' started."

"In that event, if he attempted violence, I should use my pistol—my 'gat'—and stop him."

"In that event," Pinkey relished the expression, "in that event I shall carry a shovel along to bury you."

Riding a horse from the livery stable and accompanied by Pinkey driving two pack-horses ahead of him, Wallie left the Prouty House shortly after noon, followed by comments of a jocular nature from the bystanders.

"How far is it?" inquired Wallie, who was riding his English saddle and "posting."

"Twenty for me and forty for you, if you aim to ride that way," said Pinkey. "Why don't you let 54
out them stirrups and shove your feet in 'em?"

Wallie preferred his own style of riding, however, but observed that he hoped never to have another such fall as he had had at The Colonial.

"A feller that's never been throwed has never rid," said Pinkey, sagely, and added: "You'll git used to it."

This Wallie considered a very remote possibility, although he did not say so.

Once they left the town they turned toward the mountains and conversation ceased shortly, for not only were they obliged to ride single file through the sagebrush and cacti but the trot of the livery horse soon left Wallie with no breath nor desire to continue it.

The vast tract they were traversing belonged to Canby, so Pinkey informed him, and as mile after mile slipped by he was amazed at the extent of it. Through illegal fencing, leasing, and driving small stockmen from the country by various methods, Canby had obtained control of a range of astonishing circumference, and Wallie's homestead was nearly in the middle of it.

Although they had eaten before leaving Prouty, it was not more than two o'clock before Wallie began to wonder what they would have for supper. They were not making fast time, for his horse stumbled badly and the pack-horses, both old and stiff, travelled slowly, so at three o'clock the elusive mountains seemed as far away as when they had started. 55

Unable to refrain any longer, Wallie called to ask how much farther.

"Twelve miles, or some such matter." Pinkey added: "I'm so hungry I don't know where I'm goin' to sleep to-night. That restaurant is reg'lar stummick-robbers."

By four o'clock every muscle in Wallie's body was aching, but his fatigue was nothing as compared with his hunger. He tried to admire the scenery, to think of his magnificent prospects, of Helene Spenceley, but his thoughts always came back quickly to the subject of food and a wonder as to how soon he could get it.

In his regular, well-fed life he never had imagined, much less known, such a gnawing hunger. His destination represented only something to eat and it seemed to him they never would get there.

"What will we have for supper, Pinkey?" he shouted, finally.

Pinkey replied promptly:

"I was thinkin' we'd have ham and gra-vy and cowpuncher perta-toes; and maybe I'll build some biscuit, if we kin wait fer 'em."

"Let's not have biscuit—let's have crackers."

Ham and gravy and cowpuncher potatoes! Wallie rode along with his mouth watering and visualizing the menu until Pinkey came to a halt and said with a dramatic gesture:

"There's your future home, Mr. Macpherson! That's what *I* call a reg'lar paradise."

As Mr. Macpherson stared at the Elysium indicated, endeavouring to discover the resemblance, 56
surprise kept him silent.

So far as he could see, it in nowise differed from the arid plain across which they had ridden. It was a pebbly tract, covered with sagebrush and cacti, which dropped abruptly to a creek-bed that had no water in it. Filled with sudden misgivings, he asked feebly:

"What's it good for?"

"Look at the view!" said Pinkey, impatiently.

"I can't eat scenery."

"It'll be a great place for dry-farmin'."

Wallie looked at a crack big enough to swallow him and observed humorously:

"I should judge so."

"You see," Pinkey explained, enthusiastically, "bein' clost to the mountings, the snow lays late in the spring and all the moisture they is you git it."

"I see." Wallie nodded comprehensively. "Why didn't you take it up yourself, Pinkey?"

"Oh, I got to make a livin'."

There was food for thought in the answer and Wallie pondered it as he got stiffly out of the saddle.

"Can I be of any assistance?" he asked, politely.

"You can git the squaw-axe and hack out a place fer a bed-ground and you can hunt up some firewood and take a bucket out of the pack and go to the crick and locate some water while I'm finding a place to picket these horses."

Because it would hasten supper, it seemed to Wallie that wood and water were of more importance than clearing a place to sleep, so he collected a small pile of twigs and dead sagebrush, then took an aluminum kettle from his camping utensils and walked along the bank of Skull Creek looking for a pool which contained enough water to fill the kettle. He finally saw one, and planting his heels in a dirt slide, shot like a toboggan some twenty feet to the bottom. Filling his kettle he walked back over the boulders looking for a more convenient place to get up than the one he had descended. 57

He was abreast of the camp before he knew it.

"Whur you goin'?" Pinkey, who had returned, was hanging over the edge watching him stumbling along with his kettle of water.

"I'm hunting a place to get up," said Wallie, tartly.

"How did you git down?"

"'Way back there."

"Why didn't you git up the same way?"

"Couldn't—without spilling the water."

"I'll git a rope and snake you."

"This doesn't seem like a very convenient location," said Wallie, querulously.

"You can cut out some toe-holts to-morrow," Pinkey suggested, cheerfully. "The ground has got such a good slope to drain the corrals is the reason I picked it to build on."

This explanation reconciled Wallie to the difficulty of getting water. To build a fire and make the coffee was the work of a moment, but it seemed twenty-four hours to Wallie, sitting on a saddle-blanket watching every move like a hungry bird-dog. He thought he never had smelled anything so savoury as the odour of potatoes and onions cooking, and when the aroma of boiling coffee was added to it! 58

Pinkey stopped slicing ham to point at the sunset.

"Ain't that a great picture?"

"Gorgeous," Wallie agreed without looking.

"If I could paint."

"Does it take long to make gravy?" Wallie demanded, impatiently.

"Not so very. I'll git things goin' and let you watch 'em while I go and take a look at them buzzard-heads. If a horse ain't used to bein' on picket he's liable to go scratchin' his ear and git caught and choke hisself."

"Couldn't we eat first?" Wallie asked, plaintively.

"No, I'll feel easier if I know they ain't tangled. Keep stirrin' the gravy so it won't burn on you," he called back. "And set the coffee off in a couple of minutes."

Wallie was on his knees absorbed in his task of keeping the gravy from scorching when a sound made him turn quickly and look behind him.

A large man on a small white pony was riding toward him. He looked unprepossessing even at a distance and he did not improve, as he came closer. His nose was long, his jaw was long, his hair needed cutting and was greasy, while his close-set blue eyes had a decidedly mean expression. There was a rifle slung under his stirrup-leather, and a six-shooter in its holster on his hip was a conspicuous feature of his costume. 59

He sat for a moment, looking, then dropped the bridle reins as he dismounted and sauntered up to the camp-fire.

Wallie was sure that it was "Boise Bill," from a description Pinkey had given him, and his voice was slightly tremulous as he said:

"Good evening."

The stranger paid no attention to his greeting. He was surveying Wallie in his riding breeches and puttees with an expression that was at once amused and insolent.

"Looks like you aimed to camp a spell, from your lay-out," he observed, finally.

"Yes, I am here permanently." Wallie wondered if the stranger could see that his hand was trembling as he stirred the gravy.

"Indeed! How you got that figgered?" asked the man, mockingly.

Wallie replied with dignity:

"This is my homestead; I filed on it this morning."

"Looks like you'd a-found out if it was open to entry before you went to all that trouble." Boise Bill shuffled his feet so that a cloud of the light wood-ashes rose and settled in the gravy.

Wallie frowned but picked them out patiently.

"I did," he answered, moving the pan.

"Then somebody's lied to you, fer I filed on this ground and I ain't abandoned it."

"You've never done any work on it, and Mr. Tucker has my filing fees and application so I cannot see that there is any argument about it." 60

Wallie was very polite and conciliatory.

"You'll find that filin' is one thing and holdin' is another in this man's country." Quite deliberately he scuffled up another cloud of cinders.

"I will appreciate it," said Wallie, sharply, "if you won't kick ashes in my gravy!"

"And I will appreciate it," Boise Bill mocked him, "if you'll git your junk together and move off my land in about twenty minutes."

"I refuse to be intimidated," said Wallie, paling. "I shall begin a contest suit if necessary."

"I allus fight first and contest afterward." Boise Bill lifted his huge foot and kicked over first the pan of ham and then the gravy. Wallie stood for a second staring at the tragedy. Then his nerves jumped and he shook in a passion which seemed to blind and choke him.

Boise Bill had drawn his six-shooter and Wallie was looking into the barrel of it. His homestead, his life, was in jeopardy, but this seemed nothing at all compared to the fact that the ruffian, with deliberate malice, had kicked over his supper!

"Have I got to try a chunk o' lead on you?" Boise Bill snarled at him.

For answer Wallie stooped swiftly and gripped the long handle of the frying-pan. He swung it with all his strength as he would have swung a tennis racket. Knocking the six-shooter from Boise Bill's hand he jumped across the fire at him. Scarcely conscious of what he was doing in the frenzy of rage that consumed him, Wallie whipped his little pearl-handled pistol from his 61 breeches pocket and as Boise Bill opened his mouth in an exclamation of astonishment, Wallie shoved it down his throat, yelling shrilly that if he moved an eye-lash he would pull the trigger!

This was the amazing sight that stopped Pinkey in his tracks as effectively as a bullet.

Wallie heard his step and asked plaintively but without turning:

"What'll I do with him?"

"As you are, until I pull his fangs."

Pinkey threw the shells from Boise Bill's rifle and removed the cartridges from his six-shooter. Handing the latter back to him he said laconically:

"Drift! And don't you take the beef-herd gait, neither."

The malevolent look Boise Bill sent over his shoulder was wasted on Wallie who was picking out of the ashes and dusting the ham for which he had stood ready to shed his blood.

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CHAPTER VIII

NEIGHBOURS

The modest herring had been the foundation of the great Canby fortune. Small and unpretentious, the herring had swum in the icy waters of the Maine coast until transformed into a French sardine by Canby, Sr. It had brought wealth and renown to the shrewd old Yankee, who was alleged to have smelled of herring even in his coffin, but the Canby family were not given to boasting of the source of their income to strangers, and by the time Canby, Jr., was graduated from Harvard they were fairly well deodorized.

In the East many things had conspired to make the young Canby the misanthrope and recluse he had come to be in Wyoming, where he was fully aided and abetted in his desire for seclusion by his neighbours, who disliked him so thoroughly that they went out of their way to avoid speaking to him.

Having been graduated without distinction, he concentrated his efforts upon an attempt to become one of a New England coterie that politely but firmly refused to do more than admit his existence.

In pursuance of his ambition he built a castle-like residence and specialized in orchids and 63 roses, purchased a yacht, became an exhibitor at the Horse Show. Society praised his roses, but their admiration did not extend to Canby; he went on solitary cruises, in his floating palace and the Horse Show, which had proved an open sesame to others, in his case was a failure.

Finally he married a girl who had the *entrée* to the circle he coveted, but his wife received invitations which did not include her husband. The divorce court ended the arrangement, and Canby had the privilege of paying a king's ransom in alimony into one of Boston's first families.

Petty, unscrupulous, overbearing, Canby never attributed his failure to the proper cause, which was his unpleasant personality, but regarded it as a conspiracy on the part of Society to defeat him in his ambition and accordingly came to hate it.

When he was not travelling he spent his time on the feudal estate he had created in Wyoming, where he had no visitors except Helene Spenceley and her brother, who came occasionally when invited. Protecting himself from invasion from the smaller cattlemen and homesteaders was in the nature of a recreation to Canby, who had various methods of ridding himself of their presence.

Boise Bill was one of those he kept for the purpose of intimidating prospective settlers and was considered by him his ablest lieutenant. Theretofore when that person returned and stated that the job of running off the newcomer was one he did not care to tackle further, Canby could not 64
fail to be impressed by the declaration.

Among traits less agreeable, Boise Bill had a strong sense of humour, albeit of a somewhat ghoulish brand, usually. As he rode back to report to Canby, the ludicrous side of the encounter grew on him until it outweighed the chagrin he first had felt at getting the worst of it.

Thinking of Wallie in his "dude" clothes, his face pale and his eyes gleaming, swinging the frying-pan in his rage at the loss of his supper, when a more experienced man would have thrown up his hands promptly, Boise Bill slapped his leg and rocked in the saddle as he chuckled:

"That's the closest queak I ever had; he might a trembled his gun off and killed me!"

To Canby he declared with a face that was unsmiling and solemn:

"I 'low I got my share of nerve when it comes to a show-down, and I ain' no skim-milk runt, neither, but that nester—he's a giant—and hos-tile as they make 'em! He had me lookin' at my hole card from the outset."

"Are you afraid of him?" Canby demanded, incredulously.

"I wouldn't say I'm actually *afraid* of him, but I got an old mother in southern Idyho that's dependin' on me and I can't afford to take chances."

"I'll go myself," said Canby, curtly.

"Don't let him git the drop on you," Boise Bill warned him. "I never *see* anybody so quick as he is. He had out his weepon and was over the fire at me before I knew what was happenin'," with 65
conviction. "He gets 'ringy'—that feller."

Canby's cold gray eyes glittered, though he said nothing of his intentions.

Pinkey put up Wallie's silk tent and staked it, showed him how to hobble and picket his horse and to make baking-powder biscuit, and left him.

"It'll be lonesome at first, and the work'll come hard on you, but you'll be jest as happy as if you was in your right mind, onct you git used to it," he assured Wallie.

"The work doesn't bother me, but I imagine it will be lonesome."

"You ought to git some kind of an animal and tame it," Pinkey suggested. "I mind one winter when I 'bached' I tamed and halter-broke two chipmunks so I could lead 'em anywhur. You wouldn't believe what company they was for me."

Wallie agreed that it was an idea, but he was privately of the opinion that there would be a limit to the pleasure which the company of chipmunks, however accomplished, could afford him.

"If only I had a congenial neighbour," he sighed, "it would make a great difference."

"There's Canby—you might call on him," Pinkey suggested, grinning. "Or if you ketch yourself pickin' at the bed-clothes you can saddle up and scamper over and see me. 'Tain't fur—forty miles across the mounting. Jest below that notch—you can't miss it." 66

Wallie had looked at the notch often since then. He was staring at it the evening Canby rode down on him—staring and thinking so hard of Helene Spenceley that Canby had checked his horse and was looking at him before he saw him.

It would be impossible to say which was the more astonished.

Instead of the fearsome person Canby had anticipated, he saw one so different and at the same time so extraordinary that he could not immediately collect himself.

Wallie's trunks had followed him, together with a supply of provisions, and now, his day's work done, he was sitting in front of his tent on a patent camp-chair garbed in whatsoever had come handiest.

Canby's eyes rested upon a mild-looking young man in a purple silk lounging robe, hob-nailed mountain boots, and a yachting cap with a black patent-leather visor. He was smoking a cigarette with a gold tip and a monogram, held in a hand that was white and carefully manicured.

In his surprise, Canby said: "Good evening," almost amiably.

Wallie, in turn, saw a visitor who looked as if he might just have returned from a canter through Central Park. His appearance was so homelike and familiar that Wallie went forward with a radiant smile of welcome. Before he knew it Canby found himself shaking hands vigorously with 67

the person he had come to quarrel with.

Wallie was sure that it was Canby but it flashed through his mind that perhaps he was not so black as he was painted and Pinkey was given to exaggeration, and very likely Boise Bill had acted upon his own initiative. At any rate, after four days of solitude Wallie would have been delighted to see his Satanic Majesty; so, with his most engaging smile, he invited Canby to dismount and stated that his name was "Macpherson."

Canby could do nothing less than give his name also, though he refused the invitation. Whereupon Wallie declared heartily:

"I take this as very nice and neighbourly of you, Mr. Canby, and please believe I appreciate it!"

Canby bowed but said nothing.

"You see, I'm a newcomer," Wallie babbled, "and I have so many things to learn that you can teach me. I consider myself fortunate in having a neighbour of your experience, and if you will let me I shall come to you for advice often."

"Don't hesitate to call on me." In Canby's eyes there was something like a glint of amusement.

Wallie went on guilelessly, finding it an extreme relief, after his enforced silence, to have an ear to talk into.

"The fact is," confidentially, "I may not look it but I am a good deal of a tenderfoot."

"Indeed?" Canby raised a politely surprised eyebrow. 68

"Yes," he prattled on, "I am totally ignorant of agricultural matters; but I hope to learn and make a good thing, ultimately, out of this dry-farming proposition. I've got a little money, and I intend to invest it in developing this homestead. By mixing brains with industry I hope by next fall to get an ample return upon my money and labour. I trust I am not too optimistic?"

"It would not seem so," Mr. Canby replied, guardedly. "How are you fixed for horses?"

"I was just going to ask you about that," Wallie exclaimed. "I want to plow, and haul some fence posts, and I shall need horses. Can you recommend a team that would suit me?"

"Next Thursday at two o'clock there will be a stock sale at my place and I have no doubt that you will be able to pick up something there for your purpose."

"That's splendid!" Wallie cried, delightedly. "I shall seek you out, Mr. Canby, and ask you to assist me in making a selection. I've been thinking of buying a cow, too—this is rare good luck, isn't it, to be able to purchase what I need without going so far for it!"

"I shall be present—hunt me up—two o'clock, Thursday."

With a smile and a nod Canby gathered up his reins and departed while Wallie with a glowing face looked after him and declared aloud:

"That's what I call real Western sociability!"

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CHAPTER IX

CUTTING HIS EYETEETH

A widely advertised stock sale was an event in the country for the twofold reason that it furnished the opportunity for neighbours with fifty and more miles between them to exchange personal news and experiences and also to purchase blooded animals for considerably less than they could have been imported.

This was particularly true of the Canby sale, where the "culls," both in horses and cattle, were better than the best animals of the majority of the small stockmen and ranchers. In consequence, these sales were largely attended by the natives, who drank Canby's coffee and ate his doughnuts while calling him names which are commonly deleted by the censor.

It was the custom also for such persons as had a few head of horses or cattle to dispose of, but not enough for a sale of their own, to bring them to be auctioned off with Canby's. So it had come to pass that the stock sale at Canby's ranch was second only in importance to the county fair to which all the countryside looked forward.

Therefore Wallie, whose notion of a stock sale was of the vaguest, was much surprised when 70
after riding in the direction his visitor had indicated and spending hours hunting for gates in wire fences, had come upon an assembly of a size he would not have believed possible in that sparsely populated district.

Unless they denned in the rocks, the question as to where they lived might have puzzled a person more familiar with this Western phenomenon than Wallie.

There were Ford cars which might have been duplicates of Henry's first model—with trailers containing the overflow of children—together with the larger cars of the more prosperous or more extravagant, as happened. Top buggies were in evidence, relics of the Victorian period, shipped out from Iowa and Nebraska—serviceable vehicles that had done duty when their owners were "keeping company." Lumber wagons were plentiful, with straw and quilts in the bottom to serve as shock-absorbers, while saddle horses were tied to every hitching post and cottonwood.

When Wallie arrived in his riding boots and breeches he immediately shared attention with a large, venerable-looking Durham that was being auctioned. The Durham, however, returned the stare of the crowd with blasé eyes which said that he had seen all of life he wanted to and did not care what further happened, while Wallie felt distinctly uncomfortable at the attention he attracted, and wished he might find Canby.

As he stood speculating as to whether the folds of skin around the Durham's neck might be an 71
indication of his age—a year for a fold, after the manner of snake-rattles—his attention was diverted to a group that was interested in the efforts of one of its members to pry a horse's mouth open.

It seemed to Wallie an excellent opportunity to learn something which might be of future use to him, so he joined it.

A man who looked capable of selling a runaway horse to his grandmother was saying emphatically:

"Eight, next spring, I tell you. We raised her a pet on the ranch, so I ought to know what I'm talkin' about."

The person who had managed to separate the horse's jaws laughed uproariously:

"If she ever sees sixteen again——"

"She ain't over eight, and I'll take my oath on it," interrupted the owner, with a fine show of indignation.

"If I could believe you, I'd buy her."

A piping voice from the group interjected itself into the conversation. It came from under the limp brim of a hat that dropped to the speaker's shoulders.

"Why, I knowed that harse when I first come to the country. She was runnin' with her mother over in the Bighorns, and Bear George at Tensleep owned her. Some said that Frank McMannigle's runnin' harse, 'Left Hand,' was her father, and others said she was jest a ketch colt, but I dunno. Her mother was a sorrel with a star in her forehead and the Two-pole-punkin' brand on her left shoulder. If I ain't mistaken, she had one white hind stockin' and they was a 72
wire cut above her hock that was kind of a blemish. She got a ring bone and they had to kill her, but Bear George sold the colt, this mare here, to a feller at Kaysee over on Powder River and he won quite considerable money on her. It was about thirteen year ago that I last seen her, but I knowed her the minute I laid eyes on her. She et musty hay one winter and got the tizic, but you never would know it unless you run her. One of her stifle j'ints——"

The mare's owner interrupted at this juncture:

"You jest turn your mouth on, don't you, Tex, and go off and leave it?"

"I happened to know a little somethin' about this harse," apologetically began "Tex," whose other name was McGonnigle, "so I thought——"

"So you thought you'd butt in and queer the sale of it. I suppose you'd suffer somethin' horrible if there was a horse-deal on and you had to keep your mouth shut?"

Mr. McGonnigle protested feebly that he had no such idea when he gave the horse's history, and Wallie was much interested in the wrangle, but he thought he caught a glimpse of Canby through one of the doorways of a stable so he hurried across the yard and found him in conversation with Boise Bill, who was grooming a work-horse which quite evidently was to be auctioned.

Boise Bill grinned when he saw Wallie and nodded. Canby stepped out and greeted Wallie with 73
some affability.

"I've been watching for you. Have you bid on anything?"

"Not yet. But I saw a fine-looking cow that I mean to buy if she is all she ought to be," Wallie replied with a touch of importance. "It seems to me that a good cow will help out wonderfully. I am very fond of milk and it will be useful in cooking. With a cow and a hen or two——"

Canby and Wallie crossed the yard to where a mild-eyed Jersey was being dressed in a halter preparatory to being led forward and put up at auction.

"Will you be good enough to permit me to examine this animal?" Wallie asked of her caretaker.

"Shore," he replied, heartily, though he looked puzzled.

Wallie drew off his riding gloves and stepped up briskly in a professional manner and pried open the mouth of the protesting cow.

He exclaimed as he let go abruptly:

"Why—she's old! I don't want her. She hasn't a single tooth left in her upper jaw. It's a fortunate thing I looked at her."

A small boy roosting on the corral snickered. The cow's guardian smiled broadly and openly and deliberately winked at Canby.

Offended, Wallie demanded:

"Am I in error as to her age?"

"Well—if a cow ever had a set of teeth in her upper jaw she'd be in a side-show. They don't have 'em. This cow is only three—a young animal."

"That's true," Canby assented. 74

"I declare! It seems very curious," Wallie exclaimed, astounded. He added, with all his importance punctured:

"I fear I have much to learn."

"This is a good place to learn it," observed the cow's valet.

Wallie bought the Jersey at private sale, and needless to say, paid its full value.

"She'll be fresh in January," the man said to him.

Wallie looked bewildered, so the other explained further:

"She'll have a calf." He said it in such a confidential manner that Wallie thought it was a secret and lowered his voice to answer:

"I'm glad of it." He had a notion that he had gotten the best of Canby and wished that Miss Spenceley and The Colonial folk knew he had made a shrewd bargain and gotten a herd started.

To Canby, who accompanied him on his tour of inspection, he said eagerly:

"Where I wish your assistance is in the selection of my work-horses. What would you advise? Have you a pair in mind, Mr. Canby?" Canby reflected.

"That was a good horse Boise Bill was currying," he suggested.

"Yes, I noticed him. Is there another like him?"

"I believe he is one of a team."

Canby was correct in his surmise. The pair were well matched and, impressed by their looks and strength, Wallie was delighted and determined to have them if possible. 75

"Fourteen hundred is a good weight for your purpose—above that they are apt to be clumsy," said Canby.

Wallie agreed enthusiastically.

"My own idea exactly. You see, I'll have to use them for driving as well as working, until I can afford a motor."

The gathering was composed mostly of good, honest folk but plain ones. They did, however, seem to know exactly what they were buying and why they wanted it, and Wallie was fearful that a pair of such exceptional horses would be run up to a figure beyond his resources. He wished they would bring them out and end the suspense which was momentarily growing greater as he thought of losing them.

Boise Bill drove the pair from the stable finally, just as a powerful machine arrived and took a place in the outer circle. New arrivals had no interest at the moment for Wallie, who was as nervous as a young opera singer.

As Boise Bill walked behind the team slapping them with a rope-end to drive them forward, it occurred to Wallie that it would have been much simpler to have led them, but as every one had his own way of doing things in this country he gave no further thought to the matter.

If he had not been so anxious and intent upon what was about to happen, he might also have observed an interchange of knowing looks among the gentlemen whose clothes were secured mostly with shingle-nails and baling-wire. 76

The team looked all the auctioneer declared them to be as they stood head to head—young, strong, perfectly matched—and he defied all Wyoming to find a blemish on them.

The gentlemen in patched overalls seemed willing to take his word for it, since no one stepped forward to examine the team, and they listened with such attention while he extolled their virtues that it sickened Wallie, who already felt the thrill of ownership as he looked at them.

"The greatest pullers in the State"; the auctioneer made a point of it, repeating it several times for emphasis.

Wallie scanned the faces of the crowd to see if he could detect any special interest that would denote a rival bidder, and he wished the auctioneer would stop harping on their good qualities. It surprised him a little that he saw none of his own eagerness reflected in the varied expressions, also it relieved him somewhat. If he had had an unlimited bank account it would have been different, but he realized that any determined opponent could outbid him, so he found himself in a perspiration as he waited.

"How high do you think I should go?" he asked of his friend and advisor.

"That depends on how badly you want them."

"They suit me exactly."

"Horses of that class are selling around $500, but you might venture a little more, since you like them."

"That's just about what I am able to pay. My goodness, but I hope I'm not outbid! You wouldn't believe how nervous I am. It's such a new experience that I am really agitated." 77

The statement was unnecessary, since Canby could see Wallie's knees trembling in his riding breeches.

"How much am I offered for this pair of magnificent young horses?" asked the auctioneer, ingratiatingly.

Wallie, who had not such a case of stage-fright since he first sang in public "Oh, that we two were Maying," bid instantly:

"Two hundred dollars!" His voice sounded like the squeak in a telephone receiver.

The auctioneer cupped his hand behind his ear and leaned forward:

"What?"

The incredulity in his tone prompted Wallie to raise the bid to two hundred and twenty-five when he repeated it.

The auctioneer struck his forehead with his clenched fist and staggered back dramatically, demanding:

"Am I insulted?"

"That ain't possible," croaked a voice among the spectators.

"Two hundred and fifty!" The bid came from a ministerial-looking person who was known as a kind of veterinary occasionally employed by Canby.

"Three hundred!" Wallie challenged him.

"That's more like it, but still an insult to these noble brutes I'm selling. Who says three and a quarter?"

"And a quarter!" came from the veterinary. 78

"And a quarter—and a quarter—gentlemen, what ails you?" He looked at the "bone and sinew of the nation," who prodded each other.

"Three hundred and fifty," Wallie responded.

"Three-fifty! Boost her faster, gentlemen! Boost her right along! Am I offered four hundred?"

"Four hundred!" The bid was the veterinary's.

Wallie quavered:

"Four hundred and fifty!"

"Five hundred!" his opponent came back at him.

Wallie hesitated.

"Think of it! Going for five hundred!"

The auctioneer looked at Wallie, who could not have been paler in his coffin.

"Five twenty-five!"

"Good! Now, sir," to the veterinary.

"Five-fifty!"

He turned to Wallie:

"Am I done, gentlemen?"

Wallie stared at him, his throat too dry to answer.

"Must I give away the best pullin' team in the State for a puny, piddlin' five hundred and fifty dollars?" he pleaded.

"SIX HUNDRED!" Wallie cried in desperation.

With the bid Canby raised his hat and ran his fingers through his hair casually and the veterinary stopped bidding.

"Done!" cried the auctioneer, "Sold to Mr.—the name, please—ah, Macpherson, for six hundred dollars—— A bargain!"

Between relief and joy Wallie was speechless, while Canby congratulated him and the crowd bestowed upon him glances of either derision or commiseration, according to the nature of the individual. 79

While he stood trying to realize his good fortune and that he was the owner of as good a pair of work-horses as ever looked through a halter, a figure that made his heart jump came swiftly forward, and with her hands in the pockets of her long motor coat, stopped in front of his team

and scrutinized them closely.

Helene Spenceley looked from one of the horses to the other. She saw the dilated pupils, the abnormally full forehead, the few coarse hairs growing just above the eyelid, and they told her what she had suspected.

"I am sorry I did not know it was you who was bidding on these horses," she said, turning to Wallie.

"Did you want them, Miss Spenceley? I am sorry——"

"Want them? You couldn't give them to me. They are locoed!"

"Locoed!" He could only stare at her, hoping never again to feel such dismay as filled him at that moment.

He had only the vaguest notion as to what "locoed" meant, but it was very clear that it was something highly undesirable. And he had been cheated by Canby, who had known of it and advised him to buy them! Such duplicity was without his experience, and sickened him nearly as much as the thought of the $600 he had invested in horses so radically wrong that Helene Spenceley would not take them as a gift. 80

The single thought which came to solace him as he stood humiliated and panic-stricken was that she resented the dishonest trick that had been played upon him.

Canby came forward to greet her, with his hand out. She ignored it and said indignantly:

"I should have spoiled this sale for you, Mr. Canby, if I had seen who was bidding on these locoed horses."

Though Canby flushed, he shrugged a shoulder and replied callously:

"We all had to get our eyeteeth cut when we came to the country."

81

CHAPTER X

THE BEST PULLING TEAM IN THE STATE

Leading the cow, and aided by "Tex" McGonnigle, who boasted that he had a heart as big as the country he lived in and was willing to prove it by helping him with the locoed horses, Wallie made fair progress as far as the gate in the last wire fence, where "Tex" had to leave him.

"'Tain't fur now," said that person, passing over the rope with a knot in the end with which he had belaboured the horses he had driven ahead of him. "Mog along stiddy and you'd ought to make it by sundown."

"I think I'll lead 'em," Wallie remarked.

"Locoed horses won't lead—you've got to drive 'em."

Nevertheless, on the chance that "Tex" might not know everything, Wallie tried it after his helper had galloped in another direction.

"The best pulling team in the state!" the auctioneer had declared, and truthfully. Wallie had a notion they could have moved the Capitol building if they had laid back on it as they did their halters when he tried to lead them.

There was nothing for it but to tie their heads together and drive them as Tex had done, but with even less success. They missed either Tex's voluble and spicy encouragement or the experienced hand which laid on the rope end, but the chief difficulty seemed to be that they were of different minds as to the direction which they should take, and since the cow was of still another, Wallie was confronted with a difficult situation. 82

Dragging the mild-eyed Jersey, which had developed an incredible obstinacy with the cessation of Tex's Comanche yells behind her, Wallie applied the rope he had inherited, with the best imitation he could give of the performance, but futilely.

The cow and the horses pulling in opposite directions went around and around in a circle until the trampled earth looked as if it had been the site of a cider-press or a circus.

After they had milled for twenty minutes without advancing a step Wallie lost patience.

"Oh, sugar!" he cried. "This is certainly very, very annoying!"

The cow was as much an obstacle to the continuance of their journey as the horses, since, bawling at intervals, she planted her feet and allowed her neck to be stretched until Wallie was fearful that it would separate, leaving only her gory head in the halter.

With this unpleasant possibility confronting him, Wallie shrank from putting too much strain upon it with the result that the cow learned that if she bawled loud enough and laid back hard enough, he would ease up on the rope by which he was dragging her.

Wallie had been taught from infancy that kindness was the proper method of conquering animals, therefore he addressed the cow in tones of saccharine sweetness and with a persuasive manner that would have charmed a bird off a tree.

"Bossy! Bossy! Good bossy!" he cajoled her.

Immune to flattery, she looked at him with an expression which reminded him of a servant girl who knows she is giving notice at an inopportune time. Then she planted her feet still deeper in the sand and bawled at him.

"Darn it!" he cried, finally, in his exasperation.

As he sat helpless in his dilemma, wondering what to do next, an idea occurred to him which was so clever and feasible that he lost no time in executing it.

If he tied the cow to the stirrup of his saddle and she showed no disposition to escape, then he could walk and drive the work-horses ahead, returning for his saddle-horse and the cow! This, to be sure, was a slow process, but it was an improvement over spending the night going around in a circle.

Wallie tied the cow's rope to the stirrup and both animals stood as if they were nailed to the spot while he ran after the work-horses, who had wandered in another direction. His boots, he noted, were not adapted to walking as they pinched in the toes and instep. He could not stop for such a small matter at this critical moment, however, so he continued to run until he overtook the horses and started them homeward.

Turning to look at the cow and his saddle-horse, he saw them walking briskly, side by side, like soul-mates who understood each other perfectly, in the opposite direction from which he wanted them to go. He left the horses and ran after the cow, shouting:

"Whoa—can't you?"

He reasoned swiftly that the Jersey was the nucleus of a herd which would one day run up into the thousands, and he must get her at all hazards.

"Whoa! Bossy—wait for me!" he pleaded as at top speed he went after her.

"Good bossy! Good bossy!" His quavering voice was pathetic.

At the sound of his voice the horse stopped, turned its head, and looked at him. The cow stopped also.

Intensely relieved, Wallie dropped to a walk, congratulating himself that the livery horse chanced to be so well trained and obedient. As he approached, the cow stepped forward that she might look under the horse's neck and watch her pursuer. Both animals stood like statues, regarding him intently. When within fifty feet Wallie said in a conciliatory tone to show them that he stood ready to forgive them in spite of the inconvenience to which they had put him:

"Nice horsey! Good bossy!"

Quite as if it were a signal, "Nice horsey and good bossy" started at a trot which quickly left Wallie far behind them.

Wallie ran until he felt that his overtaxed lungs were bursting. His boots were killing him, his shin bones ached, and his feet at every step sank to the ankles in the loose sand. It was like running through a bog. He pursued until he was bent double with the effort and his legs grew numb. The perspiration streamed from under his stylish derby, his stock wilted, and his clothing was as wet as if it had been raining.

When his legs would carry him not one step farther he stopped and looked after the cow and horse—who were still doing perfect team-work, trotting side by side as evenly as if they had been harnessed together. They stopped instantly when he stopped, and, as before, the horse turned its head to look back at him while the cow peered under its neck at Wallie.

Hope revived again when they showed no disposition to move, and after he had panted awhile, Wallie thought that by feigning indifference and concealing his real purpose he might approach them. To this end, he whistled with so much breath as his chase had left him, tossed pebbles inconsequently, and sauntered toward the pair as if he had all the day before him.

The subterfuge seemed to be succeeding, and he was once more within fifty feet of them when they whirled about simultaneously and started at the same lively trot, leaving Wallie far behind them.

A humane consideration for animals had been inculcated in Wallie from childhood by Aunt Mary, but now he felt such a yearning to inflict pain upon the cow and the livery horse that it would have shocked that lady if she could have read his thoughts as he chased them. He visualized the two of them tied to a tree while he laid on the rope-end, and the picture afforded him intense satisfaction.

Exhausted, and with his heart pounding under his silk shirt-bosom, Wallie stopped at last because he had to. Immediately the horse and cow stopped also. While he gasped, a fresh manœuvre occurred to Wallie. Perhaps if he made a circle, gradually getting closer, by a quick dash he could catch the bridle reins.

As he circled, the gaze of the horse and cow followed him with the keenest interest. Finally he was close enough to see the placid look of benevolence with which his cow was regarding him and success seemed about to reward his efforts. The horse, too, had half closed its eyes by the time he was ready for his coup, as if it had lost all interest in eluding him.

"Nice horsey! Good bossy!" Wallie murmured, reassuringly.

For the third time he was within fifty feet of them, and while he was debating as to whether to make his dash or try to get a little closer, the pair, seeming to recognize fifty feet as the danger zone, threw up their heads and tails and went off at a gallop.

Grinding his teeth in a way that could not but have been detrimental to the enamel, Wallie stood looking after them. A profane word never had passed his lips since he had had his mouth washed out with castile soap for saying "devil." But now with deliberate, appalling abandon, and the emphasis of a man who had cursed from his cradle, he yelled after the fleeing fiends incarnate: 87

"Go to hell—damn you!"

Instantly shocked and ashamed of himself, Wallie instinctively looked skyward, half expecting to see an outraged Jehovah ready to heave a thunderbolt down on him, though he felt that the Almighty in justice should recognize the provocation, and forgive him.

Weary, with blistered heels and drooping shoulders, Wallie plodded after them while time and again they repeated the performance until it would have worn down a bloodhound to have followed the tracks made by Wallie and the renegades.

The sun set and the colours faded, yet Wallie with a dogged tenacity he had not known was in him trudged back and forth, around and around, in pursuit of the runaways, buoyed up chiefly by the hope that if he could catch them he might soon be wealthy enough to afford to kill them.

It was nearly dusk, and a night in the open seemed before him when the pair stopped and commenced feeding toward him. Whether they had become hungry or the sport had palled on them were questions Wallie could not answer. It was enough that they waited like two lambs for him to walk up and catch them.

He was so tired that when he got himself in the saddle with the cow ambling along meekly at his stirrup, he found himself feeling grateful to them instead of vindictive. The locoed horses he decided to leave until morning. 88

By the time he had reached his homestead and fallen out of the saddle, he had forgotten that he had sworn to tie them up and "whale" them. On the contrary, he was wondering if milking were a difficult process and if he could accomplish it, for he could not find it in his heart to let a dumb brute suffer. He remembered hearing that cows should be milked regularly, and while his Jersey had goaded him to blasphemy he knew that he would not be able to sleep if she was in pain through his negligence.

Picketing the horse as Pinkey had taught him, he put the cow on a rope also. Then he set about the performance which had looked so simple when he had seen others engage in it.

Among his accoutrements was a flashlight, and with this and a lard can Wallie stood for a moment speculating as to whether the cow had any preference as to the side she was milked on. He could not see that it would make any material difference, so he sat down on his heel on the side nearest and turned his flashlight on the spot where he wished to operate. Placing his lard can on the ground where he could throw a stream into it conveniently, he used his free hand for that purpose.

To his surprise, nothing happened—except that the cow stopped chewing her cud and looked at him inquiringly. He persisted, but uselessly. Was anything wrong with his system, he wondered? He thought not, since he was milking exactly as he had seen the hired man milk on a farm where he had once spent a month in his childhood. 89

He varied his method, making gentle experiments, but at the end of ten minutes the lard can was still empty and the cow was growing restless. For that he could not blame her. His hand ached and his foot seemed about to break off at the ankle from sitting on it.

Wallie felt chagrined when he reflected that although he was a graduate of Haverford College and was bringing all his intelligence to bear upon it he was still unable to do what any hired man with an inch of forehead could accomplish with no apparent effort.

Perhaps there was some trick about it—perhaps it *did* make a difference which side a cow was milked on. Wallie walked around and turned the spot-light on the other side of his Jersey.

The outlook, he fancied, seemed more promising.

He sat down on his heel and started in energetically.

It did make a difference which side one milked on—there was no doubt about it. The instant he touched her she lifted her foot and with an aim which was not only deadly and unerring but remarkable, considering that she could not see her target, planted it in the pit of Wallie's stomach with such force that the muffled thud of it sounded like someone beating a carpet. The kick knocked the breath out of him, and as he lay on his back on a clump of cactus he was sure that he was bleeding internally and probably dying.

Wallie finally got to his feet painfully and with both hands on his stomach looked at the cow, who was again chewing tranquilly. There was murder in Wallie's eyes as he yelled at her: 90

"Curse you! I could cut your heart out!"

Then he crept up the path to his tent and dropped down on his pneumatic mattress, doubting if he ever would rise from it. As he lay there, supperless, with his clothes on, every muscle in his body aching, to say nothing of the sensation in his stomach, it seemed incredible that he could be the same person who had started off so blithely in the morning.

The series of misfortunes which had befallen him overwhelmed him. He had purchased a cow which not only gave no milk but had a vicious disposition. He had paid two prices for a pair of locoed horses that did their pulling backward. He had made himself a laughing stock to the entire country and seemed destined to play the clown somehow whenever Helene Spenceley was in the vicinity. His ears grew red to the rims as he thought of it.

But she *had* resented Canby's dishonesty for him—*that* was something; and Wallie was in a mood to be grateful for anything.

The cow grunted as she lay down to her slumbers—Wallie ground his teeth as he heard her. A coyote yapped on a ridge forlornly and the horse on picket coughed and snorted while Wallie, staring at the stars through the entrance, massaged his injury and ruminated.

Suddenly he sat up on his patent air mattress and shook his fist at the universe: 91

"Canby nor nobody else shall down me! I'm going to make good somehow, or fertilize Wyoming as old Appel told me. I'll show 'em!"

After that he felt better; so much better that he fell asleep immediately, and even the activities of two field-mice, who pulled and snipped at his hair with their sharp teeth in the interests of a nest they were building, only disturbed without awakening him.

92

CHAPTER XI

MERRY CHRISTMAS

Wallie shivered in his sleep and pulled the soogans higher. The act exposed his feet instead of his shoulders, so it did not add to his comfort. He felt sleepily for the flour sack which he wore on his head as protection against the dust that blew in through the crack in the logs and his fingers sank into a small snow bank that had accumulated on his pillow.

The chill of it completely awakened him. He found that there was frost on the end of his nose and he was in a miniature blizzard as far as his shoulders. The wind was howling around the corners and driving the first snow of the season through the many large cracks in his log residence.

The day was Christmas, and there was no reason to believe that it would be a merry one.

Wallie lay for a time considering the prospect and comparing it with other Christmases. He had a kettle of boiled beans, cold soda biscuit, coffee, and two prairie-dogs which he intended cooking as an experiment, for his Christmas dinner.

Growing more and more frugal as his bank account shrank with alarming rapidity, Wallie reasoned that if he could eat prairie-dog it would serve a double purpose: While ridding his land 93
of the pests it would save him much in such high-priced commodities as ham and bacon. Prairie-dog might not be a delicacy sought after by epicures, yet he never had heard anything directly against them, beyond their propensity for burrowing, which made them undesirable tenants. He reasoned that since they subsisted upon roots mainly, they were of cleanly habits and quite as apt to be nourishing and appetizing, if properly cooked, as rabbit.

Having the courage of his convictions, Wallie skinned and dressed the prairie-dogs he had caught out of their holes one sunshiny morning, and meant to eat them for his Christmas dinner if it was humanly possible.

The subject of food occupied a large part of Wallie's time and attention since he was not yet sufficiently practised to make cooking easy. He had purchased an expensive cook book, but as his larder seldom contained any of the ingredients it called for, he considered the price of it wasted. He had found that the recipes imparted by Tex McGonnigle, who had built his ten-by-twelve log cabin for him, were far more practical. Under his tuition Wallie had learned to make "sweat-pads," "dough-gods," "mulligan," and other dishes with names deemed unsuitable for publication.

After considering his dinner menu for a time, Wallie drew his knees to his chin, which enabled him to his get entire body under the soogan, and contrasted his present surroundings with those 94
of the previous Christmas.

In the spacious Florida hotel last year he had only to touch a button to bring a uniformed menial who served him coffee and lighted a grate fire for him, while the furnishings of his room and bath were quite as luxurious as those of The Colonial.

Now, as the light strengthened, Wallie could see his third-handed stove purchased from the secondhand man, Tucker, standing in the corner with its list to starboard. The wind blowing through the baling wire which anchored the stove-pipe to the wall sounded like an aeolian harp played by a maniac. His patent camp chair had long since given way beneath him, and when he had found at the Prouty Emporium two starch boxes of the right height, he had been as elated when they were given to him as if he had been the recipient of a valuable present. They now served as chairs on either side of his plank table.

His pneumatic mattress had collapsed from punctures, and Wallie's bones were uncomfortably close to the boards in the bottom of the bunk McGonnigle had built against one end of the cabin. His pillow was a flour sack filled with straw and of a doubtful colour, as was also the hand towel hanging on a nail beside a shocking wash basin.

There was a dirt roof on the cabin from which clods of earth fell rather frequently and bounced on Wallie's head or dropped in the food, or on his bed to startle him when sleeping. The floor contained knotholes through which the field mice and chipmunks came up to share his provisions, and the door, being a trifle larger than the frame, could not be closed entirely. 95

When Wallie had called McGonnigle's attention to the fact that he could stand in the middle of his cabin and view the scenery through the cracks in any direction, McGonnigle had assured him that "fresh air never hurt nobody," and while he cheerfully admitted that he was not a carpenter, declared that he had made allowances for this fact in his charges.

Though Wallie could not notice it when he paid them, he said nothing, for by now he was accustomed to having everything cost more than he had anticipated, however liberal he might be in his estimate.

Boise Bill rode by occasionally and inquired humorously if he thought he would "winter." To which Wallie always replied that he intended to, though there were moments of depression when he doubted it.

It was upon Wallie's inability to "winter" that Canby was counting. He had hung on longer than Canby had thought he would, but the cattleman felt fairly sure that the first big snowstorm would see the last of Wallie. The hardships and loneliness would "get" him as it did most tenderfeet, Canby reasoned, and some morning he would saddle up in disgust, leaving another homestead open to entry.

If, perchance, this did not happen, Canby had a system of his own for eliminating settlers. It was quite as efficacious as open warfare, though it took longer and was open to the objection that sometimes it enabled them to stay long enough to plow up eighty acres or so which went to weeds when they abandoned it. 96

Canby had no personal feeling against Wallie and, after meeting him, decided he would use the more lawful and humane method of ridding himself of him. Instead of running him off by threats and violence he would merely starve him out, and Wallie's bank balance indicated that Canby was in a fair way to accomplish his purpose.

Several happenings had made Wallie suspect something of Canby's purpose, and the same latent quality which had made Wallie trudge doggedly after his cow and horse until he had worn out their perversity always made him tell himself grimly that he was going to stick until he had his crop in and harvested if he laid down, a skeleton, and died beside one of his own haystacks.

Mostly, however, he was so busy with his cooking, feeding his livestock, getting wood and water, to say nothing of piling rocks and grubbing sagebrush that he had no time to brood over Canby and the wrongs he had done him. He had learned from McGonnigle that his locoed horses would grow worse instead of better and eventually would have to be shot, and that person had imparted the discouraging information also that not only could he expect no milk from his cow until her calf arrived in January but Jerseys were a breed not commonly selected for beef cattle.

Wallie had thought that his aunt would surely relent to the extent of writing him a Christmas letter but, yesterday, after riding eight miles to look in the bluing box nailed to a post by the roadside, he had found that it had contained only a circular urging him to raise mushrooms in his cellar. 97

Helene Spenceley, too, might have sent him a Christmas card or something. He had seen her only twice since the sale, and each time she had whizzed past him in Canby's machine on the way to Prouty. The sight had given him a curious feeling which he had tried to analyze but had been unable to find a satisfactory name for it.

Altogether, Wallie felt very lonely and forlorn and forgotten this Christmas morning as he lay in a knot under the soogan, listening to the wind twanging the stove-pipe wire and contemplating his present and future.

He had discovered that by craning his neck slightly when in a certain position he could look through a crack and see the notch in the mountain, below which was the Spenceley ranch, according to Pinkey. He was prompted to do so now, but an eyeful of snow discouraged his observation, so he decided that he would get up, feed his animals and, after breakfast, wash his shirt and a few towels by way of recreation.

The cabin was not only as cold as it looked but colder, and as Wallie hopped over the floor bare-footed and shivering he reflected that very likely his potatoes and onions were frozen and wished he had taken them to bed with him.

They were, unmistakably, for they rattled like glass balls when he picked up several onions and 98
examined them with a pained expression.

Wallie was still wearing much of the wardrobe he had brought with him, and when dressed to go outside he was warm but unique in a green velour hat, his riding breeches, brilliant golf stockings that were all but feetless thrust in arctics, a blue flannel shirt from the Emporium in Prouty, and a long, tight-fitting tan coat which had once been very smart indeed.

The snow had stopped falling by the time he had done his chores and breakfasted. The only benefit the storm had brought him was that it did away with the necessity of carrying water for his washing. He had acquired the agility of a cliff-dweller from scaling the embankment by means of the "toe-holts"; yet, at that, it was no easy matter to transport a bucket of water without spilling it.

He wished for a well every time that he panted in from a trip to the creek, and meant to have one as soon as he could afford it.

While the snow-water was melting Wallie considered the manner in which he should prepare the prairie-dogs. He presumed that it was too much to expect that the cook book would have anything to say on the subject, but it surely would recognize rabbit, and a recipe suitable for one would do for the other.

Wallie got out his cook book and turned eagerly to the index. There was no mention of rabbit. A thought struck him—rabbit was hare and hare was rabbit, wasn't it? If so, the cook book would 99
not admit it, for there was no such word under the H's.

He was disgusted. What good was such a cook book, he asked himself as he turned the leaves in resentment. He wished he could collect the two-fifty he had paid for it. He read aloud, sneeringly:

"Caviar toast, garnished. Crab, scalloped, in shell. Aspic in jelly. Fondu of cheese. Floating Island. Meringue glacé, and Whipped Cream."

The mere mention of the dishes made his mouth water, while his anger against the dame who had compiled it mounted higher. He remotely contemplated writing to inquire of the culinary oracle why she had ignored hare and rabbit.

Continuing to scan the index, his eye caught a word which held possibilities. Game! If rabbit was not game, what was it?

Ah! Wallie looked at a picture of a rabbit lying on a platter with its legs in the air and artistically decorated with parsley until he felt more hungry than ever. Then he read aloud with gusto:

"Barbecued rabbit. Casserole of rabbit. Roast rabbit. Smothered rabbit. Stewed rabbit."

He perused all the recipes carefully. After giving weighty consideration to each, roast rabbit seemed to make the strongest appeal to him. He read the recipe aloud twice that he might the better comprehend it:

"Dress and wash the wily *coureur de bois*, but leave the heads on in cleaning them. Stuff the bodies with a forcemeat of fat, salt pork, minced onions, and fine bread crumbs well seasoned 100
with salt and pepper. Sew them up with fine thread and lay upon thin slices of pork, covering the grating of the roaster. Lay other slices of pork over them, pour over all a cupful of stock, and roast one hour. Remove the pork, then wash with butter and dredge with flour and brown.

"Drain off the gravy, lay the bits of bacon about the rabbit in the dish: thicken the gravy with browned flour. Boil up, add a tablespoonful of tomato catsup and a glass of claret, then take from the fire."

Wallie reflected, as he sat with his feet on the stove-hearth overflowing with ashes, that when it came to the "forcemeat" he was "there with the crumbs," since he had an accumulation of ancient biscuit too hard to eat. Also he had salt pork and onions. The butter, tomato catsup, stock, claret, he must dispense with. After all, the prairie-dogs were the main thing and he had them.

He congratulated himself that he had decided to leave on the heads when skinning them. The recipe so enthused him that he decided to prepare them before starting in with his washing.

Obviously the first thing to do was to thaw the onions, so he put them in the oven, after which he went to a box in the corner and selected a few biscuit. Crumbs were crumbs, as he viewed it, and biscuit crumbs were quite as good as bread crumbs for his purpose.

There were certain marks on these biscuit that were made unmistakably by the teeth of mice and chipmunks, but these traces he removed painstakingly. As he reduced the biscuit to crumbs 101
with a hammer, he recalled that he had been awakened several times by the sound of these pestiferous animals frisking in the box in the corner. He did not allow his mind to dwell upon this, however, lest it prejudice him when it came to the eating of the "forcemeat."

Onions, he found, were not improved by freezing. Those he removed from the oven were distinctly pulpy, but since they smelled like onion and tasted like it, he mushed them in with the biscuit crumbs, and seasoned.

Then he crammed the prairie-dogs with the mixture and looked for a thread among his sewing

articles. Since he could find nothing but black linen, Wallie threaded a darning needle and did a fancy "feather" stitch down the middle of each of them.

This accomplished, he stood off and viewed his handiwork with eminent pride and satisfaction, though it occurred to him that owing to his generous use of "forcemeat" they had a bloated appearance, as if they had died of strychnine poisoning.

The heads, too, were decidedly rat-like, and as the long, sharp teeth of the pair of them grinned up at Wallie he covered them hastily and set about his washing.

He had come to begrudge every stick of firewood, and it took an incredible amount to heat wash-water. A man could very well fill his time if he did nothing but collect wood and carry water.

As he set his tub and washboard on a box and rubbed vigorously on his undergarments, he 102
smiled to himself and wondered what his friends of The Colonial would say if they could see him at the moment. He did not so much mind washing, it was easier than digging post holes, but it was not much of a way to spend Christmas and he was desperately lonely. He wished someone would come along to talk to.

He was so far from the road that there were no passersby, and no one wanted to see him anyhow, but his loneliness became so great as he dwelt upon it that on the remote chance that he might see someone even in the distance he stopped washing and walked to the window, where with his elbow he rubbed a spot clear of frost.

Looking out through the loop-hole, it was a white, tractless world he gazed upon, and he might have been in the Arctic Circle for all the signs of life he could discover. He told himself that he might have known better than to hope for any.

As he squinted, he suddenly pressed his eye harder against the window. Did he see a speck that moved or did he imagine it? He enlarged the hole and strained his eyes until they watered. Surely it moved—surely. It would be too disappointing for words if it were only a delusion.

It did! It did! There was now no mistake about it. Someone was coming toward the cabin. Wallie shook with excitement at the prospect of a visitor. Whoever it might be, Wallie would make him stay for dinner if he had to pay him by the hour for his company. That was settled. Very likely it 103
was Pinkey, but to-day even Boise Bill would be welcome.

Wallie shoved his Christmas dinner in the oven and slammed the door upon it, stoked the fire lavishly, then fell upon the washboard and rubbed furiously that he might be done the sooner. At intervals he dashed to the window, half afraid to look lest the rider had changed his mind and gone in another direction.

But no, he kept coming, and there was something in the way he sat his horse which made him think it was Pinkey.

And Pinkey it was, brilliant as a rainbow in orange chaps, red flannel shirt, and a buckskin waistcoat. His coat tied behind the cantle suggested that he either had become overheated or at only twelve below zero had not yet felt the need of it. His horse was snorting steam like a locomotive and icicles of frozen breath were pendent from its nostrils.

Wallie stood in the door, suds to the elbow and his hands steaming, waiting to receive him.

His voice trembled as he greeted him:

"I never was so glad to see anybody in my life, Pinkey."

"This is onct I know you ain't lyin'. Got anything to eat? I'm starvin'. I been comin' sence daylight."

"I got something special," Wallie replied, mysteriously. "Tie your horse to the haystack. I'll hurry things up a little."

Pinkey returned shortly and sniffed as he entered: 104

"It smells good, anyhow. There's something homelike about onions. What you cookin'?"

"It's a secret, but you'll like 'em. I made 'em out of the cook book."

Pinkey threw his coat on the table and the thud sounded as if it had a brick rolled in it.

"Here's something Helene sent—she made it—it's angel food or somethin', I reckon."

"Now wasn't that good of her!" Wallie exclaimed, gratefully.

"I can't tell till I taste it. I wouldn't call her much of a cook generally." He prodded the cake as he unrolled it and commented:

"Gosh, it's hard! I turned my thumb-nail back on it."

"It's frozen—that's what's the matter," Wallie defended, promptly.

"I think it's a bum cake," declared Pinkey, callously.

"I think you don't know what you're talking about until you try it," Wallie retorted with asperity.

Pinkey looked at him thoughtfully and changed the subject.

"I see you're playin' a tune on the washboard."

Wallie replied stiffly:

"Yes, I'm doing a little laundry." Pinkey's criticism of the cake still rankled.

"You ain't washin' that blue shirt a'ready?" Pinkey demanded, incredulously. "You only bought it Thanksgivin'."

"The front of it bent like rubber-glass and I couldn't stand it any longer." He added reminiscently: "There was a time when I wore a fresh shirt daily." 105

Pinkey stared at him awe-stricken:

"I wouldn't think changin' as often as that would be healthy."

The clothes in the dishpan on the stove boiled over, and as Wallie jumped for the broom-handle to poke them under, Pinkey demanded:

"Are you bilin' your flannens?"

"Certainly."

"A ten-year-ol' boy can't git in that suit of underwear onct you're done cookin' it," Pinkey explained, and added, disgustedly: "Wallie, don't you know nuthin'?"

Wallie looked his consternation.

"I'll know better next time," he said, humbly.

Pinkey consulted his watch and hinted:

"Don't you want me to make the bread?"

"No, I have some biscuit to warm over, we'll boil potatoes, thaw the cake out, open some pineapple, and with what I have in the oven we will have a dinner that'll be nothing short of a banquet."

"Great! I'm so hungry I could eat with a Digger Injun."

Wallie opened the oven door.

"They're browning beautifully!" he reported.

"Chickens?"

Wallie shook his head:

"I shan't tell you until you've passed upon them."

"If you've got enough of whatever it is—that's all that's worryin' me," declared Pinkey, hungrily. 106
"You'd ought to build you a root cellar next winter—if you're livin'," he remarked as the potatoes rattled when Wallie dropped them in the kettle.

"Do you suppose I could grow potatoes? Is it too dry?"

"This is a great country for potatoes. There's somethin' in the soil that gits in the potatoes' eyes and makes 'em water so they irrigate themselves. Shore! you can grow potatoes."

"I want to make a good many improvements here before next winter," announced Wallie, hopefully. "I wish you could come over for awhile and help me."

"That mightn't be a bad idea," said Pinkey, thoughtfully. "Sence the country went dry I don't much care whether I draw wages or not—they's nothin' to spend money for, so what's the use of workin'? If I was over here I might add a few feet to my rope and git me a good little start off Canby."

"Do you see much of him?" Wallie asked, indifferently.

"Too much," said Pinkey, shortly.

Wallie dropped the pan he was turning in the oven.

"They're browning beautifully," he exclaimed hastily.

"You said that before. Ain't it gittin' time to work on 'em?"

"Remove your feet and I'll set the table."

"Can't you spread a paper for a tablecloth? I always git splinters in my elbows when I eat off rough lumber." 107

Wallie laughed good-humouredly as he obliged him.

"That's shore a great smell comin' from the oven! Let's eat, feller."

"You certainly are hungry, Pinkey. If I may judge by appearances, you are not going to be disappointed. You sit down while I put things on the table."

Pinkey needed no second invitation.

"I like spuds cooked with the clothes on," he observed as he skinned a potato.

"I trust everything is going to be to your liking," Wallie declared, cordially, as he drew the prairie-dogs from the oven and laid them on an agate-ware platter.

Busy with his potato, Pinkey did not see them until they were before him. Then he stopped and stared hard as they lay on their backs grinning up at him with the "forcemeat" oozing through the stitching.

"*What are they?*" His emphasis was not flattering.

"I shan't tell you yet," declared Wallie.

Pinkey continued to eye them suspiciously.

"They kinda remind me of a mummy I seen in a side-show; then, again, they look like incubator childern—roasted. Them teeth are what git me. I can't quite place 'em. 'Tain't wood-pussy or nothin', Wallie? 'Tain't no notorious animal like pole-kitty?"

Wallie looked offended.

"I intend to eat some myself," he replied with dignity.

"Are they some kind of a varmint?" Dubiously. 108

"Varmint?"

"Pack-rat or weasel?"

"Scarcely!"

Wallie looked so injured that Pinkey said apologetically:

"I was jest cur'ous." But inquired further: "Is that stuffin' or in'ards coming through the sewin' down the front of 'em?"

"Forcemeat. I made it according to a recipe."

"Indeed?" Politely. "Don't go shy yourself jest because I'm here," he protested, as Wallie attempted to cut one in two with the butcher-knife. "I ain't feelin' so hungry—somethin' has took my appetite."

As the table swayed under Wallie's efforts to carve a prairie-dog, he suggested:

"Perhaps if you took hold of one leg——"

"Ye-ah," said Pinkey, humorously, "and you take holt of the other and put your foot on my chest so you kin git a purchase, then we'll both pull and somethin's bound to happen."

"If I could only find a joint——"

"Worry one of them legs off and we'll see how we like it before you play yourself out on it."

Wallie acted upon the suggestion and presented the severed member.

"Try it," he urged, persuasively.

Pinkey sunk his grinders into the leg and laid back on it.

"Does it seem tough?" Wallie asked, watching him anxiously. 109

"Tough! I'm scairt it's goin' to snap back and knock me over. Wait till I git a fresh holt on it."

"Do you get the flavour at all?"

"I can't pull enough off to taste it," Pinkey replied, plaintively.

"Try the dressing and tell me what you think of it." Wallie scooped out a generous spoonful and placed it on his plate, waiting confidently for the verdict.

Pinkey conveyed his knife to his mouth while Wallie stood regarding him with an expression of pleased expectancy as he tasted.

A startled look was succeeded by one that was unmistakably horror. Pinkey knocked over the box upon which he was sitting as he jumped from the table and tore the kitchen door open.

Wallie watched him wonderingly:

"Tell you what I think of it!" Pinkey declared, returning. "I ain't got words—they ain't none in the dictionary. My Gawd! what is it made of?"

"Just biscuit crumbs and onions," said Wallie, colouring.

"Where did you keep 'em?"

Wallie pointed to the box on the floor in the corner.

Pinkey made a hideous grimace.

"Gimme a drink of water! Gimme a chew of tobacco! Gimme anything to take the taste of *mouse* out'n my mouth. Wallie," solemnly, "men have died fer less'n that in this country. If I thought you'd done that on purpose I'd slit your throat from ear to ear and leave you." 110

"I thought I was very particular and cut off everything that looked suspicious," said Wallie, meekly, "I must have missed something."

"You shore did! And," Pinkey demanded, "what might them horrors be on the platter? Them teeth are mighty familiar."

Wallie quavered:

"Prairie-dog—I was experimenting to see if they were edible."

"Leave me out in the air again!" Pinkey groaned as he swallowed a drink of water. "And I passed up a turkey dinner to come and eat with you!"

"Shan't I cook you some bacon?" asked Wallie, contritely.

"I doubt if I ever feel like eatin' agin, but if the cake's thawed out I'll try a chunk of it to take my mind off that stuffin'."

Wallie opened the can of pineapple he had been treasuring and Pinkey helped himself freely to the Christmas cake.

"They must be about four meals in one of them slices, the way it feels inside of me," the latter commented, nibbling delicately on a ring of pineapple he held in his fingers.

"It's fruit-cake, and rich; you're not supposed to eat so much of it," Wallie said, sharply.

Pinkey raised his eyebrows and regarded Wallie attentively as he continued to nibble.

"Looks like you're turrible touchy about her cookin', and swelled up over gittin' a Christmas present," he remarked, finally. "You needn't be, because she made eight other cement bricks jest like this one and sent 'em around to fellers she's sorry for." 111

"Oh, did she!" Wallie ejaculated, crestfallen.

"Yes, indeed," Pinkey went on, complacently, feeling a glow of satisfaction at Wallie's lengthened countenance; "she does it every Christmas. She's kind to the pore and sufferin', but it don't mean nothin' more than a dollar she'd drop in a hat somebody was passin'."

Noting the deep gloom which immediately settled upon Wallie, Pinkey could think of the prairie-dogs with more equanimity.

112

CHAPTER XII

THE WATER WITCH

In former days Wallie had wished for a yacht, his own stables, and such luxuries, but now he wanted a well with far greater intensity than he had desired those extravagances.

The all-important question had been whether he could at present afford it, with his money vanishing like a belated snowbank. Then, while he had been debating, Rufus Reed appeared at such a timely moment that it had seemed providential.

Mr. Reed, lately arrived from Illinois, was now sitting with his feet on the stove-hearth and so close to the coals that the cabin was strong with the odour of frying rubber, and declaring modestly:

"I may say, without braggin', that I have made an enormous success since I gave up my flour and feed store and took to well-diggin' as a perfession. By acci-dent I discovered that I was peculiarly gifted."

Watching the smoke rising from Rufus's arctics and speculating as to what might be the composition of his soles that he could endure so much heat without discomfort, Wallie inquired politely:

"In what way, may I ask?" 113

Mr. Reed's tone became impressive:

"I am—a water witch."

Wallie looked puzzled.

"Some call it magic, but the fact is, I am able to locate water with a forked willer and you can call it anything you want to."

Wallie regarded the worker of miracles with fresh attention. His belief in his own powers was evidently so sincere that even a skeptic could not fail to be impressed by him.

He continued:

"With my divinin' rod I have flew in the faces of the biggest geologists in the country and found water where they said there wasn't any."

"Will the divining rod tell you how far you must dig for it?"

"Pretty close to it. I count a foot to every bob of the willer."

"In a state like Illinois where there is a great deal of moisture I presume it would be possible to get water anywhere if one went deep enough, but in Wyoming—frankly, I should not like to rely on the divining rod in Wyoming, Mr. Reed."

Mr. Reed looked somewhat offended and declared with spirit:

"I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll make you a sportin' proposition. I'll test the ground with the willer and if it says we'll get water at a certain depth and we don't strike it, I'll dig till we do, for nothin', if we have to go till we hear the Chinamen gibber. That's fair, ain't it?" 114

Wallie could not gainsay it.

"I got a willer on my saddle and it won't cost nothin' for a demonstration. Say the word," persuasively, "and you've good as got a fine, flowing well of water."

It would do no harm to let the water witch make his test, Wallie decided, so he followed sheepishly in the wake of Rufus and his willow as he walked over the greater part of the one hundred and sixty acres.

"'Tain't nowise plentiful," the latter admitted, as with each hand gripping a prong of the willow he kept his eyes fixed upon it. "But if it's here I'm bound to find it, so don't get discouraged."

Expecting nothing, Wallie was not disappointed.

At the top of a draw some hundred and fifty yards from the cabin Rufus suddenly halted.

"I felt somethin'," he said, hopefully.

"Where?" Wallie asked, interested.

"In my arm—like pins and needles—it's a symptom. She's goin' to bob!" Excitedly. "You watch and count along of me."

The willow bobbed unmistakably.

"Sixty-eight!" They finished together.

"I told you!" Rufus cried, triumphantly. He stamped his foot: "Right here is where you'll strike it." His tone was as positive as if he saw it flowing beneath the surface.

Impressed in spite of himself, Wallie endeavoured to be conservative.

"Could it have been your subconscious mind?" he asked, doubtfully. 115

"I ain't any. Rufus Reed is right out in the open. I'll stake my reputation there's plenty of water if you'll go after it."

"It's rather far from the house for convenience," he objected.

"Water in Wyoming is like whiskey, you have to take it where you can get it and not be particular."

It was a temptation, and the cost at three dollars a foot was not excessive. Wallie pondered it and said finally:

"You will agree in writing to dig without remuneration until you get water if you do not strike it at sixty-eight feet?"

"An iron-clad contract will suit yours truly," Mr. Reed declared, emphatically. He added: "I'll bring two men to work the h'ist and empty the bucket. Of course you'd aim to board us?"

"Why, yes, I can," Wallie said a little uncertainly. He had not thought of that feature, but he realized it would be necessary.

He had figured that with strict economy he had provisions enough to last him well toward summer. Three men eating three meals daily might make some difference in his calculations, but nothing serious probably.

So the contract was drawn up and signed and Rufus departed, eminently satisfied, as was Wallie, who was so eager to see his well started that he could hardly wait until the following Monday.

In the interim he dreamed of his well of cold, pure water, and every time he made use of his "toe-holts" he told himself that that inconvenience would soon be eliminated. He meant to have 116
a windmill as soon as he could afford it, for whatever else the country might lack there was no dearth of wind for motive power.

There was something permanent-looking about a well and he chuckled as he speculated as to what Canby would say when he heard of it, and he wished with all his heart that he might be around when Helene Spenceley learned that he was sinking a well on his place for household and stock purposes.

He had taken advantage of the opportunity which the gift of the cake presented to send her a note of thanks and appreciation. In reply he had received an invitation which had stung him worse than if she had written that she never wanted to see him cross her threshold.

His eyes gleamed every time he read it, which was so often that it was worn through the creases from being folded and unfolded:

> Dear "Gentle Annie":
>
> Won't you stop at the ranch on your way out and pay us a visit? I presume the middle of the summer at latest will see the last of you as I have no idea that you will be able to go through the discouragements and hardships attendant upon proving up on a homestead.
>
> My brother also will enjoy meeting you as he has heard so much of you.
>
> Looking for you soon, I am
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Helene Spenceley.

P.S. I have a new sweater pattern that I am sure will please you.

Every word had a nettle in it, a taunt that made him tingle. It seemed to Wallie he had never known such a "catty" woman, and he meant to tell her so, some day, when he was rich and successful and had proved how wrong she was in her estimate of him. 117

He was tempted to send her word, on a postal, anonymously, of the well he was digging if he had not feared she would suspect him. It seemed so long to wait for Pinkey to convey the tidings.

Rufus arrived on Monday morning, and the "crew" to which he had referred proved to be members of his own family—John and Will—whales as to size, and clownish.

It came to Wallie's mind that if they did not move any faster when they worked than when they were at leisure, the well-digging would be a long process, and his heart sank when he saw them feeding their horses so liberally from the hay which had cost $20 a ton, delivered.

The first intimation Wallie had of what he had let himself in for was when Rufus asked in a confidential tone, as if he were imparting something for Wallie's ear only:

"I wonder if we could get a bite to eat before we start in? We eat so early this morning that I don't feel as if I had had anything."

Wallie had a pan of biscuit which he had intended for dinner but he concealed his reluctance and managed to say with a show of hospitality:

"Come right in; I'll get you something."

"First rate!" declared Mr. Reed with disheartening enthusiasm as Wallie placed the biscuit, butter, and molasses before him and his helpers. 118

Wallie hoped never again to see food—his, at least—disappear with such rapidity and in such quantities. When they had finished there was not a crumb left in the pan to tell what had been, and Rufus added to Wallie's feeling of apprehension by declaring gaily as he polished his mouth on the bandanna which he drew from his hip pocket with a flourish:

"Us Reeds are all hearty eaters. We can eat a sheep at a settin' when we're all together."

Biscuit-making was Wallie's special antipathy, and he now solaced himself with the thought that since they had eaten so many, they would eat less for dinner and he would have plenty of the fresh ones left for supper.

But disappointment was again his portion. Any hope that he might have cherished that once they were well filled up their appetites would diminish was dissipated by their performance at supper which surpassed that of dinner. The manner in which the biscuits vanished was nothing less than appalling. In addition to which, he fried ham twice for them when they hinted that they were still hungry after devouring everything before them.

He thought grimly that if their capacity for work was commensurate with their appetites, the well would be dug in twenty-four hours. But after observing them in "action" through the window he had a notion that he would have considerable more than that of their society. 119

As they all sprawled on his bunk in a torpor while he washed their supper dishes, he felt not only consternation but a dislike for the Reed family growing within him. Long after they were snoring in their blankets, he lay awake calculating how long his provisions would last at such a rate of depletion.

It did not sound so much of a "sporting proposition" as when Rufus had made his proposal, and Wallie sighed in the darkness as he thought that there seemed a million ways of making mistakes in Wyoming and this already had the earmarks of being one of them.

If they found water at the depth indicated by the divining rod, it might not so much matter, but there was the other contingency confronting him—feeding the Reeds indefinitely! There was nothing to do in the circumstances but await developments, so Wallie slept finally to dream that he had discarded the table for a trough to which the Reeds came when he went to the door and called: "Soo-ee! Soo-ee!"

The developments, however, were not of an encouraging nature. In addition to a capacity for food which placed the Reeds among the world's marvels they were of a slowness of movement Wallie never had seen equalled. Whenever he looked through the window, it was to see one or the other resting from the exertion of emptying a bucket of dirt or turning the windlass.

The well deepened by inches rather than feet while Wallie sweated, and his suspicion gradually became a conviction as he watched them that they were prolonging the work purposely. It seemed to be in the nature of a vacation for them with just enough exercise to keep them in condition. 120

His antipathy had become aversion, and Wallie sometimes caught himself with his fork poised in mid air, stopping to hate John, who munched and smacked beside him, or Will, who gobbled at the end of the table, or Rufus, shovelling opposite him. Again, as they came at a trot in response to his dinner call, he visualized himself braining them with the axe as they entered, and found pleasure in the picture.

If hatred generated a poison in the system as asserted, Wallie had a notion that his bite would have been as fatal as a cobra's.

His feeling reached a point where the well became of secondary importance. To find a way to

rid himself of the Reed family was in his thoughts constantly, but there seemed nothing to do but endure them somehow until they had sunk the sixty-eight feet, according to the contract, so he went on suffering and cooking with all the grace he could muster.

Yet as the hole deepened he could not help a certain feeling of pride in it. The sense of possession was a strong trait in him, and this was *his* well on *his* homestead. He always felt the same pleasant glow of ownership when he looked at his cabin and his fence, even at his dry cow and his locoed horses, and once he had a well with a curb over it! Wallie always expanded his chest a little as he thought of it. 121

He made frequent pilgrimages to the well, and as he hung over the edge and called down, Rufus always replied to his inquiry:

"I don't see any indications yet but I look for it to come with a gush when we do strike it."

When they reached sixty-eight feet and there was still no sign of moisture Wallie told Reed that he was willing to abrogate the contract.

"No, sir!" Rufus declared, vigorously. "I've staked my reputation on this well and I'm goin' to keep on diggin'."

At seventy-two feet Wallie was desperate. The hole was still as dry as punk, and boarding the Reeds was nothing less than ruinous; besides, he was nauseated with cooking for three persons whom he detested. They could not be insulted, he discovered, and were determined to make him abide by his contract to board them.

A solution of his problem came in the night with such force and suddenness that he rolled to and fro in his bunk, hugging himself in ecstasy. He longed for morning to put his idea into execution and when it came, for the first time since their arrival, he was delighted to see the Reeds seating themselves at the table.

There were potatoes, bacon, and pancakes, with coffee, for breakfast.

John dubiously eyed the transparent fluid in his cup which might as easily have been tea, and commented:

"You musta left out somethin'." 122

Will made a wry face after filling it with half a pancake:

"Gosh! But you throwed in the sody. They ain't fit fer a dog to eat. I can't go 'em."

With the intention of taking the taste of soda out of his mouth he filled it with potato, and immediately afterward he and John jammed in the doorway as they tried to get through it simultaneously.

Wiping their streaming eyes and gulping water, they said accusingly:

"There's a can of cayenne if there's a pinch in them pertaters!"

"And the bacon's burned to a cracklin'," observed Rufus.

"Perhaps you're getting tired of my cooking?" Wallie suggested, artlessly.

"I'm tired now if this is a spec'min of what you aim to feed us," John declared, suspiciously. "I bleeve you done it on purpose."

Wallie did not deny it.

"I'm holler to the toes and I can't work on an empty stummick," said Will, disgustedly.

Only Rufus went on eating as if it took more than a can of soda and a box of pepper to spoil his food for him and he explained as they wondered at it:

"I ain't no taste sence I had scarlet fever so it don't bother me."

"Ain't you goin' to git us somethin'?" John demanded, finally, seeing Wallie made no move to cook fresh food for them.

"No," Wallie answered, bluntly. "There's nothing in the contract which specifies the manner in which I shall prepare your food for you or the amount of it. Dinner will be worse than breakfast if you want the truth from me." 123

"I'm quittin'!" the two declared together.

"Now, look here, boys!" the old man expostulated. "We got to finish this job and you know the reason."

"Reason or no reason, I ain't starvin' myself to oblige nobody," John declared, vigorously, "and he's got the drop on us about the eatin'."

"Then go—the two of you!" Reed cried, angrily, "I'm goin' to stay—I ain't nothin' to complain of. Him and me," he nodded at Wallie, "can dig that well without ye."

Surly, and without speaking, the boys took their departure.

"They got bad dispositions—they take after their mother," Rufus remarked, looking after them. "With you to work the windlass and empty the bucket we'll make out without them till I pick up another crew somewhere."

"I am willing to accept my loss and quit," Wallie pleaded.

"Well, I ain't!" declared Rufus, unnecessarily bellicose. "A contract is a contract and I got you in

writin'."

Wallie could not deny it and subsided meekly, putting a ham on to boil with a cabbage while Rufus smoked until he was ready to assist him.

"If they's anything I like it's a good mess of ham and cabbage," he observed. 124

"I am glad to have found something to stimulate your appetite—it's worried me," replied Wallie. But his sarcasm was wasted on Rufus who arose, yawning, when Wallie indicated that he was ready.

Turning the windlass according to instructions, Wallie deposited Rufus in the bottom. Then at intervals he hoisted the bucket which Rufus filled in leisurely fashion, and emptied it, performing the two men's work easily.

Wallie went down occasionally to stoke the fire, and upon his return reported so favourably upon the ham and cabbage that Rufus took to consulting his watch rather frequently after ten-thirty.

"I'll quit at 'leven," he informed Wallie, "and that'll give you plenty of time to make a batch of biscuit and get dinner."

Wallie agreed with him that it was an excellent idea and promptly at eleven pulled up the bucket of dirt which was to be the last one.

When it did not come down immediately, Rufus called to him:

"Hi! I'm ready! Get a move on, for I'm starvin'."

There was no response at the opening.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded, impatiently.

The echo of his own voice answered him. Slightly alarmed he called louder:

"Macpherson! What's happened to ye?"

Still no answer.

Distinctly nervous, Rufus shouted at the top of his lungs for Wallie and the bucket, breaking into a perspiration at the continued silence. 125

Was he sick? Fainted? Dead? Many things that could occur came to Reed as he halloed futilely.

When one o'clock came he was hoarse from yelling and sick with fear at his predicament. His imagination painted gruesome pictures as he sweated. He saw himself weak and emaciated, dying slowly of starvation, collapsing, finally to lie undiscovered for days, weeks maybe. The memory of a field mouse that had fallen into a pit haunted him, its futile, frantic struggles to scale the steep sides, and he remembered that when he had passed that way again he had looked and found it dead in the bottom. He wished now that he had rescued it.

His suffering would be worse than that of the field mouse, for he had the intelligence to know that it was useless to struggle, that there was no hope for him unless someone came to his assistance. And merciful heavens, how hungry he was at only an hour past his dinner time; what would his sensations be at an hour past his supper time or at one o'clock to-morrow? He made a sound like someone groaning in a rain barrel as he thought of the ham and cabbage boiling dry in the cabin.

It made the back of his neck ache to watch the opening of his prison and the patch of blue sky, from which he prayed, vaguely, that a rope ladder might descend to rescue him. So he sat down finally with his back against the side of the well, his knees to his chin, and his head bowed, to await the inevitable. 126

When three o'clock came he could no longer doubt but that some accident had befallen Wallie. He had given up hope and endeavoured to resign himself to the fate awaiting him. Remorse mingled with the pangs of hunger and the cold fear of dying which was upon him. He wondered if this torturing end was a judgment sent upon him. He could scarcely doubt it.

But if by some miracle he got out—if the Lord saw fit to save him—he would be a different man. The Almighty had his word for it. Still sitting with his back against the wall and his cramped legs extended in front of him, Rufus rolled his eyes in supplication to the circular blue space above him and registered this vow with all the fervour and sincerity of which he was capable.

He moved uneasily. He was vaguely conscious of a dampness. He felt mechanically of that section of his overalls upon which he was sitting. He sprang to his feet with an exclamation and looked at the spot he had occupied. Moisture! A seepage! Water! His eyes grew big with horror. Even as he looked with dilating pupils he could see the earth darken with the spreading moisture. He had sunk too many wells not to know what it portended. Not only his days but his hours perhaps were numbered. If it was alkali, it would seep in slowly and prolong his agony, if it were not, it would come faster. He would die literally in a grave of his own digging.

He sat down again because his shaking legs refused to support him, and leaned his head against the side for the same reason. Rufus was no hero and there was no need to pretend to be, drowning by himself like a rat in a bucket. 127

As he leaned there, nauseated, he caught a sound, or thought so, which increased the sinking sensation, the feeling of collapse that overwhelmed him. He took off his hat and laid his ear against the wall to be sure of it. He had not been mistaken. His time on earth was shorter even

than he had imagined. The sound he had heard was the rumble of a subterranean current that would soon break through, flowing faster and faster as the opening enlarged until it came with a gush, finally. He could visualize it because he had seen it happen. It would rise to his ankles, his knees, his armpits, then cover him, and he would go to his final punishment by the last route he ever had pictured!

Rufus got on his knees in an attitude of prayer and supplication. The cracked remnants of his stentorian voice he used to the utmost advantage. No Methodist exhorter ever prayed with more passionate fervour, and he could not in a lifetime have kept the promises he made to his Maker if only He would release him from the trap into which he had gotten himself through his own evil doing.

"Lord, it was wrong for me to take that $150, but Canby tempted me. I needed the money or I don't know as I would have done it. If You'll jest get me out of this, Lord, all the rest of my life I'll do what I can for You! I'll go to church—I'll give to the heathen—I'll stop takin' Your name in vain, and say my prayers reg'lar! Oh, Lord! Once I stole a halter and I ask Your forgiveness. And 128
I left a neighbour's gate open on purpose so the stock got into his cornfield, but I ain't a bad man naturally, and this is the first real crookedness I ever done intentionally. Lord," he pleaded, "hear my humble prayer and send somebody!"

At the top of the well Wallie had his suspicions verified. So Canby had laid one more straw on the camel's back to break it!

Any compunctions of conscience he might have had for putting Rufus through such mental anguish vanished.

Leaning over the edge of the well, he called down cheerily:

"How you making it?"

Wallie's voice sounded like the voice of an angel to the prisoner. Relief and joy beyond description filled him. Hoarse as a bullfrog, he quavered:

"In Mercy's name let me out of here, Macpherson!"

"You're all right where you are, Rufus," Wallie answered. "When you're down there you are out of mischief."

"I'm hungry—I'm starvin'——"

"I don't know when I've eaten such a ham, tender, a delicious flavour, and just enough fat on it—I thought of you all through dinner, Rufus."

"We've struck water—a big flow—I can hear it—it'll break through any minute!"

"That's fine! Splendid!" 129

"You don't understand!" Rufus cried, desperately. "I'm liable to be drowned before you can h'ist me out of here. I can heard it roar—like a cloudburst!"

"Tell me about that deal between you and Canby," Wallie suggested.

"Let down the bucket!" Rufus chattered.

"Couldn't think of it. My eyeteeth are coming through and I don't like to interrupt 'em."

"I'll make a clean breast of it."

"I don't want to pollute my well unless I have to, but that's the only way you'll get out of there," Wallie told him, grimly.

"Canby's out to break you in one way and another. He thought there was no water over here and he paid me to talk you into diggin' for it. He seen me and my boys eat one day in the mess house and he said 'twould break the Bank of England to board us, so he wanted that clause in the contract, and after sixty-eight feet he paid us, besides a hundred and fifty dollars bonus. I done wrong, Mr. Macpherson, and I freely admit it!"

"And you like my cooking, Rufus? You like your food highly seasoned with plenty of soda in the pancakes and dough-goods?"

"Yes, Mr. Macpherson," whined Rufus. "I never complained about your cookin', I've nothin' against you personal, and I'll knock off somethin' on the bill for bringin' in water if you'll jest let down that——" A screech finished the sentence. Then:

"C-r-rr-ripes! She's busted through! She's comin' like a river!" 130

He jumped and clawed at the sides in his frenzy, and Wallie could see that Rufus well might do so, for even as Wallie looked the water rushed in and rose to Rufus's ankles, and before he could get the bucket over the edge and started downward it was well to his knees, bubbling faster with every second as the opening widened.

It was indeed time for action, and Wallie himself felt relief when the windlass spun and he heard the splash of the bucket in the bottom.

Rufus's shrieks urged haste as he began to wind laboriously, and with reason, for Rufus was heavy and though Wallie put forth all his strength it was no easy task single-handed, and Rufus rose so slowly that the water gained rapidly.

It became a race between Wallie and the subterranean stream that had been tapped, and he was panting and all but exhausted when Rufus rose to the surface. As he stepped from the

bucket the water reached the top, poured over the edge, and rushed down the "draw" to Skull Creek.

Wallie looked with bulging eyes for a moment and when he had recovered from his astonishment, he turned joyfully, his grudge forgotten, and shook Rufus's hand in congratulation.

A moment later his enthusiasm was tempered somewhat by the discovery that he had brought to the surface the strongest flow of salt water in the country!

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CHAPTER XIII

WIPED OUT

"It's shore wicked the way you curse, Old Timer," said Pinkey, reprovingly, as Wallie came up from the corral carrying an empty milk bucket in one hand and testing the other for broken bones. "I could hear you talkin' to Rastus from whur I'm settin'."

Wallie exhibited a row of bruised knuckles and replied fiercely:

"If ever I had an immortal soul I've lost it since that calf came! Between his bunting on one side and me milking on the other, the cow kicked the pail over."

"Quirl you a brownie and blow it threw your hackamore and forgit it," said Pinkey, soothingly, as he handed him a book of cigarette papers, with a sack of tobacco and made room for him on the door-sill. "I ain't used to cow milk anyhow; air-tight is better."

Wallie took the offering but remained standing, rolling it dextrously as he looked off at his eighty acres of spring wheat showing emerald green in the light of a July sunset.

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Pinkey eyed him critically—the tufts of hair which stood out like brushes through the cracks in what had once been a fine Panama hat, his ragged shirt, the faded overalls, the riding boots with heels so run over that he walked on the side of them.

Unconscious of the scrutiny, Wallie continued to gaze in a kind of holy ecstasy at his wheat-field until Pinkey ejaculated:

"My, but you've changed horrible!"

"How, changed?" Wallie asked, absently.

"You're so danged dirty! I should think you'd have to sand that shirt before you could hold it to git into it."

"I hardly ever take it off," said Wallie. "I've been so busy I haven't had time to think how I looked, but I hope now to have more leisure. Pinkey," impressively, "I believe my troubles are about over."

"Don't you think it!" replied Pinkey, bluntly. "A dry-farmer kin have six months of hard luck three times a year for four and five years, hand-runnin'. In fact, they ain't no limit to the time and the kind of things that kin happen to a dry-farmer."

"But what *could* happen now?" Wallie asked, startled.

"It's too clost to bed-time fer me to start in tellin' you," said Pinkey, drily.

"You're too pessimistic, Pinkey. I've prepared the soil and seed according to the instructions in the Farmers' Bulletins from Washington, and as a result I've got the finest stand of wheat around here—even Boise Bill said so when he rode by yesterday."

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"Rave on!" Pinkey looked at him mockingly. "It's pitiful to hear you. You read them bulletins awhile and you won't know nothin'. I seen a feller plant some corn his Congressman sent him and the ears was so hard the pigs used to stand and squeal in front of 'em. But of course I'm glad you're feelin' so lucky; I'm scairt of the feelin' myself for it makes me take chances and I always git a jolt for it."

Wallie's face was sober as he confided:

"If anything went wrong I'd be done for. I'm so near broke that I count my nickels like some old woman with her butter-and-egg money."

"I guessed it," said Pinkey, calmly, "from the rabbit fur I see layin' around the dooryard."

"Nearly everything has cost double what I thought it would, but if I get a good crop and the price of wheat holds up I'll come out a-flying."

"If nothin' happens," Pinkey supplemented.

"I want to show you one of those bulletins."

"I've seen plenty of 'em. You can't stop 'em once you git 'em started. Them, and pamphlets tellin' us why we went to war, has killed off many a mail-carrier that had to fight his way through blizzards, or be fined fer not deliverin' 'em on schedule. I ain't strong fer gover'mint literature."

Wallie stepped inside the cabin and brought out a pamphlet with an illustration of twelve horses hitched to a combined harvester and thresher, standing in a wheat-field of boundless acreage.

"There," he said, proudly, "you see my ambition!"

Pinkey regarded it, unexcited. 134

"That's a real nice picture," he said, finally, "but I thought you aimed to go in for cattle?"

"I did. But I've soured on them since that calf came and I've been milking."

Pinkey agreed heartily:

"I'd ruther 'swamp' fer a livin' than do low-down work like milkin'."

"When I come in at night, dog-tired and discouraged, I get out this picture and look at it and tell myself that some day I'll be driving twelve horses on a thresher. A chap thinks and does curious things when he has nobody but himself for company."

"That's me, too," said Pinkey, understandingly. "When I'm off alone huntin' stock, I ride fer hours wonderin' if it's so that you kin make booze out of a raisin."

"Let's walk out and look at the wheat," Wallie suggested.

Pinkey complied obligingly, though farming was an industry in which he took no interest.

Wallie's pride in his wheat was inordinate. He never could get over a feeling of astonishment that the bright green grain had come from seeds of his planting—that it was his—and he would reap the benefit. Nature was more wonderful than he had realized and he never before had appreciated her. He always forgot the heart-breaking and back-breaking labour when he stood as now, surveying with glowing face the even green carpet stretching out before him. In such moments he found his compensation for all he had gone through since he arrived in Wyoming, 135
and he smiled pityingly as he thought of the people at The Colonial, rocking placidly on the veranda.

"Did you ever see anything prettier?" Wallie demanded, his eyes shining.

"It's all right," Pinkey murmured, absently.

"You're not looking," Wallie said, sharply.

"I was watchin' them cattle."

"I don't see any."

Pinkey pointed, but Wallie could see nothing.

"If they got cows on Mars, I'll bet I could read the bran's," Pinkey boasted. "Can't you see them specks movin' off yonder?"

Wallie admitted he could not.

"It's cattle, and they act like somebody's drivin' 'em," Pinkey declared, positively. "Looks like it's too early to be movin' 'em to the mountain."

His curiosity satisfied, he gave the wheat his attention.

"It looks fine, Wallie," he said with sincerity.

Wallie could not resist crowing:

"You didn't think I'd last, did you? Miss Spenceley didn't, either. She'll be disappointed very likely when she hears I've succeeded."

"Don't cackle till you've laid your aig, Gentle Annie. When you've thrashed and sold your grain and got your money in the bank, then I'll help you. We'll git drunk if I have to rob a drug-store."

"You're always putting a damper on me. It was you who advised me to go in for dry-farming," Wallie reminded him. 136

"I figgered that if you lived through a year of it," Pinkey replied, candidly, "then almost anything else would look like a snap to you."

It was plain that in spite of his prospects Pinkey was not sanguine, but in this moment of his exultation failure seemed impossible to Wallie.

In various small ways Canby had tried to break him and had not succeeded. Boise Bill had prophesied that he would not "winter"—yet here he was with every reason to believe that he would also "summer." Wallie felt rather invincible as he reflected upon it, and the aurora borealis did not exceed in colour the outlook his fancy painted that evening.

"It's eight-thirty," Pinkey hinted. "When I set up till all hours I over-sleep in the morning."

Wallie came to earth reluctantly, and as he returned to the cabin he again permitted himself the luxury of pitying the folk of The Colonial who knew nothing of such rapturous moments in that stale, uneventful world which was so remote and different from the present that it was beginning to seem like a dream to him.

They had been asleep for an hour, more possibly, when Pinkey nudged Wallie violently.

"What's that huffin', do you reckon?"

Wallie awoke with a start and listened.

"Huffing" was the right word. Lying next to the logs, some large animal was breathing so heavily in Wallie's ear that it sounded like a bellows. He peered through a crack and saw something that looked like a mastodon in the darkness tugging at a sack he had used for chinking. It was not a horse and was too large for his Jersey. It flashed through his mind that it might be a roaming silvertip from the mountain. 137

Pinkey was out of the bunk at a bound and around the corner of the cabin, where his suspicions were instantly verified.

"It's a bull!" he shouted. "I thought it. Looks like a thousand head of cattle tramplin' down your wheat-field!"

Wallie turned sick. He could not move for a moment. His air-castles fell so hard he could almost hear them.

"Do you think they've been in long?" he asked, weakly.

"Can't tell till daylight." Pinkey was getting into his clothes hurriedly.

Wallie was now in the doorway and he could make out innumerable dark shapes browsing contentedly in his grain-field.

"What'll we do?" he asked, despairingly.

"Do?" replied Pinkey, savagely, tugging at his boot straps. "I'll send one whur the dogs won't bite him with every ca'tridge. We'll run a thousand dollars' worth of taller off the rest of 'em. Git into your clothes, Gentle Annie, and we'll smoke 'em up proper."

"I don't see how it could happen," said Wallie, his voice trembling. "The fence was good!"

"If it had been twenty feet high 'twould 'a' been all the same," Pinkey answered. "Them cattle was *drove* in." 138

"You mean——" Wallie's mouth opened.

"Shore—Canby! It come to my mind last night when I seen that bunch movin'. Pretty coarse work I call it, but he thought you was alone and wouldn't ketch on to it."

"He'll pay for this!" cried Wallie, chokingly.

"You can't do nothin' with him but deal him misery. He's got too much money and pull fer you. Do you know what I think's gnawin' on him?"

"My taking up a homestead——"

"That, too, but mostly because Helene dressed him down for sellin' that locoed team to you. He's jealous."

Even in his despair Wallie felt pleased that any one, especially Canby, should be jealous of him because of Helene Spenceley.

"He aims to marry her," Pinkey added. "I wisht you could beat his time and win yerself a home somehow. I don't think you got any show, but if I was you I'd take another turn around my saddle-horn and hang on. Whenever I kin," kindly, "I'll speak a good word for you. Throw your saddle on your horse and step, young feller. I'm gone!"

The faint hope which Wallie had nursed that the damage might not be so great as he had feared vanished with daylight. Not only was the grain trampled so the field looked like a race course, but panel after panel of the fence was down where the quaking-asp posts had snapped like lead-pencils. 139

As Pinkey and Wallie surveyed it in the early dawn Wallie's voice had a catch in it when he said finally:

"I guess I'm done farming. They made a good job of it."

"I'm no 'sharp' but it looks to me like some of that wheat would straighten up if it got a good wettin'."

Wallie said grimly:

"The only thing I forgot to buy when I was outfitting in Philadelphia was a rain-making apparatus."

"On the level," Pinkey declared, earnestly, "I bleeve we're goin' to have a shower—the clouds bankin' up over there in the northwest is what made me think of it."

Wallie's short laugh was cynical.

"It might drown somebody half a mile from me but it wouldn't settle the dust in my dooryard."

"I see you're gittin' homesteaditis," Pinkey commented, "but jest the same them clouds look like they meant business."

Wallie felt a glimmer of hope in spite of himself and he scrutinized the clouds closely.

"They do look black," he admitted. "But since it hasn't rained for two months it seems too much to expect that it will rain when I need it so desperately."

"It's liable to do anything. I've seen it snow here in August. A fur-lined linen duster is the only coat fer this country. I'll gamble it's goin' to do *somethin'*, but only the Big Boss knows what."

During breakfast they got up at intervals to look through the doorway, and while they washed dishes and tidied the cabin they watched the northwest anxiously. 140

"She's movin' right along," Pinkey reported. "It might be a stiddy rain, and then agin it might be a thunder-shower, though you don't often look for 'em in the morning."

The light grew subdued with the approaching storm and Wallie commented upon the coolness. Then he went out in the dooryard and stood a moment.

"The clouds are black as ink, and how still it is," he said, wonderingly. "There isn't a breath of air stirring."

Pinkey was sitting on the floor oiling his saddle when he tilted his head suddenly, and listened. He got up abruptly and stood in the doorway, concentrating all his faculties upon some sound of which he alone was cognizant, for Wallie was aware of nothing unusual save the uncanny stillness.

"Hear that?" The sharp note in Pinkey's voice filled Wallie with a nameless fear.

"No—what?"

"That roar—can't you hear it?"

Wallie listened intently.

"Yes—like a crashing—what is it?"

"Hail! And a terror! We've got to run the stock in." He was off with Wallie following and together they got the cow and horses under shelter with all the haste possible.

The sound preceded the storm by some little time, but each moment the roar and the crash of it grew louder and when it finally reached them Wallie gazed open-mouthed. 141

Accustomed to hail like tapioca, he never had seen anything like the big, jagged chunks of ice which struck the ground with such force that they bounded into the air again. Any one of them would have knocked a man unconscious. It seemed as if they would batter his roof in, and they came so thick that the stable and corral could be seen only indistinctly.

They both stood in the doorway, fascinated and awe-stricken.

"Hear it pound! This is the worst I've seen anywhur. You're licked, Gentle Annie."

"Yes," said Wallie with a white face. "This finishes me."

"You'll have to kiss your wheat good-bye. It'll be beat into the ground too hard ever to straighten." He laid an arm about Wallie's shoulder and there was a sympathy in his voice few had heard there:

"You've put up a good fight, old pardner, and even if you are counted out, it's no shame to you. You've done good fer a Scissor-bill, Gentle Annie."

Wallie clenched his hands and shook himself free of Pinkey's arm while his tense voice rang out above the clatter and crash of the storm:

"I'm not licked! I *won't* be licked! *I'm going to stick, somehow!* And what's more," he turned to Pinkey fiercely, "if you don't stop calling me 'Gentle Annie,' I'll knock your block off!"

Pinkey looked at him with his pale, humorous eyes and beamed approvingly.

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CHAPTER XIV

LIFTING A CACHE

The Prouty barber lathering the face of a customer, after the manner of a man whitewashing a chicken coop, paused on an upward stroke to listen. Then he stepped to the door, looked down the street, and nodded in confirmation. After which he returned, laid down his brush, and pinned on a nickel badge, which act transformed him into the town constable.

The patron in the chair, a travelling salesman, watched the pantomime with interest.

"One moment, please." The barber-officer excused himself and stepped out to the edge of the sidewalk, where he awaited the approach of a pair on horseback who were making the welkin ring with a time-honoured ballad of the country:

I'm a howler from the prairies of the West.

If you want to die with terror, look at me.
I'm chain-lightnin'—

As they came abreast the constable held out his hand and the pair automatically laid six-shooters in it and went on without stopping in their song:

—if I ain't, may I be blessed.
I'm a snorter of the boundless, lone prairee.

Other citizens than the barber recognized the voices, and frowned or smiled as happened, among whom was Mr. Tucker repairing a sofa in the rear of his "Second-Hand Store." 143

Returning, the constable laid the six-shooters on the shelf among the shaving mugs and removed his badge.

"Who's that?" inquired the patron, since the barber offered no explanation.

"Oh, them toughs—'Gentle Annie' Macpherson and 'Pinkey' Fripp," was the answer in a wearied tone. "I hate to see 'em come to town."

The pair continued to warble on their way to the livery barn on a side street:

I'm the double-jawed hyena from the East.
I'm the blazing, bloody blizzard of the States.
I'm the celebrated slugger—

The song stopped as Pinkey asked:

"Shall we work together or separate?"

To this mysterious question Wallie replied:

"Let's try it together first."

After attending personally to the matter of feeding their horses oats, the two set forth with the air of having a definite purpose.

Their subsequent actions confirmed it, for they approached divers persons of their acquaintance as if they had business of a confidential nature. The invariable result of these mysterious negotiations, however, was a negative shake of the head. 144

After another obvious failure Pinkey said gloomily:

"If I put in half the time and thought trying to be a Senator that I do figgerin' how to git a bottle, I'd be elected."

Wallie replied hopefully:

"Something may turn up yet."

"I'd lift a cache from a preacher! I'd steal booze off my blind aunt! I'd——"

"We'll try some more 'prospects' before we give up. It's many months since I've gone out of town sober and I don't like to establish a precedent. I'm superstitious about things like that," said Wallie.

At this unquestionably psychological moment Mr. Tucker beckoned them from his doorway. They responded with such alacrity that their gait approached a trot, although they had no particular reason to believe that it was his intention to offer them a drink. It was merely a hope born of their thirst.

Their reputation was such, however, that any one who wished to demonstrate his friendship invariably evidenced it in this way, taking care, in violation of the ethics of bygone days, to do the pouring himself.

Mr. Tucker winked elaborately when he invited them in, and Wallie and Pinkey exchanged eloquent looks as they followed him to his Land Office in the rear of the store.

Inside, he locked the door and lowered the shade of the single window which looked out on an areaway. No explanation was necessary as he took a hatchet and pried up a plank. This accomplished, he reached under the floor and produced a tin cup and a two-gallon jug. 145

He filled it with a fluid of an unfamiliar shade and passed it to Pinkey, who smelled it and declared that he could drink anything that was wet. Wallie watched him eagerly as it gurgled down his throat.

"Well?" Mr. Tucker waited expectantly for the verdict.

Pinkey wiped his mouth.

"Another like that and I could watch my mother go down for the third time and laugh!"

"Where did you get it?" Wallie in turn emptied the cup and passed it back.

"S-ss-sh!" Mr. Tucker looked warningly at the door. "I made it myself—brown sugar and raisins. You like it then?"

"If I had about 'four fingers' in a wash-tub every half hour—— What would you hold a quart of that at?" Pinkey leaned over the opening in the floor and sniffed.

Mr. Tucker hastily replaced the plank and declared:

"Oh, I wouldn't dast! I jest keep a little on hand for my particular friends that I can trust. By the way, Mr. Macpherson, what are you goin' to do with that homestead you took up?"

"Hold it. Why?"

"I thought I might run across a buyer sometime and I wondered what you asked."

A hardness came into Wallie's face and Tucker added: 146

"I wasn't goin' to charge you any commission—you've had bad luck and——"

"You're the seventh philanthropist that's wanted to sell that place in my behalf for about $400, because he was sorry for me," Wallie interrupted, drily. "You tell Canby that when he makes me a decent offer I'll consider it."

"No offence—no offence, I hope?" Tucker protested.

"Oh, no." Wallie shrugged his shoulder. "Only don't keep getting me mixed with the chap that took up that homestead. I've had my eyeteeth cut."

Extending an invitation to call and quench their thirsts with his raisinade when next they came to town, Tucker unlocked the door.

After the two had wormed their way through the bureaus and stoves and were once more in the street, they turned and gave each other a long, inquiring look.

"Pink," demanded Wallie, solemnly, "did you smell anything when he raised that plank?"

"Did I smell anything! Didn't you see me sniff? That joker has got a cache of the real stuff and he gave us raisinade! I couldn't git an answer from a barrel of that. He couldn't have insulted us worse if he'd slapped our faces."

"A man ought to be punished that would do a wicked thing like that."

"You've said somethin', Gentle Annie."

The two looked at each other in an understanding that was beautiful and complete. 147

The behaviour of the visitors was nearly too good to be true—it was so exemplary, in fact, as to be suspicious, and acting upon this theory, the barber closed his shop early, pinned on his badge of office, and followed them about. But when at ten o'clock they had broken nothing, quarrelled with nobody, and drunk only an incredible quantity of soda pop, he commenced to think he had been wrong.

At eleven, when they were still in a pool-hall playing "solo" for a cent a chip, he decided to go home. There he confided to his wife that no more striking example of the benefits of prohibition had come under his observation than the conduct of this notorious pair who, when sober, were well mannered and docile as lambs.

It was twelve or thereabouts when two figures crept stealthily up the alley behind Mr. Tucker's Second-Hand Store and raised the window looking out on the areaway. As noiselessly as trained burglars they pried up the plank and investigated by the light of a match.

"Well, what do you think of that!"

"I feel like somebody had died and left me a million dollars!" said Pinkey in an awed tone, reaching for a tin cup. "I didn't think they was anybody in the world as mean as Tucker."

"You mustn't get too much," Wallie admonished, noting the size of the drink Pinkey was pouring for himself.

"I've never had too much. I may have had enough, but never too much," Pinkey grinned. "I don't take no int'rest in startin' less'n a quart." 148

"I hope he'll have the decency to be ashamed of himself when he finds out we know what he did to us. I shouldn't think he'd want to look us in the face," Wallie declared, virtuously.

"He won't git a chanst to look in my face for some time to come if we kin lift this cache."

Together they filled the grain sack they had brought and carefully replaced the plank, then, staggering under the weight of the load, made their way to a gulch, buried the sack, and marked the hiding-place with a stone. With a righteous sense of having acted as instruments of Providence in punishing selfishness, they returned to town to follow such whims as seized them under the stimulus of a bottle of Mr. Tucker's excellent Bourbon.

The constable had been asleep for hours when a yell—a series of yells—made him sit up. He listened a moment, then with a sigh of resignation got up, dressed, and took the key of the calaboose from its nail by the kitchen sink.

"I'll lock 'em up and be right back," he said to his sleepy wife, who seemed to know whom he meant too well to ask.

Under the arc light in front of the Prouty House he found them doing the Indian "stomp" dance to the delight of the guests who were leaning from their windows to applaud.

"Ain't you two ashamed of yerselves?" the constable demanded, scandalized—referring to the fact that Pinkey and Wallie had divested themselves of their trousers and boots and were dancing in their stocking feet. 149

"Ashamed?" Wallie asked, impudently. "Where have I heard that word?"

"Who sold liquor to you two?"

"I ate a raisin and it fermented," Wallie replied, pertly.

"Where's your clothes?" To Pinkey.

"How'sh I know?"

"You two ought to be ordered to keep out of town. You're pests. Come along!"

"Jus' waitin' fer you t'put us t'bed," said Pinkey, cheerfully.

The two lurched beside the constable to the calaboose, where they dropped down on the hard pads and temporarily passed out.

The sun was shining in Wallie's face when he awoke and realized where he was. He and Pinkey had been there too many times before not to know. As he lay reading the pencilled messages and criticisms of the accommodation left on the walls by other occupants he subconsciously marvelled at himself that he should have no particular feeling of shame at finding himself in a cell.

He was aware that it was accepted as a fact that he had gone to the bad. He had been penurious as a miser until he had saved enough from his wages as a common cowhand to buy his homestead outright from the State. After that he had never saved a cent, on the contrary, he was usually overdrawn. He gambled, and lost no opportunity to get drunk, since he calculated that he got more entertainment for his money out of that than anything else, even at the "bootlegging" price of $20 per quart which prevailed. 150

So he had drifted, learning in the meantime under Pinkey's tutelage to ride and shoot and handle a rope with the best of them. Pinkey had left the Spenceley ranch and they were both employed now by the same cattleman.

He rarely saw Helene, in consequence, but upon the few occasions they had met in Prouty she had made him realize that she knew his reputation and disapproved of it. In the East she had mocked him for his inoffensiveness, now she criticized him for the opposite. It was plain, he thought disconsolately, that he could not please her, yet it seemed to make no difference in his own feelings for her.

His face reddened as he recalled the boasts he had made upon several occasions and how far he had fallen short of fulfilling them. He was going to "show" them, and now all he had to offer in evidence was 160 acres gone to weeds and grasshoppers, his saddle, and the clothes he stood in.

It was not often that Wallie stopped to take stock, for it was an uncomfortable process, but his failure seemed to thrust itself upon him this morning. He was glad when Pinkey's heavy breathing ceased in the cell adjoining and he began to grumble.

"Looks like a town the size of Prouty would have a decent jail in it," he said, crossly. "They go and throw every Tom, Dick, and Harry in this here cell, and some buckaroo has half tore up the mattress." 151

"You can't have your private cell, you know," Wallie suggested.

"I've paid enough in fines to build a cooler the size of this one, and looks like I got a little somethin' comin' to me."

"I suppose they don't take that view of it," said Wallie, "but you might speak to the Judge this morning."

After a time Pinkey asked, yawning:

"What did we do last night? Was we fightin'?"

"I don't know—I haven't thought about it."

"I guess the constable will mention it," Pinkey observed, drily. "He does, generally."

"Let's make a circle and go and have a look at my place," Wallie suggested. "It's not far out of the way and we might pick up a few strays in that country."

Pinkey agreed amiably and added:

"You'll prob'ly have the blues for a week after."

The key turning in the lock interrupted the conversation.

"You two birds get up. Court is goin' to set in about twenty minutes." The constable eyed them coldly through the grating.

"Where's my clothes?" Pinkey demanded, looking at the Law accusingly.

"How should I know?"

"I ain't no more pants than a rabbit!" Pinkey declared, astonished. 152

"Nor I!" said Wallie.

"You got all the clothes you had on when I put you here."

"How kin we go to court?"

"'Tain't fur."

"Everybody'll look at us," Pinkey protested.

The constable retorted callously:

"Won't many more see you than saw you last night doin' the stomp dance in Main Street."

"Did we do that?" Pinkey asked, startled.

"Sure—right in front of the Prouty House, and Helene Spenceley and a lot of folks was lookin' out of the windows."

Wallie sat down on the edge of his cot weakly. That settled it! He doubted if she would ever speak to him.

"I've got customers waitin'," urged the constable, impatiently. "Wrap a soogan around you and step lively."

There was nothing to do but obey, in the circumstances, so the shame-faced pair walked the short block to a hardware store in the rear of which the Justice of the Peace was at his desk to receive them.

"Ten dollars apiece," he said, without looking up from his writing. "And half an hour to get out of town."

Pinkey and Wallie looked at each other.

"The fact is, Your Honour," said the latter, ingratiatingly, "we have mislaid our trousers and left our money in the pockets. If you would be so kind as to loan us each a ten-spot until we have wages coming we shall feel greatly indebted to you." 153

The Court vouchsafed a glance at them. Showing no surprise at their unusual costume, he said as he fumbled in the pocket of his waistcoat:

"Such gall as yours should not go unrewarded. You pay your debts, and that's all the good I know of either of you. Now clear out—and if you show up for a month the officer here is to arrest you."

He transferred two banknotes to the desk-drawer and went on with his scratching.

"Gosh!" Pinkey lamented, as they stood outside clutching their quilts, "I wisht I knowed whur to locate them mackinaws. I got 'em in Lethbridge before I went to the army, and I think the world of 'em. I don't like 'poor-boys-serge,' but I guess I'll have to come to it, since I'm busted."

"What's that?" Wallie asked, curiously.

"Denim," Pinkey explained, "overalls. That makes me think of a song a feller wrote up:

> "A Texas boy in a Northern clime,
> With a pair of brown hands and a thin little dime.
> The southeast side of his overalls out—
> *Yip-yip, I'm freezin' to death*!"

"That's a swell song," Pinkey went on enthusiastically. "I wish I could think of the rest of it."

"Don't overtax your brain—I've heard plenty. Let's cut down the alley and in the back way of the Emporium. Oh!" He gripped his quilt in sudden panic and looked for a hiding-place. Nothing better than a telegraph pole offered. He stepped behind it as Helene Spenceley passed in Canby's roadster. 154

"Did she see me?"

"Shore she saw you. You'd oughta seen the way she looked at you."

Wallie, who was too mortified and miserable for words over the incident, declared he meant never again to come to town and make a fool of himself.

"I know how you feel, but you'll git over it," said Pinkey, sympathetically. "It's nothin' to worry about, for I doubt if you ever had any show anyhow."

Canby laughed disagreeably after they had passed the two on the sidewalk.

"That Montgomery-Ward cowpuncher has been drunk again, evidently," he commented.

"I wouldn't call him that. I'm told he can rope and ride with any of them."

He looked at her quickly.

"You seem to keep track of him."

She replied bluntly:

"He interests me."

"Why?" curtly. Canby looked malicious as he added: "He's a fizzle."

"He'll get his second wind some day and surprise you."

"He will?" Canby replied, curtly. "What makes you think it?"

"His aunt is a rich woman, and he could go limping back if he wanted to; besides, he has what I call the 'makings'." 155

"He should feel flattered by your confidence in him," he answered, uncomfortably.

"He doesn't know it."

Canby said no more, but it passed through his mind that Wallie would not, either, if there was a way for him to prevent it.

CHAPTER XV

COLLECTING A BAD DEBT

Wallie and Pinkey picked up a few stray cattle on their way to the homestead on Skull Creek. It was late in the afternoon when they reached it, so they decided to spend the night there. The corral was down in places, but with a little work it was repaired sufficiently to hold the cattle they put in it.

As Pinkey had prophesied, it gave Wallie the "blues" to look at the place where he had worked so hard and from which he had hoped so much. He felt heartsick as he saw the broken fence-posts and tangled wire, the weeds growing in his wheat-field, the broken window-panes, and the wreckage inside his cabin.

The door had been left open and the range stock had gone in for shelter, while the rats and mice and chipmunks had taken possession. Such of his cooking utensils as remained had been used and left unwashed, and the stove was partially demolished.

The only thing which remained as he had left it was the stream of salt water that had cut a deeper channel for itself but had not diminished in volume.

"I'll go over to Canby's and hit the cook for some grub and be back pronto," said Pinkey.

Wallie nodded. He was in no mood for conversation, for the realization of his failure was strong upon him, and he could not rid himself of the mortification he felt at having made a spectacle of himself before Helene Spenceley.

The future looked utterly hopeless. Without capital there seemed nothing to do but go on indefinitely working for wages. His aunt had sent word in a roundabout way that if he wished to come back she would receive him, but this he did not even consider.

Sitting on what was left of his doorstep, he awaited Pinkey's return, in an attitude of such dejection that that person commented upon it jocosely. He rode up finally with a banana in each hip pocket that he had pilfered from the cook, together with four doughnuts in the crown of his hat and a cake in his shirt front.

"I tried to get away with a pie, but it was too soft to carry, so I put a handful of salt under the crust and set it back," he said, as he disgorged his plunder. "He charged me for the bread and meat, and wouldn't let me have no butter! It's fellers like the Canby outfit that spoil a country."

When they had eaten, they spread their saddle-blankets in the dooryard and with their saddles for pillows covered themselves with the slickers they carried and so slept soundly until morning.

After breakfast, as they were leading their horses up the weed-grown path to the cabin to saddle them, Pinkey's eye rested on the flowing salt water stream.

"Can you beat it!" he commented. "Good for nuthin' but a bathin' pool fer dudes——"

Wallie stopped in the path and looked at the friend of his bosom.

"Pink," he said, solemnly, "why wouldn't this make a dude ranch?"

Pinkey stared back at him.

"Gentle Annie," he replied, finally, "I told you long ago you was good fer somethin' if we could jest hit on it. You're a born duder!"

"Thanks! I feel as complimented as the fellow in the Passion Play who is cast for Judas Iscariot."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about—I've only seen a few draymas—but you got the looks and the figger and a way about you that I've noticed takes with women. You'd make a great dude wrangler. Bleeve me, you've thought of somethin'!"

"I wasn't thinking of myself, but of the place here—the scenery—the climate—fishing in the mountains—hunting in season——"

"*And*"—Pinkey interrupted—"the strongest stream of salt water in the state fer mineral baths, with the Yellowstone Park in your front dooryard!"

In his enthusiasm he pounded Wallie on the back.

"It *would* be an asset, having the Park so close," the latter agreed, his eyes shining.

Pinkey went on:

"You kin run dudes whur you can't run sheep or cattle. What you need is *room*—and we're there with the room. Fresh air, grasshoppers, views any way you look—why, man, you got everything!"

"Except money," said Wallie, suddenly.

Pinkey's face lengthened.

"I hadn't thought of that."

For an instant they felt crushed. It was such a precipitous descent to earth after their flight.

They walked to the cabin, and saddled in a silence which was broken finally by Pinkey, who said vindictively:

"I'd rob a train to git money enough to turn fifty head of dudes loose on Canby. He'd be mad enough to bite himself. If he could help it he wouldn't have a neighbour within a hundred miles."

Wallie's thoughts were bitter as he remembered the many injuries he had suffered at Canby's hands. It was a subject upon which he dared not trust himself to talk—it stirred him too much, although he had long ago decided that since he was powerless to retaliate there was nothing to do but take his medicine. As he made no response, Pinkey continued while he tightened the cinch:

"If you could make a dude ranch out o' this and worry him enough, he'd give you about any price you asked, to quit."

"I'd ask plenty," Wallie replied, grimly, "but it's no use to talk."

"It wouldn't trouble my conscience none if I hazed a bunch of his horses over the line, but horses are so cheap now that it wouldn't pay to take the chance." 160

"There's the Prouty Bank," Wallie suggested, ironically.

"Them bullet-proof screens have made cashiers too hard to git at." Pinkey spoke in an authoritative tone.

"Why don't you marry some rich widow and get us a stake?"

"Aw-w!" Resentment and disgust were in Pinkey's voice. "I'd steal washings off of clothes lines first." He added: "I don't like them jokes."

"I didn't know you were touchy, Pink."

"Everybody's touchy," Pinkey replied, sagely, "if you hit 'em on the right spot. But, do you know, this dude ranch sticks in my mind, and I can't git it out."

"We might as well let it drop. We haven't the money, so we're wasting our breath. We'll lose the jobs we've got if we don't get about our business. Let's leave the cattle in the corral and scout a little through the hills—it'll save us another trip. I don't want to come here again soon—it hurts too much."

Pinkey agreed, and they rode gloomily along the creek bank looking for a ford. A few hot days had taken off the heavy snows in the mountains so quickly that the stream was running swift and deep.

"That's treach'rous water," Pinkey observed. "They's boulders in there as big as a house where it looks all smooth on top. I know a place about a mile or so where I think it'll be safe."

They had ridden nearly that distance when, simultaneously, they pulled their horses up. 161

"Look at that crazy fool!" Pinkey ejaculated, aghast.

"It's—Canby!" Wallie exclaimed.

"Nobody else! Watch him," incredulously, "tryin' to quirt his horse across the crick!"

"Isn't it the ford?"

"I should say not! It looks like the place but it ain't—he's mixed—he'll be in a jack-pot quick if he don't back out. Onct his horse stumbles it'll never git its feet in there."

They rode close enough to hear Canby cursing as he whipped.

"Look at him punish the poor brute! See him use that quirt and cut him with his spurs! Say, that makes me sick to see a good horse abused!" Pinkey cried, indignantly.

Wallie said nothing but watched with hard, narrowed eyes.

"I s'pose I'd oughta yell and warn him," finally Pinkey said, reluctantly.

"You let out a yip and I'll slat you across the face!"

Pinkey stared at the words—at Wallie's voice—at an expression he never had seen before.

"I know how you feel, but it's pure murder to let him git into that crick."

"Will you shut up?" Wallie looked at him with steely eyes, and there was a glint in them that silenced Pink.

He waited, wonderingly, to see what it all meant. The battle between man and horse continued while they watched from the high bank. In terrified protest the animal snorted, reared, whirled, while the rider plied the quirt mercilessly and spurred. Finally the sting of leather, the pain of sharp steel, and the stronger will won out, and the trembling horse commenced to take the water. 162

Pinkey muttered, as, fascinated, he looked on:

"I've no idea that he knows enough to quit his horse on the down-stream side. He'll wash under, tangle up, and be drowned before we get a chanst to snake him out. He's a gone goslin' right

now."

Cautiously, a few inches to a step, the horse advanced.

"There! He's in the boulders! Watch him flounder! Look at him slip—he's hit the current! Good-night—he's down—no, he's goin' to ketch himself! Watch him fight! Good ol' horse—good ol' horse!" Pinkey was beside himself with excitement now. "He's lost his feet—he's swimmin'—strikin' out for the shore—too swift, and the fool don't know enough to give him his head!"

They followed along the bank as the current swept horse and rider down.

"He swims too high—he's playin' out—there's so much mud he'll choke up quick. It'll soon be over now." Pinkey's face wore a queer, half-frightened grin. "Fifty yards more and——"

Wallie commenced to uncoil his saddle rope.

"You goin' to drag him out?"

Wallie made no answer but touched his horse and galloped until he was ahead of Canby and the drowning horse. Making a megaphone of his hands he yelled. 163

Canby lifted his wild eyes to the bank.

"Throw me a rope!" he shrieked.

A slow, tantalizing smile came to Wallie's face. Very distinctly he called back:

"How much damages will you give me for driving your cattle into my wheat?"

"Not a damn cent!"

The rope Wallie had been swinging about his head to test the loop promptly dropped.

The horse was swimming lower at every stroke.

"Five hundred!" Fear and rage were in Canby's choking voice.

"Put another cipher on that to cover my mental anguish!" Wallie mocked.

The horse was exhausting itself rapidly with its efforts merely to keep its nose out, making no further attempt to swim toward the bank. Canby slapped water in its face in the hope of turning it, but it was too late. Its breathing could be heard plainly and its distended nostrils were blood-red.

Many things passed swiftly through Canby's calculating mind in the few seconds that remained for him to decide.

His boots had filled and he was soaked to the waist; he knew that if he left the horse and swam for it he had small chance of success. He was not a strong swimmer at best, and even if he managed to get to the bank its sides were too high and steep for him to climb out without assistance. He looked at Wallie's implacable face, but he saw no weakening there, it was a 164 matter of a moment more when the horse would go under and come up feet first.

"Throw me the rope!" His voice vibrating with chagrin and rage admitted his defeat.

Wallie measured the distance with his eye, adjusted the loop, and as it cut the air above his head Canby held up his hands to catch it when it dropped.

"Good work!" Pinkey cried as it shot out and hit its mark. "You never made a better throw than that, old kid!"

Canby slipped the loop under his arm and, as he took his feet from the stirrups, shouted for them to tighten up.

The horse, relieved of his weight, took heart and struck out for the opposite bank, where a little dirt slide enabled it to scramble out. Shaking and dripping, at last it stood still at the top, while Canby, a dead weight, was dragged over the edge to dry land.

There was as much fury as relief in his face when he stood up and started to loosen the rope around his chest.

Wallie stopped him with a gesture.

"No, you don't! I take no chances when I play with crooks. You make out that check."

"Isn't my word good?" Canby demanded.

"Not so far as I can throw my horse."

"I haven't a check-book," he lied.

"Get it, Pink."

The check-book and indelible pencil which every sheep and cattleman carries were in the inside 165 pocket of his coat.

"Fill it out." Wallie passed the pencil to him. "And don't leave off a cipher by mistake."

"I refuse to be coerced!" Canby declared, defiantly. "I'll keep my word, but I didn't say when."

"*I'm* setting the date," Wallie replied, coolly, "and that's just four minutes and a half from *now*," taking out his watch. "If I haven't got the check by then you'll pay for those locoed horses, too, or I'll throw you back."

"You don't dare!"

"When you haven't anything to lose you'll do considerable to get 'hunks' and that's my fix. Besides, I need the money. Two minutes left—think fast."

"You'll sweat blood for this before I'm through with you!"

"Time's up—yes or no?"

Canby gritted his teeth.

Silently Wallie passed the end of the rope to Pinkey, who understood and took a turn around his saddle-horn.

Before he could resist Wallie gave Canby a shove and pushed him over the bank. He struck the water with a splash and went out of sight. Immediately the well-trained cow-horse felt the strain it backed up and held the rope taut.

Canby came to the surface, then dangled as the horse continued to hold off. As he strangled with the water he had taken in his lungs and struggled frantically in the air, it seemed beyond human belief that it was he, Canby—Canby the all-powerful—in such a plight! 166

"Pay out a little rope, Pinkey. Give the fish more line."

Once again Canby dropped back and came up gasping, coughing, fighting for his breath.

A little anxiously Pinkey asked:

"Don't you bleeve he's had enough?"

"Too much scrap left in him yet," Wallie replied, unmoved.

Canby shrieked at last: "I'll pay! Let me up!"

"You mean that?"

"Good God—YES!"

Pinkey led the horse back and in no gentle fashion Canby was pulled over the edge for the second time, where he lay limp. When his breath and strength returned he struggled to his feet.

"If you go in again you won't come up." Wallie's voice was metallic and, searching his face, Canby saw that he meant exactly what he said.

His hand was shaking as he filled out the check, using the saddle for a desk.

Wallie looked at it and handed it back.

"You forgot the horses—six hundred is what they cost."

Canby started to protest, then, with a crafty look which, fleeting as it was, Wallie caught, he made out a new check for fifty-six hundred.

Turning to Pinkey, Canby said: "I'll give you a hundred and fifty for your horse." 167

Pinkey hesitated. It was a hundred more than it was worth.

"I guess not." Wallie's voice was curt. "I'm clairvoyant, Canby, and I've read your thought. You can't stop payment by telephone, because Pink is going to close-herd you right here until I ride to Prouty and get this cashed."

Pinkey's jaw dropped.

"By the long-horn toads of Texas! I wouldn't 'a' thought of that in a month!"

As Wallie put his foot into the stirrup for the first time his face relaxed. He looked over his shoulder and grinned:

"If you listen, maybe you'll hear something making a noise like a dude ranch, Pink."

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CHAPTER XVI

THE EXODUS

Never had Mr. Cone put in such a summer! The lines in his forehead looked as if they had been made with a harrow and there were times when his eyes had the expression of a hunted animal. Pacifying disgruntled guests was now as much a part of the daily routine as making out the menus. In the halcyon days when a guest had a complaint, he made it aside, delicately, as a suggestion. Now he made a point of dressing Mr. Cone down publicly. In truth, baiting the landlord seemed to be in the nature of a recreation with the guests of The Colonial. Threats to leave were of common occurrence, and Mr. Cone longed to be once more in a position to tell them calmly to use their own pleasure in the matter. But what with high taxes, excessive wages,

extensive improvements still to be paid for, prudence kept him silent.

The only way in which he could explain the metamorphosis was that the guests were imbued with the spirit of discontent that prevailed throughout the world in the years following the war. The theory did not make his position easier, however, nor alter the fact that he all but fell to trembling when a patron approached to leave his key or get a drink of ice water at the cooler. 169

As he lay awake wondering what next they would find to complain of, he framed splendid answers, dignified yet stinging, but when the time came to use them he remembered his expenses and his courage always failed him.

In his heart, he felt that this could not go on forever—some day someone would speak just the right word and he would surprise them. He had come to listen with comparative equanimity to the statement that his hotel was badly managed, the service poor, and the food the worst served on the beach-front, but there was the very strong possibility that someone would inadvertently touch a sensitive nerve and he would "fly off the handle." When that happened, Mr. Cone dreaded the outcome.

Such were conditions at The Colonial when the folders arrived announcing the opening of the Lolabama Ranch to tourists—the name meaning Happy Wigwam. Messrs. Macpherson and Fripp, it stated, were booking guests for the remainder of the season and urged those who had a taste for the Great Outdoors to consider what they had to offer. The folders created a sensation. They came in the morning after a night of excessive heat and humidity. The guests found them in their mail when, fishy-eyed and irritable, they went in to breakfast.

A new elevator boy who had jarred them by the violence of his stops had not improved their tempers, therefore few of them failed to comment to Mr. Cone upon the increasing wretchedness of the service. 170

While they fanned themselves and prophesied a day that was going to be a "scorcher" they read of a country where the nights were so cool that blankets were necessary, where the air was so invigorating that langour was unheard of, with such a variety of scenery that the eye never wearied. There were salt baths that made the old young again, big game in the mountains for the adventurous, fishing, with bait in untold quantities, saddle-horses for equestrians, innumerable walks for pedestrians, an excellent table provided with the best the market offered, and, finally, a tour of the Yellowstone Park under the personal guidance of the hosts of The Lolabama in a stage-coach drawn by four horses, by motor, or on horseback as suited their pleasure.

Small wonder that life on The Colonial veranda suddenly looked tame after reading the folder and studying the pictures! Their discontent took the form of an increasing desire to nag Mr. Cone. Vaguely they held him responsible for the heat, the humidity, the monotony of the ocean, and their loss of appetite due to lack of exercise.

On an impulse, Mr. Henry Appel, after consulting with his wife, got up abruptly and went inside for the purpose of having a plain talk with Mr. Cone.

Mr. Cone, who was making out the weekly bills, pretended not to see him until he cleared his throat and said very distinctly:

"May I have your attention, Mr. Cone?" 171

Quaking, Mr. Cone stepped forward briskly and apologized.

Ignoring the apology, Mr. Appel began impressively:

"You cannot have failed to see, Mr. Cone, that my wife and I have been thoroughly dissatisfied this summer, as we have been at no great pains to conceal it. We have been coming here for twenty-two seasons, but we feel that we cannot put up with things any longer and are hereby giving you notice that next Thursday our room will be at your disposal."

"Is it anything in particular—anything which I can remedy? Perhaps you will reconsider." Mr. Cone pleaded, looking from one to the other.

"Last night—at dinner"—Mrs. Appel eyed him accusingly—"I found—an eyewinker—in the hard sauce."

Mr. Cone stammered:

"I'm v-very sorry—it was not my eyewinker—such things will happen—I will speak to the pastry cook and ask him to be careful——"

Mr. Budlong, who had come in to lay his grievance before Mr. Cone, interrupted:

"For two mornings Mrs. Budlong and myself have been awakened by the man with the vacuum cleaner who has wanted to work in our room before we were out of it. I should judge," he said, acidly, "that you recruit your servants from the Home for the Feeble-minded, and, personally, I am sick of it!"

"It is almost impossible to get competent help," Mr. Cone protested. "The man shall be discharged and I promise you no further annoyance." 172

Mr. Budlong, nudged by his wife, was not to be placated.

"Our week is up Monday, and we are leaving."

Miss Mattie Gaskett, encouraged by the conversation to which she had listened, declared with asperity:

"There has been fuzz under my bed for exactly one week, Mr. Cone, and I have not called the maid's attention to it because I wished to see how long it would remain there. I have no reason to believe that it will be removed this summer. I am sure it is not necessary to tell you that such filth is unsanitary. I have decided that you can make out my bill at your earliest convenience."

"But, Miss Gaskett——"

She ignored the protesting hand which Mr. Cone, panic-stricken, extended, and made way for a widow from Baltimore, who informed him that her faucet dripped and her rocking-chair squeaked, and since no attention had been paid to her complaints she was making other arrangements.

It was useless for Mr. Cone to explain that with the plumbers striking for living wages and the furniture repairers behind with their work, it had been impossible to attend immediately to these matters.

Ruin confronted Mr. Cone as he argued and begged them not to act hastily. But something of the mob spirit had taken possession of the guests in front of the desk who stood and glowered at him, and his conciliatory attitude, his obsequiousness, only added to it. 173

If nothing else had happened to strain Mr. Cone's self-control further, he and his guests might have separated with at least a semblance of good feeling, but the fatal word which he had feared in his forebodings came from Mrs. J. Harry Stott, who majestically descended the broad staircase carrying before her a small reddish-brown insect impaled on a darning-needle. She walked to the desk and presented it for Mr. Cone's consideration. It was a most indelicate action, but the knowledge that it was such did not lessen the horror with which the guests regarded it.

Aghast, speechless, Mr. Cone, one of whose proudest boasts had been of the hotel's cleanliness, could not have been more shocked if he had learned that he was a leper.

There were shudders, ejaculations, and a general determination to leave even sooner than anticipated.

"Where did you find it?" Mr. Cone finally managed to ask hoarsely.

"Walking on my pillow!" replied Mrs. Stott, dramatically. "*And I think there are others!* If you will see that my trunks get off on the 4:17 I shall be obliged to you."

Mr. Cone knew it was coming. He felt the symptoms which warned him that he was going to "fly off the handle." He leaned over the counter. Mrs. Stott's eyes were so close together that, like Cyclops, she seemed to have but one, and they had the appearance of growing even closer as Mr. Cone looked into them. 174

"Do not give yourself any concern on that score, madam. Your trunks will be at the station as soon as they are ready and it will please me if you will follow them.

"For twelve years I have been pretending not to know that you used the hotel soap to do your washing in the bath-tub, and it is a relief to mention it to you.

"And, Miss Gaskett," the deadly coldness of his voice made her shiver, "I doubt if the fuzz under your bed has troubled you as much as the fact that for three summers your cat has had kittens in the linen closet has annoyed me."

The Baltimore widow had his attention:

"It is possible that the drip from your faucet and the squeak in your rocking-chair gets on your nerves, my dear lady, but not more than your daily caterwauling on the hotel piano gets on mine.

"I shall miss your check, certainly, Mr. Appel, but not nearly so much as I shall enjoy the relief from listening to the story of the way you got your start as a 'breaker-boy' in the coal region."

He bowed with the irony of Mephistopheles to Mrs. Budlong:

"Instead of discharging the man with the vacuum cleaner, I shall give him for his large family the cake and fruit you would have carried away from the table in your capacious pocket if you had been here."

His eyes swept them all.

He would have given Mr. Budlong his attention, but that person's vanishing back was all he could see of him, so he turned to the others and shouted: 175

"Go! The sooner the better. Get out of my sight—the lot of you! I'M GOING TO A REST CURE!"

His hand travelled toward the potato he used as a pen-wiper and there was something so significant in the action when taken in connection with his menacing expression that, without a word, they obeyed him.

CHAPTER XVII

COUNTING THEIR CHICKENS

The "Happy Family" of The Colonial had decided to make up a congenial party and spend the remainder of the summer at the Lolabama Ranch in Wyoming. They were expected on the morrow, everything was in readiness for their coming, and, after supper, down by the corrals Wallie and Pinkey sat on their heels estimating their probable profits.

Pinkey's forehead was furrowed like a corrugated roof with the mental effort as he figured in the dust with a pointed stick while Wallie's face wore a look of absorption as he watched the progress, although he was already as familiar with it as with his multiplication tables.

"Ten head of dudes at $100 a month is a $1,000," said Pinkey. "And twelve months in the year times a $1,000 is $12,000. And, say——"

Wallie interrupted:

"But I've told you a dozen times they all go South in the winter. The most we can count on is two months now and perhaps more next summer."

Pinkey replied confidently:

"You can't figger out ahead what a dude is goin' to do any more than a calf or a sheep. If we treat 'em right and they get stuck on the country they're liable to winter here instead of Floridy. Now, if we could winter—say—ten head of dudes at $150 a month for seven months, that would be $10,500. The trip through the Yellowstone Park and Jackson Hole Country is goin' to be a big item. Ten head of dudes—say—at $5.00 a day for—say—fifteen days is——"

"But you never deduct expenses, Pinkey. It isn't all profit. There's the interest on the investment, interest on the money we borrowed, groceries, the cook's wages, and we'll need helpers through the Yellowstone."

"You're gettin' an awful habit of lookin' on the black side of things," said Pinkey, crossly.

"If we can pay expenses and have a $1,000 clear the first year, I'll be satisfied."

"A thousand dollars!" Pinkey exclaimed, indignantly. "You're easy pleased—I thought you had more ambition. Look at the different ways we got to git their money. Two bits apiece for salt water baths and eight baths a day—some of 'em might not go in reg'lar—every day, but, say eight of 'em do, anyway, eight times two bits is $2.00. Then $10.00 apiece every time they go to town in the stage-coach is, say, $100 a trip—and they go twict a week, say, that's $200."

"But they might not go twice a week," Wallie protested, "nor all of them at a time."

"You shore give me the blues a croakin'. Why don't you look on the bright side of things like you useta? Do you know, I've been thinkin' we ought to make out a scale of prices for lettin' 'em work around the place. They'd enjoy it if they had to pay for it—dudes is like that, I've noticed. They're all pretty well fixed, ain't they?"

"Oh, yes, they all have a good deal of money, unless, perhaps Miss Eyester, and I don't know much about her in that way. But Mr. Penrose, Mr. Appel, and Mr. Budlong are easily millionaires."

Pinkey's eyes sparkled.

"I s'pose a dollar ain't any more to them than a nickel to us?"

Wallie endeavoured to think of an instance which would indicate that Pinkey's supposition was correct, but, recalling none, declared enthusiastically:

"They are the most agreeable, altogether delightful people you ever knew, and, if I do say it, they think the world of me."

"That's good; maybe they won't deal us so much grief."

"How—grief?"

"Misery," Pinkey explained.

"I can't imagine them doing anything ill-natured or ill-bred," Wallie replied, resentfully. "You must have been unfortunate in the kind of dudes you've met."

Pinkey changed the subject as he did when he was unconvinced but he was in no mood for argument. He climbed to the top pole of the corral fence and looked proudly at the row of ten-by-twelve tents which the guests were to occupy, at the long tar-paper room built on to the original cabin for a dining room, at the new bunk-house for himself and Wallie and the help, at the shed with a dozen new saddles hanging on their nails, while the ponies to wear them milled behind him in the corral. His eyes sparkled as he declared:

"We shore got a good dudin' outfit! But it's nothin' to what we *will* have—watch our smoke! The day'll come when we'll see this country, as you might say, lousy with dudes! So fur as the eye kin reach—dudes! Nothin' but dudes!" He illustrated with a gesture so wide and vigorous that if it had not been for his high heels hooked over a pole he would have lost his balance.

"Yes," Wallie agreed, complacently, "at least we've got a start. And it seems like a good sign, the luck we've had in picking things up cheap."

Instinctively they both looked at the old-fashioned, four-horse stage-coach that they had found scrapped behind the blacksmith shop in Prouty and bought for so little that they had quaked in their boots lest the blacksmith change his mind before they could get it home. But their fears were groundless, since the blacksmith was uneasy from the same cause.

They had had it repaired and painted red, with yellow wheels that flashed in the sun. And now, there it stood—the last word in the picturesque discomfort for which dudes were presumed to yearn! They regarded it as their most valuable possession since, at $10.00 a trip, it would quickly pay for itself and thereafter yield a large return upon a small investment.

Neither of them could look at it without pride, and Pinkey chortled for the hundredth time:

"It shore was a great streak of luck when we got that coach!"

Wallie agreed that it was, and added:

"Everything's been going so well that I'm half scared. Look at that hotel-range we got second hand—as good as new; and the way we stumbled on to a first-class cook; and my friends coming out—it seems almost too good to be true."

He drew a sigh which came from such contentment as he had not known since he came to the State, for it seemed as if he were over the hard part of the road and on the way to see a few of his hopes realized.

With the money he had collected from Canby he had formed a partnership with Pinkey whereby the latter was to furnish the experience and his services as against his, Wallie's, capital.

Once more the future looked roseate; but perhaps the real source of his happiness lay in the fact that he had seen Helene Spenceley in Prouty a good bit of late and she had treated him with a consideration which had been conspicuously lacking heretofore.

If he made a success she *must* take him seriously and—anyway, his train of thought led him to inquire:

"Don't you ever think about getting married, Pink?"

His partner regarded him in astonishment.

"Now wouldn't I look comical tied to one of them quails I see runnin' around Prouty!"

"But," Wallie persisted, "some nice girl——"

"Aw-w—— I'd ruther have a good saddle-horse. I had a pal that tried it onct, and when I seen him, I says: 'How is it, Jess?' He says, 'Well, the first year is the worst, and after that it's worse and worse.' No, sir! Little Pinkey knows when he's well off."

It was obvious that his partner's mood did not fit in with his own. The new moon rose and the crickets chirped as the two sat in silence on the fence and smoked.

"It's a wonderful night!" Wallie said, finally, in a hushed voice.

"It's plumb peaceful," Pinkey agreed. "I feel like I do when I'm gittin' drunk and I've got to the stage whur my lip gits stiff. I've always wisht I could die when I was like that."

Wallie suggested curtly:

"Let's go to bed." He had regretted his partner's lack of sentiment more than once.

"Time to git into the feathers if we make an early start." Pinkey unhooked his heels. "Might have a little trouble hitchin' up. The two broncs I aim to put on the wheel has never been drove."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MILLIONAIRES

Pinkey was not one to keep his left hand from knowing what his right hand is doing, so the report had been widely circulated that "a bunch of millionaires" were to be the first guests at the new Lolabama Dude Ranch. In consequence of which, aside from the fact that the horses ran across a sidewalk and knocked over a widow's picket-fence, the advent of Pinkey and Wallie

in Prouty caused no little excitement, since it was deduced that the party would arrive on the afternoon train.

If to look at one millionaire is a pleasure and a privilege for folk who are kept scratching to make ends meet, the citizens of Prouty might well be excused for leaving their occupations and turning out *en masse* to see a "bunch." The desire to know how a person might look who could write his check in six or more figures, and get it cashed, explained the appearance of the male contingent on the station platform waiting for the train to come in, while the expectation of a view of the latest styles accounted for their wives.

"Among those present," as the phrase goes, was Mr. Tucker. Although Mr. Tucker had not been in a position to make any open accusations relative to the disappearance of his cache, the 183
cordial relations between Wallie and Pinkey and himself had been seriously disturbed. So much so, in fact, that they might have tripped over him in the street without bringing the faintest look of recognition to his eyes.

Mr. Tucker, however, was too much of a diplomat to harbour a grudge against persons on a familiar footing with nearly a dozen millionaires. Therefore, when the combined efforts of Wallie and Pinkey on the box stopped the coach reasonably close to the station platform, Mr. Tucker stepped out briskly and volunteered to stand at the leaders' heads.

"Do you suppose we'll have much trouble when the train pulls in?" Wallie asked in an undertone.

"I don't look fer it," said Pinkey. "They might snort a little, and jump, when the engine comes, but they'll git used to it. That twenty-mile drive this mornin' took off the wire-aidge some."

Pinkey's premises seemed to be correct, for the four stood with hanging heads and sleepy-eyed while everyone watched the horizon for the smoke which would herald the coming of the train.

"Your y-ears is full of sand and it looks like you woulda shaved or had your whiskers drove in and clinched." Pinkey eyed Wallie critically as they waited together on the seat.

"Looks as if you would have had your teeth fixed," Wallie retorted. "It's been nearly a year since that horse kicked them out."

"What would I go wastin' money like that for?" Pinkey demanded. "They're front ones—I don't 184
need 'em to eat."

"You'd look better," Wallie argued.

"What do I care how I look! I aim to do what's right by these dudes: I'll saddle fer 'em, and I'll answer questions, and show 'em the sights, but I don't need teeth to do that."

Pinkey was obstinate on some points, so Wallie knew it was useless to persist; nevertheless, the absence of so many of his friend's teeth troubled him more than a little, for the effect was startling when he smiled, and Pinkey was no matinee idol at his best.

"There she comes!"

As one, the spectators on the platform stretched their necks to catch the first glimpse of the train bearing its precious cargo of millionaires.

Wallie felt suddenly nervous and wished he had taken more pains to dress, as he visualized the prosperous-looking, well-groomed folk of The Colonial Hotel.

As the mixed train backed up to the station from the Y, it was seen that the party was on the back platform of the one passenger coach, ready to get off. The engine stopped so suddenly that the cars bumped and the party on the rear platform were thrown violently into each other's arms.

The expression on old Mr. Penrose's face was so fiendish as Mrs. C. D. Budlong toppled backward and stood on his bunion that Wallie forgot the graceful speech of welcome he had framed. Mr. Penrose had travelled all the way in one felt slipper and now, as the lady 185
inadvertently ground her heel into the tender spot, Mr. Penrose looked as he felt—murderous.

"Get off my foot!" he shouted.

Mrs. Budlong obeyed by stepping on his other foot.

Mr. Appel, who had lurched over the railing, observed sarcastically:

"They ought to put that engineer on a stock train."

The party did not immediately recognize Wallie in his Western clothes, but when they did they waved grimy hands at him and cried delightedly:

"Here we are, Wallie!"

Wallie made no reply to this self-evident fact and, indeed, he could not, for he was too aghast at the shabby appearance of his wealthy friends to think of any that was appropriate. They looked as if they had ransacked their attics for clothes in which to make the trip.

The best Wallie could immediately manage was a limp handshake and a sickly grin as the coal baron and street-railway magnate, Mr. Henry Appel, stepped off in a suit of which he had undoubtedly been defrauding his janitor for some years.

Mrs. J. Harry Stott was handed down in a pink silk creation, through the lace insertion of which one could see the cinders that had settled in the fat crease of her neck. While Mrs. Stott recognized its inappropriateness, she had decided to give it a final wear and save a fresh gown. 186

Upon her heels was Mr. Stott, in clothes which bore mute testimony to the fact that he led a sedentary life. Mr. Stott was a "jiner" for business purposes and he was wearing all his lodge pins in the expectation of obtaining special privileges from brother members while travelling.

C. D. Budlong wore a "blazer" and a pair of mountain boots that had involved him in a quarrel with a Pullman conductor, who had called him a vandal for snagging a plush seat with the hob-nails. At his wife's request, Mr. Budlong was bringing a canvas telescope filled with a variety of tinned fruits. It was so heavy that it sagged from the handle as he bore it in front of him with both hands, so no one was deceived by his heroic efforts to carry it jauntily and make it appear that he did not notice the weight.

The only stranger in the party was Mrs. Henry Appel's maiden aunt—Miss Lizzie Philbrick—sixty or thereabouts. "Aunt Lizzie" was a refugee from the City of Mexico, and had left that troublesome country in such a panic that she had brought little besides a bundle of the reports of a Humane Society with which she had been identified, and an onyx apple, to which it was assumed there was much sentiment attached, since she refused to trust it to the baggage car, and was carrying it in her hand.

"Aunt Lizzie" looked as if she had been cast for a period play—early General Grant, perhaps—as she descended wearing a beaded silk mantle and a bonnet with strings. 187

"Be careful, Aunt Lizzie! Look where you step!"

The chorus of warnings was due to the fact that Aunt Lizzie already had fallen fourteen times in transit, a tack-head seeming sufficient to trip her up, and now, quite as though they had shouted the reverse, Aunt Lizzie stumbled and dropped the onyx apple upon old Mr. Penrose's felt-shod foot.

This was too much. Mr. Penrose shouted furiously:

"I wish you'd lose that damned thing!"

When it came to altered looks, Wallie had no monopoly on surprise. The Happy Family found it difficult to reconcile this rather tough-looking young man with the nice, neat boy who had blown them kisses from the motor bus.

"Now, what sort of a conveyance have you provided?" inquired Mr. Stott, who had taken the initiative in such matters during the trip.

Wallie pointed proudly to the stage-coach with Pinkey on the box and Mr. Tucker standing faithfully at the leaders' heads.

Everybody exclaimed in delight and lost no time in greeting Pinkey, whose response was cordial but brief. To Wallie he said, out of the corner of his mouth:

"Load 'em on. The roan is gittin' a hump in his back."

"We have twenty-five miles to make," Wallie hinted.

"Our luggage? How about that?" inquired Mr. Stott. 188

"It will follow." Wallie opened the stage-coach door as a further hint.

"I want to get some snap-shots of the town," said Mr. Penrose, who had his camera and a pair of field-glasses slung over his shoulder.

"What an experience this will be to write home!" gushed Miss Gaskett. "Let's stop at the office and mail post-cards."

Pinkey leaned over the side and winked at Wallie, who urged uneasily:

"We must start. Twenty-five miles is a good distance to make before dark."

"Switzerland has nothing to surpass this view!" declared Mr. Stott, who had never been in Switzerland.

Everyone took a leisurely survey of the mountains.

"And the air is very like that of the Scotch moors." No one ever would have suspected from his positive tone that Mr. Stott never had been in Scotland, either.

"I am sorry to insist," said Wallie in response to another significant look from Pinkey, "but we really will have to hurry."

Thus urged, they proceeded to clamber in, except Miss Gertie Eyester, who was patting the roan on the nose.

"Dear 'ittie horsey!"

"'Ittie horse eats human flesh, you'd better not git too close," said Pinkey.

Miss Eyester looked admiringly at Pinkey in his red shirt and declared with an arch glance:

"You're so droll, Mr. Fripp!" 189

Since Mr. Fripp thought something of the sort himself he did not contradict her, but told himself that she was "not so bad—for a dude."

"I hope the horses are perfectly safe, because my heart isn't good, and when I'm frightened it goes bad and my lips get just as *b-l-u-e*!"

"They look all right now," said Pinkey, after giving them his careful attention.

Miss Eyester observed wistfully:

"I hope I will get well and strong out here."

"If you'd go out in a cow-camp fer a couple of months it would do you a world of good," Pinkey advised her. "You'd fatten up."

Mr. Budlong, who had gotten in the coach, got out again to inquire of Pinkey if he was sure the horses were perfectly gentle.

"I'd trust my own step-mother behind 'em anywhere."

Mr. Budlong, who had had a step-mother, intimated that that was not convincing proof, and returned to the coach declaring that he had no fears for himself, but his wife was nervous.

To show his contempt of danger, Mr. Stott said: "Poof!"

Wallie, having closed the door, climbed up beside Pinkey, who unlocked the brake.

"I always feel helpless shut inside a vehicle," declared Mr. Budlong.

Mr. Stott again said recklessly: "Poof!"

Just as he said "poof!", the leaders rose on their hind legs. Mr. Tucker, who rose with them, clung valiantly to their bits and dangled there. One of the wheel horses laid down and the other tried to climb over the back of the leader in front of him, while the bystanders scattered. 190

"There seems to be some kind of a ruckus," Mr. Appel remarked as he stood up and leaned out the window.

Before he had time to report, however, two side wheels went over the edge of the station platform, tipping the coach to an angle which sent all the passengers on the upper side into the laps of those on the lower.

Aunt Lizzie pitched headlong and with such force that when she struck Mr. Stott on the mouth with her onyx apple she cut his lip.

"You'll kill somebody with that yet!" Mr. Stott glared at the keepsake.

Aunt Lizzie scrambled back into her seat and looked composedly at the drop of blood he offered in evidence, on the corner of his handkerchief.

Mr. Appel, who undoubtedly would have gone on through the window when the coach lurched had it not been for his wife's presence of mind in clutching him by the coat, demanded in an angry voice—instead of showing the gratitude she had reason to expect:

"Whatch you doin'? Tearin' the clothes off'n m'back? Wisht you'd leave me be!"

It had been years since Mr. Appel had spoken to his wife like that. Mrs. Appel opened her reticule, took out a handkerchief and held it to her eyes. 191

In the meantime the side wheels had dropped off the station platform and the coach had righted itself, but in spite of all that Pinkey and Wallie could do the leaders swung sharply to the left and dragged the wheel horses after them down the railroad track.

When the wheels struck the ties, Miss Mattie Gaskett bounded into the air as if she had been sitting upon a steel coil that had suddenly been released. She was wearing a tall-crowned hat of a style that had not been in vogue for some years and as she struck the roof it crackled and went shut like an accordeon, so that it was of an altogether different shape when she dropped back to the seat.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed, blinking in a dazed fashion as she felt of her hat.

Old Mr. Penrose, who had elongated his naturally long neck preparatory to looking out the window, also struck the roof and with such force that his neck was bent like the elbow in a stove-pipe when he came down. He said such a bad word that Aunt Lizzie Philbrick exclaimed: "Oh, how dread-ful!" and asked him to remember where he was.

Mr. Penrose replied that he did not care where he was—that if her neck had been driven into her shoulders a foot she would say something, too.

Mrs. J. Harry Stott and Mr. Budlong, who had bumped heads so hard that the thud was heard, were eyeing each other in an unfriendly fashion as they felt of their foreheads, waiting for the lump.

Mr. Stott, who was still patting his lip with his handkerchief, declared: 192

"Such roads as these retard the development of a county."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Mr. Appel, getting up out of the aisle. "They are a disgrace!"

"We are going *away* from the mountains—I don't understand——"

Mr. Stott smiled reassuringly at Mrs. Budlong and told her that Wallie and Pinkey, of course, knew the road.

"I don't care," she insisted, stoutly, "I believe something's wrong. We are going awfully fast, and if I thought it was as rough as this all the way I should prefer to walk."

"You must remember that you are now in the West, Mrs. Budlong," Mr. Stott replied in a kind but reproving tone, "and we cannot expect——"

Mrs. Budlong, who had just bitten her tongue, retorted sharply:

"We certainly could expect a more comfortable conveyance than this. If I live to get out I shall never step foot in it again."

"When we stop at the post-office," said Mr. Budlong in a tone of decision as he clung to the window frame, "I shall hire a machine and go out—the rest of you can do as you like."

If there was dissatisfaction inside the coach it was nothing at all compared to the excitement on the box as the horses galloped down the railroad track. The leaders' mouths might have been bound in cast-iron for all the attention they paid to the pull on their bits, although Pinkey and Wallie were using their combined strength in their efforts to stop the runaways. 193

"Them dudes must be gittin' an awful churnin'," said Pinkey through his clenched teeth.

"We'll be lucky if we are not ditched," Wallie panted as he braced his feet.

"Wouldn't that be some rank! Even if we 'rim a tire' we got to swing off this track, for there's a culvert somewheres along here and——"

"Pink!"

Pinkey had no time to look, but he knew what the sharp exclamation meant.

"Pull my gun out—lay it on the seat—I can stop 'em if I must."

Pinkey's face was white under its sunburn and his jaw was set.

"How far we got?"

"About a hundred yards," Wallie answered, breathing heavily.

"We'll give 'em one more try. My hands are playin' out. You pop it to the roan when I say. Cut him wide open! If I can't turn him, I'll drop him. They'll pile up and stop. It's the only way."

Pinkey dug his heels into the foot-brace in front and took a tighter wrap of the lines around his hands. He could see the culvert ahead. His voice was hoarse as he gave the word.

Wallie stood up and swung the long rawhide braided whip. At the same time Pinkey put all his failing strength on one line. As the roan felt the tremendous pull on his mouth and the whip-thongs stung his head and neck, he turned at a sharp angle, dragging his mate. The wheel 194 horses followed, and some of the stout oak spokes splintered in the wheels as they jerked the coach over the rail.

The pallid pair exchanged a quick glance of unutterable relief. The horses were still running but their speed was slackening as Pinkey swung them in a circle toward the town. Dragging the heavy coach over sagebrush hummocks and through sand had winded them so that they were almost ready to quit when they turned down the main street.

"If we'd 'a' hit that culvert we mighta killed off half our dudes. That woulda been what I call notorious hard luck," Pinkey had just observed, when Wallie commenced to whip the horses to a run once more.

"What you doin' that for?" He turned in astonishment.

"Let 'em go—I know what I'm about!"

"I think you're crazy, but I'll do what you say till I'm sure," Pinkey answered as Wallie continued to lay on the lash.

Imperative commands were coming from inside the coach as it tore through the main street.

"Let me out of this death-trap!" Old Mr. Penrose's bellow of rage was heard above the chorus of voices demanding that Pinkey stop.

But it was not until they were well on the road to the ranch, and Prouty was a speck, that the horses were permitted to slow down; then Pinkey turned and looked at Wallie admiringly. 195

"You shore got a head on you, old pard! We wouldn't 'a' had a dude left if we'd let 'em out while they was mad."

"It just occurred to me in time," said Wallie, complacently.

"You don't s'pose any of 'em'll slip out and run back?"

"No, I think we're all right if nothing more happens between here and the ranch."

After a time Pinkey remarked:

"That lady with the bad heart—she must 'a' been scairt. I'll bet her lips were purple as a plum, don't you?"

But Wallie, who was far more interested in the probable fact that the coach as a source of revenue could no longer be counted on than in the colour of Miss Eyester's lips, mumbled that he didn't know.

CHAPTER XIX

A SHOCK FOR MR. CANBY

The morning following their arrival at The Lolabama, The Happy Family, looking several shades less happy, began coming from their tents shortly after daylight. By five o'clock they were all up and dressed, since, being accustomed to darkened rooms, they found themselves unable to sleep owing to the glare coming through the white canvas.

Out of consideration for his guests, whom he remembered as late risers, Wallie had set the breakfast hour at eight-thirty. This seemed an eternity to The Happy Family who, already famished, consulted their watches with increasing frequency while they watched the door of the bunk-house like cats at a mouse-hole for the cook to make his appearance.

After a restless night due to strange beds and surroundings, still fatigued with their long journey, their muscles stiff from the "churning" in the stagecoach, they were not better natured for being ferociously hungry.

After wandering around to look listlessly at the ponies, and at the salt-water plunge that was to rejuvenate them, they sat down on the edge of the platforms in front of their tents to endure somehow the three hours which must pass before breakfast.

The dawn was sweet-scented, the song of the meadow-lark celestial, and the colours of the coming day reflected on the snow-covered peaks a sight to be remembered, but the guests had no eyes or ears or nose for any of the charms of the early morning. The rising of the sun was nothing as compared to the rising of the cook who would appease their savage hunger.

Conversation was reduced to monosyllables as, miserable and apathetic, they sat thinking of the food they had sent back to Mr. Cone's kitchen with caustic comments, of the various dishes for which the chef of The Colonial was celebrated.

Mr. Stott thought that his watch must be slow until it was found that every other watch agreed with his exactly. He declared that when the cook did appear he meant to urge him to hurry breakfast.

The cook came out, finally, at seven-thirty, and, after a surprised glance at the row on the platforms, strode into the kitchen where he rattled the range as if it were his purpose to wreck it.

When the smoke rose from the chimney Mr. Stott went to the door to carry out his intention of asking the cook to speed up breakfast.

A large sign greeted him:

DUDES KEEP OUT

The cook was a gaunt, long-legged person with a saturnine countenance. He wore a seersucker coat with a nickel badge pinned on the lapel of it.

As an opening wedge Mr. Stott smiled engagingly and pointed to it:

"For exceptional gallantry, I presume—a war medal?"

The hero stopped long enough to offer it for Mr. Stott's closer inspection.

It read:

UNITED ORDER OF PASTRY COOKS OF THE WORLD

Taken somewhat aback, Mr. Stott said feebly:

"Very nice, indeed—er——"

"Mr. Hicks, at your service!" the cook supplemented, bowing formally.

"Hicks," Mr. Stott added.

"Just take a second longer and say 'Mister.'"

The cook eyed him in such a fashion as he administered the reprimand for his familiarity that Mr. Stott backed off without mentioning his starving condition.

"What did he say?" they asked, eagerly, as he sat down on his platform, somewhat crestfallen.

"He seems a temperamental person," Mr. Stott replied, evasively. "But we shall have breakfast in due season."

It was suspected that Mr. Stott had failed in his mission, and they were sure of it as the hands dragged around to eight-thirty.

At that hour precisely Mr. Hicks came out and hammered on a triangle as vigorously as if it

were necessary. In spite of their efforts to appear unconcerned when it jangled, the haste of the guests was nothing less than indecent as they hurried to the dining room and scrambled for seats at the table.

The promise of food raised their spirits a trifle and Mr. Appel was able to say humorously as, with his table knife, he scalped his agate-ware plate loose from the oil-cloth:

"I suppose we shall soon learn the customs of the country. In a month we should all be fairly well ac'climated."

"Acclim'ated," Mr. Stott corrected.

"Ac'climated," Mr. Appel maintained, obstinately. "At least with your kind permission I shall continue to so pronounce it."

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Stott apologized with elaborate sarcasm, "but when I am wrong I like to be told of it." Which was not the strict truth for the reason that no one ever was able to convince him that he ever was mistaken. As a result of the discussion everyone was afraid to use the word for fear of offending one or the other.

The silence that followed while breakfast was being placed upon the table was broken by Miss Eyester, who said timidly:

"In the night I thought I heard something sniffing, and it frightened me."

Not to be outdone in sensational experiences, Mrs. Stott averred positively:

"There was some *wild animal* running over our tent. I could hear its sharp claws sticking into the canvas. A coyote, I fancy." 200

"A ground-squirrel, more likely," remarked Mr. Appel.

Mr. Stott smiled at him:

"Squee-rrel, if you will allow me to again correct you."

"I guess I can't help myself," replied Mr. Appel, drily.

Mr. Stott shrugged a shoulder and his tolerant look said plainly that, after all, one should not expect too much of a man who had begun life as a "breaker-boy."

"The squee-rrel or coyote or whatever it was," Mrs. Stott continued, "went pitter-patter, pitter-patter—so!" She illustrated with her finger-tips on the oil-cloth.

"Prob'ly a chipmunk," said Pinkey, prosaically.

"Are they dangerous, Mr. Fripp?" inquired Miss Gaskett.

"Not unless cornered or wounded," he replied, gravely.

This was a joke, obviously, so everybody laughed, which stimulated Pinkey to further effort. When Mr. Hicks poured his cup so full that the coffee ran over he remarked facetiously:

"It won't stack, cookie."

Coffee-pot in hand, Mr. Hicks drew himself up majestically and his eyes withered Pinkey.

"I beg to be excused from such familiarity, and if you wish our pleasant relations to continue you will not repeat it." 201

"I bet I won't josh *him* again," Pinkey said, ruefully, when Mr. Hicks returned to the kitchen in the manner of offended royalty.

"Cooks are sometimes very peculiar," observed Mr. Stott, buttering his pancakes lavishly. "I remember that my mother—my mother, by the way, Mr. Penrose, was a Sproat——"

"Shoat?" Old Mr. Penrose, who complained of a pounding in his ears, was not hearing so well in the high altitude.

Mr. Appel and Pinkey tittered, which nettled Mr. Stott and he shouted:

"Sproat! An old Philadelphia family."

"Oh, yes," Mr. Penrose recollected. "I recall Amanda Sproat—she married a stevedore. Your sister?"

Mr. Stott chose to ignore the inquiry, and said coldly:

"My father was in public life." He might have added that his father was a policeman, and therefore his statement was no exaggeration.

Everybody felt that it served Mr. Penrose right for telling about the stevedore when he was seized with a violent fit of coughing immediately afterward. Wiping his streaming eyes, he looked from Wallie to Pinkey and declared resentfully:

"This is the result of your reckless driving. The cork came out of my cough syrup in the suitcase. The only way I can get relief from the irritation is to apply my tongue to the puddle. I shall have to lick my valise until I can have the prescription refilled in Prouty." 202

The culprits mumbled that they "were sorry," to which Mr. Penrose replied disagreeably that that did not keep him from "coughing his head off!"

Looking sympathetically at Pinkey, Miss Eyester, for the purpose of diverting the irascible old gentleman's attention from the subject, asked when she might take her first riding lesson.

Pinkey said promptly: "This mornin'—they's nothin' to hinder."

"That's awfully good of you, Mr. Fripp," she said, gratefully.

Pinkey, who always jumped when any one called him "Mister," replied bluntly:

"Tain't—I wantta."

"We'll all go!" Mrs. Stott cried, excitedly.

"Shore." There was less enthusiasm in the answer.

"We were so fortunate as to be able to purchase our equipment for riding broncos before coming out here," explained Mr. Budlong. "There is an excellent store on the Boardwalk and we found another in Omaha."

"We have divided skirts and everything! Just wait till you see us!" cried Mrs. Budlong. "And you'll take our pictures, won't you, Mr. Penrose?"

"I don't mind wasting a couple of films," he consented.

Between the pancakes and the prospective riding lesson the atmosphere cleared and everyone's spirits rose so that the slightly strained relations were again normal by the time they got up from the table.

They were as eager as children as they opened their trunks for their costumes, and even Aunt Lizzie Philbrick, who had once ridden a burro in Old Mexico, declared her intention of trying it.

While the "dudes" dressed, Pinkey and Wallie went down to the corral to saddle for them.

"We better let her ride the pinto," said Pinkey, casually.

"'Her?'" Wallie looked at his partner fixedly. "Which 'her'?"

"That lady that's so thin she could hide behind a match and have room left to peek around the corner. She seems sickly, and the pinto is easy-gaited," Pinkey explained, elaborately.

"All right," Wallie nodded, "and we'll put Aunt Lizzie on the white one and give Mrs. Budlong ——"

"Kindly assign me a spirited mount," interrupted Mr. Stott, who, as to costume, was a compromise between an English groom and a fox-hunter.

Wallie looked dubious.

"Oh, I understand horses," declared Mr. Stott, "I used to ride like an Indian."

"The buckskin?" Wallie asked doubtfully of Pinkey.

Pinkey hesitated.

"You need not be afraid that he will injure me. I can handle him."

Wallie, who never had heard of Mr. Stott's horsemanship, consented reluctantly.

"I prefer to saddle and bridle myself, also," said Mr. Stott, when the buckskin was pointed out to him.

Wallie's misgivings returned to him and Pinkey rolled his eyes eloquently when they saw "the man who understood horses" trying to bridle with the chin-strap and noted that he had saddled without a blanket.

Mr. Stott laughed inconsequently when the mistake was pointed out to him and declared that it was an oversight merely.

"Now, if you will get me something to stand on I am ready to mount."

Once more Pinkey and Wallie exchanged significant glances as the man "who used to ride like an Indian" climbed into the saddle like someone getting into an upper berth in a Pullman.

Mr. Stott was sitting with the fine, easy grace of a clothespin when the rest of the party came down the path ready for their riding lesson.

Neither Pinkey nor Wallie was easily startled, but when they saw their guests the most their astonishment permitted was an inarticulate gurgle. Dismay also was among their emotions as they thought of conducting the party through Prouty and the Yellowstone. Wallie had his share of moral courage, but when they first met his vision he doubted if he was strong enough for the ordeal.

Mrs. Budlong, whose phlegmatic exterior concealed a highly romantic nature and an active imagination, was dressed to resemble a cow-girl of the movies as nearly as her height and width permitted. Her Stetson, knotted kerchief, fringed gauntlets, quirt, spurs to delight a Mexican, and swagger—which had the effect of a barge rocking at anchor—so fascinated Pinkey that he could not keep his eyes from her.

Old Mr. Penrose in a buckskin shirt ornate with dyed porcupine quills, and a forty-five Colt slung in a holster, looked like the next to the last of the Great Scouts, while Mr. Budlong, in a beaded vest that would have turned bullets, was happy though uncomfortable.

Mr. Budlong was dressed like a stage bandit, except that he wore moccasins in spite of Pinkey's warning that he would find it misery to ride in them unless he was accustomed to wearing them.

Simultaneous with Miss Gaskett's appearance in plaid bloomers a saddle-horse lay back and broke his bridle-reins, for which Pinkey had not the heart to punish him in the circumstances.

Aunt Lizzie wore long, voluminous, divided skirts and a little white hat like a paté-tin, while by contrast Mrs. Harry Stott looked very smart and ultra in a tailored coat and riding breeches.

This was the party that started up Skull Creek under Pinkey's guidance, and the amazing aggregation that greeted the choleric eye of Mr. Canby on one of the solitary rides which were his greatest diversion. He had just returned from the East and had not yet learned of the use to which Wallie had put his check. But now he recalled Wallie's parting speech to Pinkey when he had started to get the paper cashed, and this fantastic company was the result!

As Canby drew in his horse, he stared in stony-eyed unfriendliness while they waved at him gaily and Mr. Stott called out that they were going to be neighbourly and visit him soon.

The feeling of helpless wrath in which he now looked after the party was a sensation that he had experienced only a few times in his life. Pinkey had warned him that at the first openly hostile act he would "blab" the story of the Skull Creek episode far and wide. He had hit Canby in his most vulnerable spot, for ridicule was something which he found it impossible to endure, and he could well appreciate the glee with which his many enemies would listen to the tale, taking good care that it never died.

By all the rules of the game as he had played it often, and always with success, Wallie should long since have "faded"—scared, starved out. Yet, somehow, in some unique and extraordinary way that only a "dude" would think of, he had managed to come out on top.

But the real basis for Canby's grievance, and one which he would not admit even to himself, was that however Wallie was criticized, Helene Spenceley never failed to find something to say in his defence.

There was not much that Canby could do in the present circumstances to put difficulties in Wallie's way, but the next day he found it convenient to turn a trainload of long-horn Texas cattle loose on the adjacent range, and posted warnings to the effect that they were dangerous to pedestrians, and persons going among them on foot did so at their own risk.

CHAPTER XX

WALLIE QUALIFIES AS A FIRST-CLASS HERO

Pinkey took a triangular piece of glass from between the logs in the bunk-house and regarded himself steadfastly in the bit of broken mirror.

He murmured finally:

"I ain't no prize baby, but if I jest had a classy set of teeth I wouldn't be bad lookin'."

He replaced the mirror in the crack and sauntered down to the cook-shack where he seated himself on the door-sill. The chef was singing as if he meant it: "Ah, I Have Sighed to Rest Me Deep in the Silent Grave."

Pinkey interrupted:

"How do you git to work to get teeth, Mr. Hicks, if they ain't no dentist handy?"

Like Mr. Stott, no question could be put to Mr. Hicks for which he could not find an answer. He now replied promptly:

"Well, there's two ways: you can send to Mungummery-Ward and have a crate sent out on approval, and keep tryin' till you find a set that fits, or you can take the cast off your gooms yourself, send it on and have 'em hammer you out some to order."

"Is that so? What kind of stuff do they use to make the cast of your gooms of?"

"Some uses putty, some uses clay, but I believe they generally recommend plaster of Paris. It's hard, and it's cheap, and it stays where it's put."

A thoughtful silence followed; then Pinkey got up and joined Wallie, who was sitting on the top pole of the corral, smoking moodily.

The "dudes" were at target practice with 22's and six-shooters, having been persuaded finally not to use Mr. Canby's range as a background. They now all walked with a swagger and seldom went to their meals without their weapons.

Pinkey blurted out suddenly:

"I wisht I'd died when I was little!"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothin'."

It was plain that he wished to be interrogated further, but Wallie, who was thinking of Helene Spenceley and her indifference to him, was in no mood to listen to other people's troubles.

After another period of reflection Pinkey asked abruptly:

"Do you believe in signs?"

To which Wallie replied absently:

"Can't say I do. Why?"

"If there's anything in signs I ought to be turrible jealous—the way my eyebrows grow together."

"Aren't you?" indifferently.

"Me—jealous? Nobody could make me jealous, especially a worman." 209

"You're lucky!" Wallie spoke with unnecessary emphasis. "It's an uncomfortable sensation."

Pinkey shifted uneasily and picked a bit of bark off the corral pole.

"Don't it look kinda funny that Miss Eyester would take any in'trist in Old Man Penrose? A girl like her wouldn't care nothin' about his money, would she?"

Wallie looked dour as he answered:

"You never can tell—maybe." He had been asking himself the same question about Miss Spenceley, whom he had seen rather frequently of late with Canby.

"Guess I'll quirl me a brownie and git into the feathers," glumly. "I thought I'd go into town in the mornin', I want to do me some buyin'."

Wallie nodded, and Pinkey added as he unhooked his heels:

"You want to ride herd pretty clost on Aunt Lizzie. She's bound and determined to go outside the fence huntin' moss-agates. The cattle are liable to hook her. Canby throwed them long-horns in there on purpose."

"I'm sure of it," Wallie said, grimly. "Yes, I'll watch Aunt Lizzie. But she isn't worse than Appel, who was over there catching grasshoppers because he said they were fatter."

"Dudes is aggravatin'," Pinkey admitted. "But," philosophically, "they're our meal-tickets, so we got to swaller 'em."

As Wallie watched his partner go up the path to the bunk-house he wondered vaguely what 210
purchase he had to make that was so important as to induce him to make a special trip to Prouty. But since Pinkey had not chosen to tell him and Wallie had a talent for minding his own business, he dismissed it; besides, he had more vital things to think about at that moment.

It had hurt him that Helene Spenceley had not been over. Obviously he had taken too much for granted, for he had thought that when she saw he was in earnest once more and in a fair way to make a success of his second venture, things would be different between them. He had imagined she would express her approval in some way, but she seemed to take it all as a matter of course. She was the most difficult woman to impress that he ever had known, but, curiously, the less she was impressed the more eager he was to impress her. Yet her casualness only spurred him to further effort and strengthened his determination to make her realize that there was a great deal in him worth while and that some day he would stand for something in the community.

But somehow he did not seem to make much progress, and now he asked himself grumpily why in the dickens he couldn't have fallen in love with Mattie Gaskett, who followed him like his shadow and had her own income, with wonderful prospects.

He scuffed at the bark on the corral pole with his foot and thought sourly of the rot he had read about love begetting love. He had not noticed it. It more often begot laughter, and his case was an instance of it. Helene Spenceley laughed at him—he was sure of it—and fool that he was— 211
imbecile—it did not seem to make any difference. There was just one girl for him and always would be—he was like that and it was a misfortune.

In time, very likely, he would be a hermit, or a "sour-ball" like Canby; he would sit at dances looking like a bull-elk that's been whipped out of the herd, and the girls would giggle at him.

Wallie's mood was undoubtedly pessimistic, and, finally, he trudged up the path to bed, hoping he would awaken in a more cheerful humour—which he did—because he dreamed that with Helene Spenceley beside him he was burning up the road in a machine of a splendour "to put Canby's eye out."

The next morning Pinkey was gone when they gathered at the breakfast table. Miss Eyester looked downcast because he had failed to tell her of his intention, while Mrs. Stott declared that it was very inconsiderate for him to go without mentioning it, since he had promised to match embroidery cotton for her and she could not go on with her dresser-scarf until she had some apple-green to put the leaves in with.

The morning passed without incident, except that Mr. Budlong was astonished when Wallie told him that his new high-power rifle was scattering bullets among Mr. Canby's herd of cattle more than a mile distant and that it was great good fortune he had not killed any of them. Otherwise Wallie was engaged as usual in answering questions and lengthening and shortening stirrups 212
for ladies the length of whose legs seemed to change from day to day, making such alterations

necessary.

Miss Gaskett "heeled" Wallie with flattering faithfulness and incidentally imparted the information that a friend from Zanesville, Ohio, Miss Mercy Lane was to join their party in Prouty when the date was definitely set for their tour of the Yellowstone.

"She's a dear, sweet girl whom I knew at boarding-school, and," archly, "you must tell me that you will not fall in love with her."

Wallie, who now thought of even "dear, sweet girls" in terms of dollars and cents, felt that he could safely promise.

It was a relief when the triangle jangled for dinner, and Wallie looked forward to the ride afterward, although it had its attendant irritations—chief of which was the propensity of J. Harry Stott to gallop ahead and then gallop back to see if the party was coming: rare sport for Mr. Stott, but less so for the buckskin. As soon as that sterling young fellow had discovered that he could ride at a gallop without falling off he lost no opportunity to do so, and his horse was already showing the result of it.

Boosting Aunt Lizzie Philbrick on and off her horse to enable her to pick flowers and examine rocks was a part of the routine, as was recovering Mrs. Budlong's hairpins when her hair came down and she lost her hat. Mr. Budlong, too, never failed to lag behind and become separated from the rest of the party, so that he had to be hunted. He persisted in riding in moccasins and 213
said that his insteps "ached him" so that he could not keep up.

Reasoning that every occupation has drawbacks of some kind, Wallie bore these small annoyances with patience, though there were times when he confessed that The Happy Family of The Colonial were not altogether so charming and amiable as he had thought.

He never would have suspected, for instance, that J. Harry Stott, who in his own environment was a person of some little consequence, in another could appear a complete and unmitigated ass. Or that Mrs. Budlong had such a wolfish appetite, or that ten cents looked larger to Mr. Appel than a dollar did to Pink, or that Old Penrose was vain as a peacock about his looks. Still, Wallie consoled himself, everyone had his idiosyncrasies, and if they had not had these they might have had worse ones.

To-day there was the usual commotion over getting off, and then when Wallie was ready to boost Aunt Lizzie on her horse she was nowhere to be found. She was not in her tent, nor had she fallen over the embankment, and the fact that she set great store by her afternoon rides deepened the mystery.

Old Mr. Penrose, who had unslung his field-glasses, declared he saw something that might be the top of Aunt Lizzie's head moving above a small "draw" over on Canby's lease. Mr. Penrose, who had sought ranch life chiefly because he said he was sick of cities and mobs of people, when not riding now spent most of his time with his high-power glasses watching the road in the 214
hope of seeing someone passing and he had come to be as excited when he saw a load of hay as if he had discovered a planet.

He passed the glasses to Wallie, who adjusted them and immediately nodded:

"That's somebody in the draw; it must be Aunt Lizzie."

There was no doubt about it when she came out and started walking slowly along the top, searching, as she went, for moss-agates. Wallie gave a sharp exclamation, for, in the moment that they watched her, a small herd of the Texas cattle came around a hill and also saw her. They stopped short, and looked at the strange figure. Then, like a band of curious antelope, they edged a little closer. It might be that they would not attack her, but, if they did, it was certain they would gore her to death unless someone was there to prevent it.

Leading his own horse and dragging Aunt Lizzie's stubborn white pony behind him, Wallie threw down the wire gate opening into the Canby lease and sprang into the saddle.

He kept his eyes fixed on the cattle as he rode toward Aunt Lizzie, making the best time he could, with her cayuse pulling back obstinately on the bridle, but, in any case, he could not have seen Helene Spenceley and Canby riding from the opposite direction, for they were still on the other side of a small ridge which hid them.

Helene had stopped at the Canby ranch for luncheon on her way to pay her long-deferred visit to her whilom acquaintances of The Colonial, and though Canby had not relished the thought 215
that she was going there, he had asked to accompany her across the leases. Pleased that she had stopped without an invitation, he was more likable than ever she had seen him, and he made no pretense of concealing the fact that she could be mistress of the most pretentious house in the country if she chose to.

Helene could not well have been otherwise than impressed by its magnificence. She was aware that with Canby's money and her personal popularity she could make an enviable position for herself very easily, and she was nothing if not ambitious. The traits in Canby which so frequently antagonized her, his arrogance, his selfish egotism and disregard of others' rights and feelings, to-day were not in evidence. He was spontaneous, genial, boyish almost, and she never had felt so kindly disposed toward him nor so tolerant of his failings.

She looked at him speculatively now as he rode beside her and wondered if association would beget an affection that would do as well as love if supplemented by the many things he had to offer?

Her friendlier mood was not lost on Canby who was quick to take advantage of it. He leaned over and laid his hand on hers as it rested on the saddle horn.

"Your thoughts of me are kinder than usual, aren't they, Helene? You are less critical?" He spoke almost humbly.

She smiled at him as she admitted:

"Perhaps so." 216

"I wish you could think so of me always, because I should be very happy if—you——" His narrow, selfish face had a softness she never had seen in it as he paused while he groped for the exact words he wished in which to express himself.

There was no need for him to finish, for his meaning was unmistakable, and the colour rose in Helene's cheeks as she averted her eyes from his steady gaze and looked on past him.

Their horses had been climbing slowly and had now reached the top of the ridge which gave an uninterrupted view across the flat stretch which lay between them and the ranch that was such an eyesore to Canby.

As she took in the sweep of country her gaze concentrated upon the moving objects she saw in it. Puzzled at first, her look of perplexity was succeeded by one of consternation, then horror. With swift comprehension she grasped fully the meaning of a scene that was being enacted before her.

Her expression attracted Canby's attention even before she pointed and cried sharply:

"Look!"

Aunt Lizzie was still busy with her pebbles, a tiny, tragic figure she looked, in view of what was happening, as she walked along in leisurely fashion, stopping every step or two to pick up and examine a stone that attracted her attention.

The herd of long-horns had come closer, but one had drawn out from the others and was shaking its head as it trotted down upon her. 217

Wallie had long since abandoned the pony he was leading, and with all the speed his own was capable of, was doing his best to intercept the animal before it reached her. But he was still a long way off and even as Helene cried out the steer broke into a gallop.

Canby, too, instantly grasped the situation.

"If I only had a rifle!"

"Perhaps we can turn it! We'll have to make an awful run for it but we can try!"

They had already gathered the reins and were spurring their horses down the declivity.

Canby's thoroughbred leaped into the air as the steel pricked it and Helene was soon left behind. She saw that she could figure only as a spectator, so she slowed down and watched what followed in fascinated horror.

Canby was considerably farther off than Wallie, in the beginning, but the racing blood in the former's horse's veins responded gallantly to the urge of its rider. It stretched out and laid down to its work like a hare with the hounds behind it, quickly equalizing the distance.

Aunt Lizzie was poking at a rock with her toe when she looked up suddenly and saw her danger. The steer with a spread of horns like antlers and tapering to needle points was rushing down upon her, infuriated.

For a moment she stood, weak with terror, unable to move, until her will asserted itself and then, shrieking, she ran as fast as her stiff old legs could carry her.

Wallie and Canby reached the steer almost together. A goodly distance still intervened between 218
it and Aunt Lizzie, but the gap was shortening with sickening rapidity and Helene grew cold as she saw that, try as they might, they could not head it.

The animal seemed to be conscious only of its fleeing victim. When she ran, her flight appeared to excite and enrage it further, for it bawled with anger. The fluttering petticoats were a challenge, and the steer was bent on reaching and destroying the strange object with the weapons nature had given it. It was accustomed to horsemen and had no fear of them, but it saw a menace in the little old woman screaming just ahead, so it ignored Canby and Wallie, and they could not swerve it.

Helene wrung her hands in a frenzy as she watched their futile efforts. Wallie always carried a rope on his saddle, why didn't he use it? Was he afraid? Couldn't he? She felt a swift return of her old contempt for him. Was he only a "yellow-back" cowpuncher after all, underneath his Western regalia? Momentarily she despised him. Notwithstanding his brave appearance he was as useless in a crisis like this as Canby. Pinkey was more of a man than either of them. He would stop that steer somehow if he had only his pocketknife to do it. Her lip curled disdainfully for she had an innate contempt of impotency and failure.

She cried out sharply as Aunt Lizzie stumbled and pitched headlong. Between exhaustion and terror that paralyzed her she was unable to get up, though she tried. The steer, flaming-eyed, 219
was now less than fifty yards from her.

Helene felt herself grow nauseated. She meant to close her eyes when it happened. She had seen a horse gored to death by a bull and it was a sight she did not wish to see repeated.

Canby in advance of Wallie was a little ahead of the steer, slapping at it with his bridle-reins, Wallie behind had been crowding its shoulder. But nothing could divert it from its purpose.

Helene was about to turn her head away when she saw Wallie lay the reins on his horse's neck and lean from the saddle.

His purpose flashed through Helene's mind instantly. Then she cried aloud—incredulously:

"He's going to try *that*!" And added in a frightened whisper: "He can't do it! He can never do it!"

Wallie's horse, which had been running at the steer's shoulder, missed his hand on the reins and lagged a little, so that the distance between them was such as to make what he meant to attempt seemingly impossible. For a second he rode with his arm outstretched as if gauging the distance, then Helene grew rigid as she saw him leave the saddle.

He made it—barely. The gap was so big that it seemed as if it were not humanly possible more than to touch the short mane on the animal's neck with his finger-tips. But he clung somehow, his feet and body dragging, while the steer's speed increased rather than slackened. First with one hand and then the other he worked his way to a grip on the horns, which was what he wanted. 220

The steer stopped to fight him. Its feet ploughed up the dirt as it braced them to resist him. Then they struggled. The steer was a big one, raw-boned, leggy, a typical old-time long-horn of the Texas ranges, and now in fear and rage it put forth all the strength of which it was capable.

With his teeth grinding, Wallie fought it in desperation, trying to give the twist that drops the animal. Its breath in his face, the froth from its mouth blinded him, but still he clung while it threw him this and that way. He himself never knew where his strength came from. Suddenly the steer fell heavily and the two lay panting together.

Helene drew the back of her hand across her eyes and brushed away the tears that blurred her vision, while a lump rose in her throat too big to swallow. "Gentle Annie" of The Colonial veranda, erstwhile authority on Battenburg and sweaters, had accomplished the most reckless of the dare-devil feats of the cow-country—he had "bull-dogged" a steer from horseback!

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CHAPTER XXI

"WORMAN! WORMAN!"

Business which had to do with the cache they had lifted from Tucker detained Pinkey in town longer than expected. He returned in the night and did not get up when the triangle jangled for breakfast. In fact, it was well into the forenoon when he appeared, only to learn that Miss Eyester had gone off with old Mr. Penrose to look at an eagle's nest.

"What did he do that for?" Pinkey demanded of Wallie.

"I presume he wanted her company," Wallie replied, composedly, entertained by the ferocity of Pinkey's expression.

"Is he a dude or is he a duder that he has to go guidin' people to see sights they prob'ly don't want to look at?"

"She seemed willing enough to go," Wallie answered.

Pinkey sneered:

"Mebbe I'd better git me a blue suit with brass buttons and stand around and open gates and unsaddle fer 'em."

Wallie regarded his partner calmly. 222

"Pinkey, you're *jealous*."

"Jealous! Me jealous of an old Methuselah that don't know enough to make a mark in the road?" Unconsciously Pinkey's hand sought his eyebrows, as he laughed hollowly. "Why, I could show her a barrel of eagles' nests! I know whur there's a coyote den with pups in it! I know whur there's a petrified tree and oceans of Injun arrer heads, if she'd jest waited. But if anybody thinks I'm goin' to melt my boot-heels down taggin' a worman, they're mistaken!" Pinkey stamped off to the bunk-house and slammed the door behind him.

"Where's Pinkey?" The question was general when it was observed that his chair was vacant at dinner.

"Still reposing, I imagine," Wallie answered, humorously.

Mrs. Budlong commented:

"A night ride like that must be very fatiguing."

"Oh, very." Wallie winked at himself figuratively, thinking that the 99 per cent. alcoholic content of one of Mr. Tucker's bottles undoubtedly accounted for his weariness.

"You are sure he's not ill?" inquired Miss Eyester. She had not enjoyed her revenge upon Pinkey, for going away without telling her, as much as she had anticipated; besides, the eagle's nest turned out to be a crows' nest with no birds in it, and that was disappointing.

Mr. Hicks, who frequently joined in the conversation when anything interested him, snorted from the kitchen doorway: 223

"Ill? You couldn't make him 'ill' with a club with nails in it—that feller."

"Oh, how dread-ful!" Aunt Lizzie clasped her hands, and looked at the brutal cook reprovingly.

"Perhaps one of us had better awaken him," Miss Eyester suggested. "He should eat something."

"Hor! Hor! Hor!" Mr. Hicks laughed raucously. "Maybe he don't feel like eating. Let him alone and he'll come out of it."

Miss Eyester resented the aspersion the meaning of which was now plain to everybody, and said with dignity, rising:

"If no one else will call him, I shall."

"Rum has been the curse of the nation," observed Mr. Budlong to whom even a thimbleful gave a headache.

"I wish I had a barrel of it," growled old Mr. Penrose. "When I get home I'm going to get me a worm and make moonshine."

"Oh, how dread-ful!"

"'Tain't," Mr. Penrose contradicted Aunt Lizzie, curtly.

"'Tis!" retorted Aunt Lizzie.

They glared at each other balefully, and while everybody waited to hear if she could think of anything else to say to him, Miss Eyester returned panting:

"The door's locked and there's a towel pinned over the window." 224

"No!" They exclaimed in chorus, and looked at Wallie. "Do you suppose any thing's happened?"

"He locked the door because he does not want to be disturbed, and the towel is to keep the light out," Mr. Stott deduced.

"Of *course*!" They all laughed heartily and admired Mr. Stott's shrewdness.

"Any fool would have thought of that," growled Mr. Penrose.

"You think you know everything," said Aunt Lizzie, in whom his threat to make moonshine and break the law still rankled.

"I know quite a lot, if I could just think of it," replied Mr. Penrose almost good-naturedly.

"All the same," declared the cook, scouring a frying-pan in the doorway, "it's not like him to go to all that trouble just to sleep. I'll go up and see if I can raise him."

Even in the dining room they could hear Mr. Hicks banging on the door with the frying-pan, and calling. He returned in a few minutes.

"There's something queer about it. It's still as a graveyard. He ain't snoring."

"Could he have made way with himself?" Mr. Appel's tone was sepulchral.

"Oh-h-h!" Miss Eyester gasped faintly.

"Perhaps he has merely locked the door and he is outside," Mr. Stott suggested.

"I'll go down and see if I can notice his legs stickin' out of the crick anywhere," said Mr. Hicks, briskly.

"It is very curious—very strange indeed," they declared solemnly, though they all continued eating spare-ribs—a favourite dish with The Happy Family. 225

The cook, returning, said in a tone that had a note of disappointment. "He ain't drowned."

"Is his horse in the corral?" asked Wallie.

Mr. Hicks took observations from the doorway and reported that it was, which deepened the mystery.

Since no human being, unless he was drugged or dead, could sleep through the cook's battering with the frying-pan, Wallie himself grew anxious. He recalled Pinkey's gloom of the evening before he had gone to Prouty. "I wisht I'd died when I was little," he remembered his saying.

Also Pinkey's moroseness of the morning and the ferocity of his expression took on special significance in the light of his strange absence. Instinctively Wallie looked at Miss Eyester. That young lady was watching him closely and saw his gravity. Unexpectedly she burst into tears so explosively that Mrs. Budlong moved back the bread plate even as she tried to comfort her.

"I know something has happened! I *feel* it! When Aunt Sallie choked on a fish-bone at Asbury

Park I knew it before we got the wire. I'm sort of clairvoyant! Please excuse me!" Miss Eyester left the table, sobbing. It seemed heartless to go on eating when Pinkey, the sunshine of the ranch, as they suddenly realized, might be lying cold in death in the bunk-house, so they followed solemnly—all except Mrs. Henry Appel, who lingered to pick herself out another spare-rib, which she took with her in her fingers. 226

They proceeded in a body to the bunk-house, where Wallie applied his eye to the keyhole and found it had been stuffed with something. This confirmed his worst suspicions. Nobody could doubt now but that something sinister had happened.

Mr. Penrose, who had been straining his eyes at the window, peering through a tiny space between the towel and the window frame, declared he saw somebody moving. This, of course, was preposterous, for if alive Pinkey would have made a sound in response to their clamour, so nobody paid any attention to his assertion.

"We'll have to burst the door in," said Mr. Stott in his masterful manner, but Wallie already had run for the axe for that purpose.

Mrs. Appel, alternately gnawing her bone and crying softly, begged them not to let her see him if he did not look natural, while Miss Eyester leaned against the door-jamb in a fainting condition.

"Maybe I can bust it with my shoulder," said Mr. Hicks, throwing his weight against the door.

Immediately, as the lock showed signs of giving, a commotion, a shuffling, was heard, a sound as if a shoulder braced on the inside was resisting.

There was a second's astonished silence and then a chorus of voices demanded:

"Let us in! Pinkey! What *is* the matter?"

The answer was an inarticulate, gurgling sound that was blood-curdling. 227

"He's cut his wind-pipe and all he can do is gaggle!" cried Mr. Hicks, excitedly, and made a frenzied attack on the door that strained the lock to the utmost.

If the noise he made was any criterion it was judged that Pinkey's head must be nearly severed from his body—which made the resistance he displayed all the more remarkable. He was a madman, of course—that was taken for granted—and the ladies were warned to places of safety lest he come out slashing right and left with a razor.

They ran and locked themselves in the kitchen, where they could look through the window—all except Miss Eyester, who declared dramatically that she had no further interest in life anyhow and wished to die by his hand, knowing herself responsible for what had happened.

Wallie, breathless from running, arrived with the axe, which he handed to Mr. Hicks, who called warningly as he swung it:

"Stand back, Pinkey!—I'm comin'!"

The door crashed and splintered, and when it opened, Mr. Hicks fell in with it.

He fell out again almost as quickly, for there was Pinkey with the glaring eyes of a wild man, his jaws open, and from his mouth there issued a strange white substance.

"He's frothin'!" Mr. Hicks yelled shrilly. "He's got hydrophoby! Look out for him everybody!"

"G-gg-ggg-ough!" gurgled Pinkey.

"Who bit you, feller?" the cook asked, soothingly. 228

"G-ggg-gg-ough!" was the agonized answer.

"We'll have to throw and hog-tie him." Mr. Hicks looked around to see if there was a rope handy.

"Don't let him snap at you," called Mr. Stott from a safe distance. "If it gets in your blood, you're goners."

The cook who, as Pinkey advanced shaking his head and making vehement gestures, had retreated, was suddenly enlightened:

"That ain't froth—it's plaster o' Paris—I bet you! Wait till I get a stick and poke it!"

Pinkey nodded.

"That's it!" Mr. Hicks cried, delightedly: "He's takin' a cast of his gooms—I told him about it."

The look he received from Pinkey was murderous.

"How are we going to get it out?" Wallie asked in perplexity.

"It's way bigger than his mouth," said Mr. Appel, and old Mr. Penrose suggested humorously: "You might push it down and make him swallow it."

"Maybe you could knock a little off at a time or chisel it," ventured Mr. Budlong. "It's hard as a rock," feeling of it. "You'll have to crack it."

"It's like taking a hook out of a cat-fish," said the cook, facetiously. "Say, can you open your mouth any wider?"

Pinkey made vehement signs that his mouth was stretched to the limit.

"It's from ear to ear now, you might say," observed Mr. Budlong. "If you go to monkeying you'll have the top of his head off." 229

"If I could just get my fist up in the roof somehow and then pry down on it." The size of Mr. Hicks' fist, however, made the suggestion impractical.

"I believe I can pick it off little by little with a hairpin or a pair of scissors or something." Miss Eyester spoke both confidently and sympathetically.

Pinkey nodded, his eyes full of gratitude and suffering.

"Don't laugh at him," she pleaded, as they now were howling uproariously. "Just leave us alone and I'll manage it somehow."

It proved that Miss Eyester was not over-sanguine for, finally, with the aid of divers tools and implements, Pinkey was able to spit out the last particle of the plaster of Paris.

"I s'pose the story'll go all over the country and make me ridic'lous," he said, gloomily. Feeling the corners of his mouth tenderly: "I thought at first I'd choke to death before I'd let anybody see me. What I'll do to that cook," his eyes gleaming, "won't stand repeatin'. And if anybody dast say 'teeth' to me——"

"Whatever made you do it?"

Too angry for finesse, Pinkey replied bluntly:

"I done it fer you. I thought you'd like me better if I had teeth, and now I s'pose you can't ever look at me without laughin'."

Miss Eyester flipped a bit of plaster from his shirtsleeve with her thumb and finger.

"I wouldn't do anything to hurt your feelings, ever." 230

"Never?"

"Never."

"Then don't you go ridin' again with that old gummer."

"Do you care, really?" shyly.

"I'll tell the world I do!"

Miss Eyester fibbed without a pang of conscience:

"I never dreamed it."

"I thought you wouldn't look at anybody unless they had money—you bein' rich 'n' ever'thing."

"In the winter I earn my living cataloguing books in a public library. I hate it."

Pinkey laid an arm about her thin shoulders.

"Say, what's the chanct of gittin' along with you f'rever an' ever?"

"Pretty good," replied Miss Eyester, candidly.

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CHAPTER XXII

"KNOCKING 'EM FOR A CURVE"

It had been put to a vote as to whether the party should make the trip through the Yellowstone Park by motor, stopping at the hotels, or on horseback with a camping outfit.

Mr. Stott, after the persuasive manner in which he addressed a jury, argued:

"We can ride in automobiles at home. That is no novelty. Than horseback riding, there is no more healthful exercise. We are all agreed that we have had enough of hotels, while camping will be a new and delightful experience. In the brief period that we shall lie next to nature's heart we will draw strength from her bosom. By camping, we can loaf along in leisurely fashion, taking our own time for seeing the wonders of the Yellowstone, and fishing."

The programme he outlined was so sensible and attractive that everybody was in favour of it strongly except old Mr. Penrose, who declared that sleeping on the ground would give him rheumatism, and the fear that bugs would crawl in his ears made him restless. Mr. Stott, however, overcame his objection by assuring him that the ground was too dry to give any one rheumatism and he could provide himself with cotton against the other contingency. 232

The outlook for a successful trip from every viewpoint was most promising, yet there were moments when Wallie had his doubts and misgivings. He supposed that it was his experience in dry-farming which had made him pessimistic concerning all untried ventures. Certainly it had destroyed his beautiful, child-like faith in the teaching that the hairs of his head were numbered

and no harm could come to him. He had noticed that everyone who ever had dry-farmed carried the scars afterward. It was an unforgettable experience, like a narrow escape from lynching.

Pinkey, on the contrary, had no sombre thoughts to disturb him. He was filled with boundless enthusiasm; though this condition was chronic since he had become engaged to Miss Eyester.

Pinkey, in love, was worse than useless. Escorting Miss Eyester was now his regular business, with dude wrangling reduced to a side issue. Therefore it had devolved upon Wallie to buy teepees, extra bedding, food, and the thousand and one things necessary to comfort when camping.

It all had been accomplished finally, and the day came when the caravan was drawn up beside the Prouty House ready to start toward the Yellowstone.

A delighted populace blocked the sidewalk while they awaited the appearance of Miss Gaskett's friend, Miss Mercy Lane, who had arrived on a night train according to arrangement. 233

The cavalcade, if not imposing, was at least arresting. No one could pass it yawning. There was no one who had come to see the party start who did not feel repaid for the effort.

First, there was Mr. Hicks, driving four horses and the "grub-wagon," and leading the procession. He handled the lines with an aplomb reminiscent of the coaching days of Reginald Vanderbilt, together with the noble bearing of the late Ben Hur tooling his chariot. Mr. Hicks dignified the "grub-wagon" to such an extent that it was a treat to look at him.

Second in place was Pinkey, driving the tent-and-bed-wagon, with Miss Eyester on the high spring-seat beside him. Behind Pinkey came "Red" McGonnigle, driving a surrey provided for those who should become fatigued with riding horseback. The vehicle, like the stage-coach, was a bargain, sold cheaply by the original owner because of the weakness of the springs, which permitted the body to hit the axle when any amount of weight was put in it. This was a discovery they made after purchase. Aunt Lizzie Philbrick was the only passenger, though it was anticipated that Miss Mercy Lane would prefer to drive also, since she had had no previous riding.

Behind the surrey was the riding party, even more startling than when they had first burst upon Wallie in their bead-work and curio-store trappings. Mr. Stott was wearing a pair of "chaps" spotted like a pinto, while Mr. Budlong in flame-coloured angora at a little distance looked as if his legs were afire.

Their ponies peered out shamefacedly through brilliant, penitentiary-made, horse-hair bridles, and old Mr. Penrose was the envy of everybody in a greasy, limp-brimmed Stetson he had bought from a freighter. Also he had acquired a pair of 22-inch, "eagle's bill" tapaderas. He looked like a mounted pirate, and, in his evil moments, after sleeping badly, he acted like one. 234

Everyone was in high spirits and eager to get started. Mr. Stott surreptitiously spurred his horse to make him cavort more spiritedly before the spectators, and the horse responded in such a manner that the rising young attorney was obliged to cling with both hands to the saddle-horn.

When he came back, slightly paler, Wallie said curtly:

"You don't need spurs on that horse."

"I'm the best judge of that," Stott retorted.

Wallie said nothing further, for at the moment the crowd parted to permit the passing of the newcomer from Zanesville, Ohio.

As he saw her, Wallie felt willing to renew his promise to Miss Gaskett not to fall in love with her. Wallie was a charitable soul, and chivalrous, but he could not but think that Miss Mercy, who was a trained nurse, must have changed greatly since she and Miss Gaskett were school-girls.

She wore a masculine hat with a quill in it and a woollen skirt that bagged at the knees like trousers. Her hair was thin at the temples, and she wore gold glasses astride her long, "foxy" nose. Although no average cake would have held the candles to which Miss Mercy's birthdays entitled her, she was given to "middy" blouses and pink sweaters. 235

"Merce has such a unique personality that I am sure you are going to enjoy her," beamed Miss Gaskett in presenting Wallie.

Wallie murmured that he had no doubt of it, and boosted Miss Mercy into the surrey.

With nothing further to detain them, Mr. Hicks swung his lash and the four went off at a gallop, with the cooking utensils in the rear rattling so that it sounded like a runaway milk-wagon.

He had been instructed to drive ahead and select a suitable place for the noon-day luncheon in order that everything should be in readiness upon their arrival, but to the others Wallie had suggested that they ride and drive more slowly to save the horses.

In spite of Wallie's request, however, Mr. Stott, seeing the cook getting ahead, started off at a gallop to overtake him. In no uncertain voice Wallie called to him.

"You will oblige me if you will ride more slowly," Wallie said, speaking very distinctly when Mr. Stott came back to ask what was wanted.

"Why, what's the matter?"

His feigned innocence added to Wallie's anger.

"I don't want that horse ruined."

"I am paying for him," Stott returned, insolently.

"I still own him, and it's my privilege to say how he shall be ridden."

Stott dropped back suddenly but Wallie foresaw trouble with him before the trip was finished, though he meant to hold his temper as long as possible. 236

The reprimand had a beneficial effect upon the other equestrians, who had contemplated dashing after Mr. Stott, but now concluded to jog along at a reasonable gait, working off their superfluous energy in asking questions. Did eagles really carry off children? And was the earth under the Yellowstone Park hollow?

In the surrey "Red" McGonnigle was putting forth his best efforts to entertain Aunt Lizzie and Miss Mercy, which he considered as much a part of his duties as driving.

A portion of the road was through a cañon, cut from the solid rock in places, with narrow turnouts, and a precipitous descent of hundreds of feet to a sinister-looking green river roaring in the bottom.

"Now, here," said Mr. McGonnigle, as they entered it, lolling back in the seat and crossing his legs in leisurely fashion, "is where there's been all kinds of accee-dents."

He pointed with the stub of a buggy-whip:

"About there is where four horses on a coal-wagon run away and went over. Two was killed and one was crippled so they had to shoot it."

"Oh, how dread-ful!" Aunt Lizzie exclaimed, nervously.

Miss Mercy's contralto voice boomed at him:

"What happened to the driver?"

"His bones was broke in a couple of dozen places, but they picked him up, and sence, he has growed together." 237

Miss Mercy snickered.

"You see that p'int ahead of us? Onct a feller ridin' a bronc backed off there. They rolled two hundred feet together. Wonder it didn't kill 'em."

Aunt Lizzie was twisting her fingers and whispering:

"Oh, how dread-ful!"

"Jest around that bend," went on the entertainer, expectorating with deliberation before he continued, "a buggy tried to pass a hay-wagon. It was a brand-new buggy, cost all of $250, and the first time he'd took his family out in it. Smashed it to kindlin' wood. The woman threw the baby overboard and it never could see good out of one eye afterward. She caught on a tree when she was rollin' and broke four ribs, or some such matter. He'd ought to a-knowed better than to pass a hay-wagon where it was sidlin'. Good job, says I, fer havin' no judgment though I was one of his pall-bearers, as an accommodation."

Aunt Lizzie was beyond exclaiming, and Miss Mercy's toes were curling and uncurling, though she preserved a composed exterior.

After setting the brake, McGonnigle went on humorously, gesticulating spaciously while the slack of the lines swung on the single-tree:

"On this here hill the brake on a dude's automo-bubbly quit on him. When he come to the turn he went on over. Ruined the car, plumb wrecked it, and it must a cost $1,500 to $2,000. They shipped his corp' back East somewhere." 238

Pale, and shaking like an aspen, Aunt Lizzie clung tightly to Miss Mercy. The scenery was sublime, but they had no eye for it. Their gaze was riveted upon the edge of the precipice some six or eight inches from the outer wheels of the surrey, and life at the moment looked as sweet as it seemed uncertain.

Driving with one hand and pointing with the other, McGonnigle went on with the fluency for which he was celebrated:

"That sharp curve we're comin' to is where they was a head-on collision between a chap on a motorcycle and a traction en-jine they was takin' through the cañon. He was goin' too fast, anyhow—the motorcycle—and it jest splattered him, as you might say, all over the front of the en-jine."

Mr. McGonnigle put the lines between his knees and gripped them while he readjusted his hat with one hand and pointed with the other:

"You see that hangin' rock? There where it sticks over? Well, sir, two cayuses tryin' to unload their packs bounced off there and——"

A shriek in his ear interrupted McGonnigle at this juncture. He turned, startled, to see Aunt Lizzie with her fingers in her ears screaming that she was going to have hysterics.

To prove that she was a woman of her word, she had them, while Mr. McGonnigle, utterly unconscious that he was the cause, regarded her in astonishment. 239

"She's got a fit," he said to Wallie, who hurried forward.

"He's scared her out of her wits," declared Miss Mercy, glaring at him.

"Me?"

"You! You're a careless driver. I don't believe you understand horses, and I shan't ride any further with you."

"Red" jammed the whip in its socket and wrapped the lines around it. Springing over the wheel he stood by the roadside and declared defiantly:

"I'm quittin'. Hate to leave you in a pinch, Wallie, but I take sass from no female. I'd ruther herd sheep than wrangle dudes, anyhow. I tried to be entertainin', and this is the thanks I git fer it."

"Nobody asked you to talk," Miss Mercy snapped at him.

Wallie succeeded in pacifying "Red" finally and suggested that he and Pinkey exchange places. Pinkey consented reluctantly, and "Red" climbed upon the seat of the bed-wagon with a dark look at the "female" who had questioned his knowledge of horses, while he mumbled something about "fixin' her."

By ten-thirty food was the chief topic of conversation, and everyone was keeping an eye out for Hicks and the "grub-wagon." At eleven the hilarity had simmered to monosyllables, and old Mr. Penrose, who always became incredibly cross when he was hungry, rode along with his face screwed up like a bad youngster that is being carried out of church for a spanking in the vestibule. 240

"I'm so weak I can scarcely sit in the saddle!" Mrs. J. Harry Stott snapped at Wallie as if she held him responsible.

"I'm simply ravenous—starving!" declared Mrs. Budlong. She also looked at him accusingly.

By eleven-thirty they were all complaining bitterly that the cook had been allowed to get so far ahead that they should all perish of hunger before they could overtake him. Mr. Stott galloped ahead as if he were pursued by hostile Indians to see if he could see Hicks, and galloped back again to say that he could not.

At twelve the animals in a zoo just before feeding time had "nothing on" The Happy Family when it came to ferocity, but they brightened immediately as they finally caught a glimpse of Hicks' camp-fire, and grew almost cheerful when they saw him cutting bread on the lowered tail-board of the wagon, where the lunch was waiting for them.

The spot he had selected could not truthfully be called ideal, viewed from any angle, since there was no shade and the sand, sizzling hot, reflected the glare of the mid-day sun as painfully as a mirror. None, however, had the temerity to offer any criticism to Mr. Hicks personally, for his vitriolic tongue had long since properly subjugated even the rambunctious attorney.

The "dudes" dismounted stiffly and stood at a respectful distance, sniffing the bubbling coffee and watching the cook slice ham with a knife that had a blade like the sword of a Crusader. 241

Mr. Hicks had an alert, suspicious manner as if he feared that someone would jump forward and snatch something before he had given the signal.

When the operation of bread-slicing was completed, Mr. Hicks stuck the point of the knife in the tail-board and, gripping the handle, struck a pose like that of the elder Salvini, while in a sonorous voice he enumerated the delicacies he had to offer. It sounded like a roll-call, and his tone was so imperative that almost one expected the pickles and cheese to answer—"present."

"Come and get it!" he finished, abruptly, and retired to sit down under sagebrush as if he were disgusted with food and people who ate it. There Wallie joined him and from the vantage point watched his guests eat their first meal in the open.

If there was one thing upon which The Happy Family at The Colonial had prided itself more than another it was upon its punctilious observance of the amenities. There were those among the "newcomers" who averred that they carried their elaborate politeness to a point which made them ridiculous. For example, when two or more met at the door of the elevator they had been known to stand for a full minute urging precedence upon the other, and no gentleman, however bald or susceptible to draughts, would converse with a lady with his head covered.

Now Wallie felt that his eyes must have deceived him when Mr. Budlong prodded Miss Eyester in the ribs with his elbow in his eagerness to get in ahead of her, while old Mr. Penrose reached a long arm over Aunt Lizzie Philbrick's shoulder and took away a piece of apple pie upon which she already had closed her fingers. 242

When Miss Gaskett and Mr. Appel chanced to select the same slice of ham neither seemed disposed to relinquish it but displayed considerable spirit as they pulled until it gave way in its weakest sector, leaving Mr. Appel with only an inch of fat between his thumb and finger. He regarded his portion with chagrin while Miss Gaskett went off triumphantly to make a sandwich.

Mr. Stott with his usual enterprise and shrewdness had gotten next to the tail-board, where he stood munching and reviewing the food with an eye to his next selection. He was astonished to see Miss Mercy's alpine hat rising, as it were, from the earth at his feet to crowd him from his desirable position. As she stood up she jabbed him in the nostril with the quill, and Mr. Stott gave ground before he realized it. Miss Mercy snickered in appreciation of the cleverness of her manœuvre.

As Wallie observed them while waiting his opportunity to get a dill pickle or whatever crumb they might leave him, he thought grimly that if they had been without food for twenty-four hours instead of less than half a dozen, they would have been close to cannibalism. He, for one, would not care to be adrift in an open boat with Mrs. Budlong—hungry and armed with a hatchet—while Stott, he was sure would murder him for a frankfurter in those circumstances. 243

Aunt Lizzie, to whom accidents of an unusual nature seemed always to be happening, wandered off with a wedge of pie and a cup of coffee and sat down on an ant-hill.

While she sipped her coffee and drank in the scenery simultaneously, the inhabitants of the hill came out in swarms to investigate the monster who was destroying their home. They attacked her with the ferocity for which red ants are noted, and she dropped her pie and coffee and ran screaming to the wagon.

Fearful that she would be pursued by them, she got into the surrey, where she became involved in a quarrel with Miss Mercy, who was eating her lunch there.

Miss Mercy caught a butterfly that lighted on a seat-cover and pulled off first one wing and then the other in spite of Aunt Lizzie's entreaties. She dropped it on the bottom of the surrey and put her astonishingly large foot upon it.

"There," she snickered, "I squashed it."

Aunt Lizzie, to whom anything alive was as if it were human, wrung her hands in anguish.

"I think you are horrid!"

"What good is it?"

"What good are you, either? I shan't ride with you." Aunt Lizzie climbed into the third seat of the surrey, where she refused to answer Miss Mercy when she spoke to her.

The rest and food freshened the party considerably but by four o'clock they were again hungry and drooping in their saddles. Only Mr. Stott, endowed, as it seemed, with the infinite wisdom of the Almighty, retained his spirits and kept up an unending flow of instructive conversation upon topics of which he had the barest smattering of knowledge. Constantly dashing off on his part to investigate gulches and side trails caused Wallie's smouldering wrath to burn brighter, as the buckskin hourly grew more jaded. 244

Complaints increased that their horses were hard-gaited, and the voices of the ladies held plaintive notes as they declared their intention of riding in the surrey when they overtook it. Pinkey was stopped finally, and his passengers augmented by the addition of Mrs. Stott, Miss Gaskett, and Mrs. Budlong, who carefully folded their jackets to sit on.

At five o'clock Mr. Stott raced forward and returned to announce that Hicks had camped just around the bend of the river.

"You're wearing that horse out, Stott," said Wallie, coldly.

"He's feeling good—watch him!" cried the lawyer, gaily, putting spurs to the horse and disappearing.

It was a beautiful camping spot that Hicks had selected, though "Red" McGonnigle grumbled that it was not level enough for the teepees.

Old Mr. Penrose, who had fallen off his horse rather than dismounted, declared he was so tired that he could sleep on the teeth of a harrow, like a babe in its cradle. 245

"We'll be all right when we get seasoned," said Mr. Appel, cheerfully, hunting in his wife's handbag for the vaseline.

"You couldn't have a better place to start in at," "Red" commented, grimly.

On the whole, the day might be regarded as a pleasant one, and if the remainder of the trip equalled it, there was no doubt but that the party would return satisfied, which meant that they would advertise it and the next season would be even more successful.

Everyone carried wood to build a camp-fire after supper, but by the time they had it going they were too sleepy to sit up and enjoy it. They stumbled away to their several teepees with their eyes half closed and for the first time since they had known each other failed to say "pleasant dreams!" when separating for the night.

Mr. Stott lingered to regale Pinkey and Wallie for the fourteenth time with the story of the hoot-owl which had frightened him while hunting in Florida, but since it was received without much enthusiasm and he was not encouraged to tell another, he, too, retired to crawl between his blankets and "sleep on Nature's bosom" with most of his clothes on.

"I wouldn't wonder but that we'll have to hit him between the horns before the trip is over," Pinkey remarked, looking after Stott.

Wallie said nothing, but his face spoke for him.

Pinkey continued in a tone of satisfaction:

"Outside of him, everything's goin' splendid. The Yellowstone Park is the fightin'est place anybody ever heard of. I've seen life-time friends go in there campin' and come out enemies—each one sittin' on his own grub-box and not speakin'. But it don't look as if we was goin' to have any serious trouble—they're nice people." 246

"And they think the world of me," Wallie reiterated.

"I've been thinkin' I could lose the horses for two or three days and that would count up considerable. Ten dudes at $5.00 a day for three days, say—— Oh, we're sittin' pretty! We'll come out of this with a roll as big as a gambler's."

"It *looks* encouraging," Wallie replied more guardedly, though in his heart he was sharing Pinkey's optimism.

They kicked out the camp-fire and rolled up in their respective blankets, Pinkey to die temporarily, and Wallie to lie awake listening to the roar of the river and speculating as to whether Helene Spenceley had any special prejudice against the dude business.

Of course, he admitted, had he a choice in the matter, he would have preferred to have been an ambassador, a lawyer of international reputation, even a great artist; but for a start, as the foundation of a fortune, dudes were at least as good as *herring*.

With this consoling thought, Wallie turned over on a pillow which would have engaged the earnest attention of the most lax health officer, and fell into a contented slumber.

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CHAPTER XXIII

RIFTS

Before the birds had taken their heads from under their wings Miss Mercy Lane was up and crashing through the brambles on a hunt for "Red" McGonnigle.

It was a morning to thrill the soul of a taxi-cab driver, but it had no interest for Miss Mercy. The dew on the petals of the wild-rose, the opaline tints of a sweet-scented dawn meant nothing to that lady as, without a collar, her shirt-waist wrongly buttoned, her hair twisted into a hard "Psyche" knot, she searched for her enemy.

In her earnest desire to get in touch with Mr. McGonnigle as soon as possible, she clumped about, peering into the faces of the helpers, who had thrown their tarps down upon whatever spot looked a likely place for sleeping.

Pinkey she found without difficulty; also Mr. Hicks, who, awakened by the feeling that someone was looking at him, sat up and in a scandalized tone told her to go right away, from him. "Red" McGonnigle, however, whether by accident or premeditation, had repaired with his blankets to a bed-ground where the Almighty could not have found him with a spy-glass. In consequence, 248
Wallie was awakened suddenly by the booming voice of Miss Mercy demanding to know Red's whereabouts.

Her lids were puffed as if she had not closed them, and through the slits her eyes gleamed at him. She looked so altogether formidable as she stood over him that his first impulse was to duck his head under the covers.

Since it was manifestly impossible for Wallie to get to his feet as politeness demanded, and it seemed ridiculous to sit up in bed and converse with a lady he knew so slightly, it appeared that the best thing to do in the circumstances was to remain as he was, prostrate and helpless, and this he did—to take such a dressing down as made him tingle.

Aiming her finger at him, Miss Mercy declared that deliberately, wilfully, maliciously, "Red" McGonnigle had set her tent on a *hump*. More than that, he had cut down an alder, leaving some three or four sharp prongs over which he had spread her blankets. She would have been as comfortable on the teeth of a hay-rake, and had not even dozed in consequence. With her own ears she had heard "Red" McGonnigle threaten to "fix" her, and he had done it. If he was not discharged she would return to Prouty at the first opportunity. This was final.

Wallie argued vainly that it was an accident, that "Red" was altogether too chivalrous to take such a low-down revenge upon a lady, and explained that in any event it would be impossible to dispense with his services at this juncture. He declared that he regretted the matter deeply and 249
promised to prevent a recurrence.

But Miss Mercy was adamant, and intimated that Wallie was in sympathy with his hireling if not in actual "cahoots" with him.

Wallie realized that it would be impossible to resent the implication with proper dignity while lying on the flat of his back looking up at his accuser, so he said nothing, whereupon Miss Mercy flung at him as she departed:

"I intend to ask a ride back to Prouty from the first passerby, and I shall *knock* you and your ranch at every opportunity!"

She returned to her teepee to complete her toilette while Wallie took his boots from under his

pillow and drew them on glumly, feeling that much of the joy had been taken from what promised to be a perfect morning.

Mr. Hicks, too, started breakfast in a mood that was clearly melancholy, for as he rattled the pots and pans Wallie heard him reciting:

"And when my time comes, let me go—not like the galley slave at night scourged to his dungeon—but like one sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust——" He stopped suddenly, and then in a voice that chilled Wallie's blood he shouted:

"Jumping Je-hoshaphat! Git out o' that grub-box!"

He had caught Mrs. Budlong in the act of spreading jam on a cracker.

"How dare you speak so to me?" she demanded, indignantly. 250

For answer, Mr. Hicks replied autocratically:

"You ought to know by this time that I don't allow dudes snooping around when I'm cooking."

"You are insulting—I shall report you."

Mr. Hicks laughed mockingly:

"You do that and see what it gets you."

The cook quite evidently knew his power, for when Mrs. Budlong carried out her threat Wallie could only reply that he dared not antagonize Hicks, since to replace him would cause delay, inconvenience, and additional expense to everybody.

Mrs. Budlong rested all her chins upon her cameo breastpin and received the explanation coldly.

"Verra well," she said, incisively, "verra, verra well! I shall buy jam and crackers at the first station, Mr. Macpherson, and carry them with me."

Wallie had no heart to say more than:

"Indeed, Mrs. Budlong, I am so sorry——"

But she was already on the way to report the controversy to her husband.

When they had bathed their faces and hands in the river the evening before someone had referred to it poetically as "Nature's wash-basin." Wallie, seeing Mrs. Appel with her soap and towel on the way to "Nature's wash-basin," was inspired by some evil spirit to inquire how she had rested.

"Rested!" she hissed at him. "Who could rest, to say nothing of sleeping, within six blocks of Mr. Penrose? A man who snores as he does should not be permitted to have his tent among human beings. If it is ever placed near mine again, Wallie, I shall insist upon having it removed if it is 251 midnight. Knowing the trouble he has had everywhere, I am surprised at your not being more considerate."

"To-night I will attend to it. I regret very much——" Wallie mumbled.

Mrs. J. Harry Stott beckoned him aside as breakfast was being placed on the table.

Mrs. Stott had a carefully cultivated mispronunciation of great elegance when she wished to be impressive, and as soon as she began Wallie realized that something portentous was about to be imparted to him. Even the way she raised her eyebrows made him warm all over with a sense of guilt of something of which he was ignorant.

"You will excuse me if I speak frankly?"

Wallie gulped, wondering fearfully what she knew and how much.

She went on in a voice which seemed to have hoarfrost on it:

"But the fact is, I am not in the habit of eating with the *help*."

Wallie felt relief surge over him. His face cleared and he laughed light-heartedly.

"I know that, of course, Mrs. Stott, but out here it is different. Camping is particularly democratic. It has never occurred to 'Red' or Hicks that they are not welcome at the table, and I fear that they would be greatly offended if I should suggest——"

Mrs. Stott drew herself up haughtily.

"That is no concern of mine, Wallie. It is a matter of principle with me to keep servants in their 252 places. I am not a snob, but——"

"Sh-ss-sh!" Wallie looked over his shoulder in Hicks' direction.

In clarion tones she continued:

"I cannot consent to letting down the barriers even in these unconventional surroundings. You can adjust the matter to suit yourself, but I ab-so-lute-ly refuse to sit cheek by jowl with the cook and McGonnigle!"

Wallie grew solemn, as well he might, for along with the tact of a diplomat to a Balkan state it required the courage of a lion to convey the information to one of Hicks' violent disposition that he was not fit to sit at table with the wife of the rising young attorney.

It weighed on his mind through breakfast, and he was not made more comfortable by the fact

that "Red," stimulated to effervescence by so large an audience, tossed off his *bon-mots* in a steady stream, unconscious that his wit was not a treat to all who heard him and that his presence was regarded as anything but highly desirable, while Mr. Hicks brought his tin-plate and, by chance purely, elbowed himself a place beside Mrs. Stott with the greatest assurance.

Wallie decided to postpone the delicate talk of dropping a hint to Mr. Hicks until later in the day, as he had plenty to engage his attention with Miss Mercy's departure confronting him.

"Red" denied the crime with which he was charged with a face of preternatural innocence, 253
declaring that he was shocked that any one should attribute to him such a heinous offence as purposely leaving four sharp alder prongs under a lady's blankets. Nobody—bar none—had a greater respect for the sex than "Red" McGonnigle!

But Miss Mercy was not to be pacified by apologies however abject, or explanations however convincing. Implacable, and maintaining a haughty silence, she packed her suitcase and put an outing flannel nightgown—with a nap so long that it looked like a fur garment—in a fishnet bag. Having made stiff adieux to the party, she went and sat down on a rock by the roadside to await some passerby who would take her to Prouty.

She quite enjoyed herself for a time, thinking what a strong character she was, and how independent. A weaker woman would have allowed herself to be persuaded to overlook the incident, but she was of different metal. For nearly an hour this thought gave her great satisfaction, but, gradually, the monotony began to pall and she had a growing feeling of resentment that nobody missed her. It seemed deceitful, after making such an ado over her decision to leave them, to resign themselves so quickly to her absence. Mattie Gaskett might come and renew her entreaties for her to return, or, at least, keep her company!

The occasional bursts of laughter that reached her were like personal affronts and, finally, she 254
included everybody in her indignation at "Red" McGonnigle. But, as the time dragged, her mood changed perceptibly. Though she would not admit it in her secret heart, she wished that someone would come and coax her to reconsider. From this stage, while the tents were being dismantled and packed into the bed-wagon accompanied by much merriment, she came to a point where she tried to think of some excuse that would enable her to return without seeming to make any concession.

As it happened, the only person who gave Miss Mercy any thought as she waited forlornly by the roadside was Aunt Lizzie Philbrick. Although she and Miss Mercy had not been speaking since the episode of the butterfly, her tender conscience was troubled that she had not said good-bye to her. The more she thought about it the more strongly it urged her to be forgiving and magnanimous to the extent of wishing Miss Mercy a pleasant journey. With this purpose in view Aunt Lizzie left the others and started for the roadside. If she had not been otherwise engaged at the moment, Miss Mercy might have seen Aunt Lizzie's white sailor hat bobbing above the intervening bushes, but she was intent on learning the cause of a rustling she had heard in the leaves behind her. It was a snake, undoubtedly, and it flashed through Miss Mercy's mind that here was her opportunity not only to return to camp but to go back a heroine.

She set her fishnet bag on the stump she vacated and provided herself with a cudgel before 255
starting to investigate. Advancing cautiously, she saw a bunch of tall grass wave in a suspicious manner. She smote the clump with her cudgel, and a large, warty toad jumped out into the open. It was stunned, and stood blinking as if trying to locate the danger.

"Nasty thing!" exclaimed Miss Mercy, viciously, and raised her club to finish it.

The blow landed, and Miss Mercy and the toad saw stars simultaneously, for Aunt Lizzie brought down a four-foot stick and crushed in the crown of Miss Mercy's alpine hat.

"You dread-ful woman!" Aunt Lizzie shrieked at her, and it was her purpose to strike again but the stick was rotten, and since only some six inches remained in her hand, she had to content herself with crying:

"You horrible creature! You unnatural woman! 'Shady' Lane—you belong in an asylum!"

Since Miss Mercy had been told this before, she resented it doubly, and no one can say what else might have happened if Wallie, hearing the disturbance, had not hurried forward to discover what was occurring.

"She was killing a hop-toad!" Aunt Lizzie screamed, hysterically. Then her legs collapsed, while Miss Mercy boomed that if she did, it was none of Aunt Lizzie's business—it was not her hop-toad.

The astounding news passed from mouth to mouth that Aunt Lizzie and Miss Mercy had been fighting in the brush with clubs, like Amazons, and everyone rushed forward to view the 256
combatants and to learn the details, but the chugging of a motor sent Miss Mercy into the middle of the road to flag it before they could hear her side of the story.

It proved to be no less a person than Rufus Reed, who was transporting provisions on a truck between Prouty and a road-camp in the Park. Rufus welcomed company and intimated that his only wonder was that they were not all leaving.

So Miss Mercy clambered up beside Rufus and without looking back started on her return journey to Zanesville, Ohio, to soothe the brow of the suffering and minister to the wants of the dying in her professional capacity.

Pinkey sombrely looked after the cloud of dust in which Rufus and the Angel of Mercy vanished.

"That's one chicken we counted before it was hatched," he observed, regretfully, to Wallie.

The scenery was sublime that morning and the party were in ecstasies, but mere mountains, waterfalls, and gorges could not divert Wallie's mind from the disquieting fact that he must somehow convey the information to Mr. Hicks that his presence at table with the guests was undesirable.

As he rode, he framed tactful sentences in which to break the news to that formidable person, and he had finally a complete and carefully prepared speech which he meant to deliver in a friendly but firm manner. The result he could only guess at. Hicks might quit, or he might resent the affront to his dignity with any convenient weapon, or after a savage outburst of sarcasm he might make the best of the situation. The only thing that Wallie could not imagine was a calm 257
acquiescence. It would be easier to replace Mr. Hicks, however, than to acquire a new party of dudes at this late season, so Wallie nerved himself to the ordeal.

The passengers who preferred to ride in the surrey had now increased to a number which made it necessary for them to sit in each other's laps, and it devolved upon Wallie to drive their horses. Herding loose horses is sometimes a task to strain the temper, and these were that kind of horses, so that by the time the party reached the noon-day camp Wallie was in a more fitting mood to confront Mr. Hicks than when they had started.

The cook was busy over the camp-fire when Wallie determined to speak and have it over.

"Don't let him tree you or run you into the river." Pinkey, who knew Wallie's purpose, warned him jocosely. "I'm glad it ain't me has the job of tellin' that hyena that he ain't as welcome as the President."

Wallie could not share Pinkey's amusement. On the contrary, it annoyed him. That was the worst of his partner nowadays, he was so happy that nothing troubled him. Perhaps envy was at the bottom of this irritation; at any rate, Wallie frowned and told himself that he never would have believed that love could make such a simpleton of anybody.

As Wallie drew nearer, through the smoke and steam rising from various cooking utensils he noted that Mr. Hicks' expression was particularly melancholy and his colour indicated that a large amount of bile had accumulated in his system. There was something tragic in the very way 258
he stirred the frying potatoes, and as Wallie hesitated Hicks set his fists on his hips and recited in a voice vibrating with feeling:

> "Into this Universe, and why not knowing,
> Nor whence, like water will-nilly flowing,
> And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
> I know not whither willy-nilly blowing."

It did not seem a propitious moment to "put Mr. Hicks in his place," as Mrs. Stott had phrased it, but Wallie had no desire to nerve himself twice for the same ordeal; therefore, with something of the desperate courage which comes to high-strung persons about to have a tooth extracted, Wallie advanced and inquired cordially:

"Well, Mr. Hicks, how are things coming?"

"I am not complaining," replied Mr. Hicks, in a tone which intimated that once he started enumerating his grievances he would not know where to finish.

"Pleasant people, aren't they?" Wallie suggested.

"So is a menagerie—after it's eaten."

"They do have appetites," Wallie admitted. "I suppose it's living in the open."

"I've cooked for section hands on the Burlington, and they were canary-birds beside these Poland Chinas. We had ought to brought troughs instead of tinware."

"You mustn't speak so of our guests," Wallie reprimanded. 259

Hicks went on wrathfully:

"That fat sister in the cameo breastpin—she swiped a can of potted chicken on me yesterday—she's a regular 'camp-robber'."

Wallie interposed hastily:

"We mustn't have any trouble. I want to get through this trip peaceably. In fact, Mr. Hicks, it's along this line that I wished to have a word with you."

Mr. Hicks looked at him quickly and suspiciously.

"Has any of 'em been kickin' on me?"

Wallie hesitated, casting a furtive eye about as he did so for the most convenient exit.

"Not kicking, I wouldn't say *kicking*, Mr. Hicks, but it has been suggested—I have been thinking that it might be *pleasanter* for you and Red to have your own table."

Mr. Hicks stopped turning over the potatoes and looked at him for what seemed to Wallie a full minute.

"In other words," he said, finally, in a voice that was oily and coaxing, as if he wanted the truth from him, "the dudes don't want the cook and the horse-wrangler to eat with them?"

Wallie noticed uneasily that while Hicks spoke he was tentatively feeling the edge of the knife

he had been using. Instinctively Wallie's eyes sought the route he had selected, as he replied conciliatingly:

"No reflection upon you and Red is intended, Mr. Hicks; it is just that Eastern people have different customs, and we have to humour them, although we may not agree with them."

There was another silence, in which Hicks continued to thumb the knife in a manner that kept Wallie at a tension, then he said with a suavity which somehow was more menacing than an outburst:

"Perhaps it *would* be better for us rough-necks to eat at the second table. It hadn't occurred to me that our society might not be agreeable to ladies and gentlemen. I'm glad you mentioned it."

Hicks seemed to purr, actually. His tone was caressing—like the velvet touch of a tiger—and his humble acceptance of the situation was so unnatural that Wallie felt himself shiver with apprehension. Was he capable of putting ground-glass in the sugar, he wondered, or dropping a spider in something?

"Red" was plainly disgruntled when he found himself, as it were, segregated, and he sulked openly; but Hicks, on the contrary, was so urbane and respectful that everyone remarked his changed manner, and Mrs. Stott triumphantly demanded to know if it were not proof of her contention that servants were the better for being occasionally reminded of their position.

"I am not a snob," she reiterated, "but common people really spoil my appetite when I am obliged to eat with them."

Wallie, however, could not share her elation, for there was that in Mr. Hicks' eye whenever he met it which renewed his uneasy forebodings as to ground glass and spiders.

CHAPTER XXIV

HICKS THE AVENGER

The remarkable change in Mr. Hicks' manner continued the next morning. It was so radical that no one could fail to observe it and the comments were frequent, while Mrs. Stott crowed openly.

From haughty independence he had become so anxious to please that he was almost servile, and his manner toward the wife of the rising young attorney particularly was that of a humble retainer fawning at the feet of royalty. During breakfast he stood at a respectful distance, speaking only when spoken to, and jumping to serve them.

This attitude quickly dissipated the fear which he had inspired in The Happy Family, and by noon they were not only calling him "Hicks" but "Ellery." Then, this stage of familiarity having been passed in safety, Mr. Stott humorously dubbed him "Cookie," and the name was adopted by everyone.

Mrs. Budlong ventured to complain that there was too much shortening in the biscuit. This was a real test of the sincerity of his reformation since, if such a thing were possible, he had been even more "touchy" upon the subject of his cooking than his dignity. No one could doubt but that the change was genuine when he not only received the criticism meekly but actually thanked her for calling his attention to it.

Thus encouraged, Mr. Appel declared that he wished he would not fry the ham to chips and boil the "daylights" out of the coffee. Mr. Hicks bowed servilely and replied that he would try to remember in future. Mrs. Stott took occasion to remark that his vegetables would be better for less seasoning and more cooking, and Miss Gaskett thought his dried fruit would be improved by soaking over night and additional sweetening.

Mr. Hicks received these criticisms in a humility that was pathetic when compared with his former arrogance. He looked crushed as he stood with bowed head and drooping shoulders as if his proud, untrammelled spirit had been suddenly broken.

Miss Eyester felt sorry for him and asserted that she could not recall when she had enjoyed food so much and eaten so heartily. Indeed, she had been such a gourmand that she had gained a pound and six ounces, if the scales upon which she had been weighed in Prouty were accurate.

Mr. Stott, however, who was in one of his waggish moods, undid all that she might have accomplished in the way of soothing Hicks' injured feelings, by inquiring facetiously if he would mind rolling him out a couple of pie-crusts to be tanned and made into bedroom slippers.

Mr. Hicks laughed heartily along with the others, and only Wallie caught the murderous glitter through his downcast lashes.

It developed that the Yellowstone Park was a place with which Hicks was thoroughly familiar from having made several trips around the Circle. He was not only acquainted with points of interest off the beaten track passed unseen by the average tourist, but he suggested many original and diverting sports—like sliding down a snowbank in a frying-pan—which would not have occurred to any of them.

By the time the party had reached the Lake Hotel they were consulting him like a Baedeker, and he answered every question, however foolish, with a patience and an affability that were most praiseworthy. Their manner toward him was a kind of patronizing camaraderie, while Mrs. Stott treated him with the gracious tolerance of a great lady unbending.

A disbelief in the ability of the leopard to change its spots made Wallie sceptical regarding Hicks' altered disposition, yet he did his best to convince himself that he was wrong when Hicks went out and caught a trout from the Yellowstone Lake expressly for Mrs. Stott's supper.

It was a beautiful fish as it lay on the platter, brown, crisp, and ornamented with lemon. Mr. Hicks offered it much as the head of John the Baptist might have been brought to Salome.

"Thank you, Hicks," said Mrs. Stott, kindly.

"I hope you'll like it, ma'am," he murmured, humbly. 264

The mark of favour seemed to bear out Mrs. Stott's contention that inferiors should not be treated as equals in any circumstances. Now, with her fork in the fish, Mrs. Stott looked around the table and inquired graciously if she might not divide it with someone?

Everyone politely declined except Mrs. Budlong, who looked at it so wistfully that Mrs. Stott lost no time in transferring it to her plate. She ate with gusto and declared after tasting it:

"It is delicious, simply delicious! I never remember eating another with quite the same delicate flavour. I presume," addressing herself to Mr. Hicks, who was standing with arms akimbo enjoying her enjoy it, "it is due to something in the water?"

"I presume so," he replied, respectfully, and added: "The trout in the Yellowstone Lake are said to be very nourishing."

It was natural that Mrs. Stott should feel a little flattered by this evidence of partiality even from a menial, also she noticed that Mrs. Budlong was following each mouthful with the eyes of a hungry bird-dog so she could not refrain from saying further:

"It is such a delightful change from ham and bacon. I am not sure," she averred, laughingly, "that I shall not eat the head and fins, even."

"I wish *I* was in such favour," Mrs. Budlong declared, enviously.

"Never mind, Honey Dumplin'," said Mr. Budlong, "I shall go out after supper and catch your breakfast." 265

"You ought to get a boatload," Hicks added quickly, "if you find the right place."

"I saw them jumping by the million where I was walking before supper." Mr. Appel volunteered to conduct Mr. Budlong to the spot as soon as they were finished eating.

Everyone who had fishing-tackle decided to avail himself of this wonderful opportunity, and they all followed Mr. Appel except Mr. and Mrs. Stott, who preferred to fish by themselves from the bridge over the Yellowstone river.

They were the last to leave but returned in not more than twenty minutes, Mr. Stott supporting his wife in what seemed to be a fainting condition.

Wallie hastened forward to lend his assistance if necessary.

"Is she ill?" he inquired, solicitously.

"Ill! She is sick at her stomach and no wonder!" He was plainly angry and appeared to direct his wrath at Wallie.

While Wallie wondered, it did not seem a propitious moment to ask questions, and he would have turned away had Mr. Stott not said peremptorily:

"Wait a minute. I want to speak to you."

Having laid Mrs. Stott, who was shuddering, on her blankets and administered a few drops of aromatic spirits of ammonia, he dropped the flap of her teepee and beckoned Wallie curtly:

"You come with me."

Wallie could not do else than follow him, his wonder growing as he led the way to the camp kitchen where Mr. Hicks was engaged at the moment in the task which he referred to as "pearl-diving." 266

He did not appear surprised to see them in his domain, on the contrary he seemed rather to be expecting them, for immediately he took his hands out of the dish-water, wiped them on the corner of his apron, and reaching for a convenient stick of stove-wood laid it on the corner of the table with a certain significance in the action.

"Make yourself to home, gents," he said, hospitably, indicating the wagon-tongue and a cracker-box for seats, respectively. "Anything in particular I can do for you?" He looked at Mr. Stott guilelessly.

"You can answer me a few questions." Mr. Stott fixed a sternly accusing eye upon him. "Hicks,

was, or was not, that trout you gave my wife, wormy?"

Mr. Hicks, who seemed to relish the situation, pursed his lips and considered. Finally he asked in a tone which showed that he had pride in his legal knowledge:

"Will I or will I not incriminate myself by answering?"

"You probably will if I'm correct in my suspicions. I want the truth."

"Then," replied Mr. Hicks, while his hand slipped carelessly to the stick of stove-wood, "if you force the issue, I will say that I've seen a good many wormy trout come out of the Yellowstone but that was the worst I ever met up with."

Mr. Stott advanced belligerently.

"And you dare boast of it!" 267

"I'm not boasting—I'm just telling you," replied Mr. Hicks, calmly. "An Eye for an Eye, a Tooth for a Tooth, that's my motto, and your wife thought I wasn't good enough to eat at the table with her."

"You hear?" Stott turned to Wallie furiously. "He did it on purpose. I demand that you discharge this fellow!"

Mr. Hicks' fingers caressed the stove-wood while he waited Wallie's answer.

Wallie squirmed between the two of them.

"It was reprehensible, Mr. Stott, I am more distressed than I can tell you. I have no excuse to offer for Hicks' action, but the truth is, as he knows and has taken advantage of it, I cannot replace him and it is impossible to get along without a cook with so large a party."

"You will, then, not discharge him?" Stott demanded.

"I am helpless," Wallie reiterated.

Hicks grinned triumphantly.

"In that case," Mr. Stott declared in a tone which implied that a tremendous upheaval of some kind would follow his decision, "my wife and I will leave your party and continue through the Park by motor."

Wallie felt that it was useless to argue with any one so determined, so he made no effort to persuade Mr. Stott to remain, though the deflection of two more persons was a serious matter to him and Pinkey.

Without waiting to say good-bye to the others, the Stotts paid their bill and departed, walking so 268
erect in their indignation as they started down the road toward the Lake Hotel that they seemed to lean backward.

It was not yet dark when Mr. Stott, stepping briskly and carrying his Gladstone bag, raincoat, and umbrella in a jaunty manner, came into camp announcing breezily that he had decided, upon reflection, not to "bite off his nose to spite his face." He declared that he would not let the likes of Ellery Hicks upset his plans for touring the Yellowstone, and while his wife refused to return he meant to carry out his original intention.

But the real reason for Mr. Stott's decision, as Wallie suspected from the frequency with which he had discovered him sitting upon a log in secluded spots counting his money, was that the hotel rates and motor fare were far higher then he had anticipated.

Mrs. Stott's absence did not leave the gap which she had anticipated. In fact, after the first evening her name was never mentioned, and Mr. Stott's marital ties rested so lightly upon him that a stranger would never have known they existed. He gravitated toward Miss Gaskett with a promptitude which gave rise to the suspicion that he had had his eye upon her, and Miss Gaskett responded so enthusiastically that it was a matter for gossip.

It was noted that she took to doing her hair up at night on "wavers" and used her lipstick with 269
greater frequency, and whereas she had vowed she meant never again to get in the saddle she now rode with Mr. Stott daily.

The ladies who had known Miss Gaskett for twenty-five years, and nothing to her discredit, were not prepared to say that she was a huzzy and a vampire without further evidence, but they admitted to each other privately that they always had felt there was something queer and not quite straightforward about Mattie.

Miss Gaskett, who looked like a returned missionary that had had a hard time of it carrying the Light into the dark places, seemed rather elated than depressed at the aspersions cast upon her character, and by the time they reached the "Paint Pots" she was flaunting Mr. Stott shamelessly, calling him "Harry" before everybody, and in the evening sitting with him by the camp-fire on the same saddle-blanket.

At Mammoth Hot Springs Mrs. Budlong showed her disapproval by refusing to speak to Miss Gaskett, and Miss Gaskett replied by putting on a peek-a-boo blouse that was a scandal.

But Mrs. Budlong herself was not in too high favour, since to the sin of gluttony she had added that of lying and been caught at it. It was a small matter, but, as Mrs. Appel declared indignantly, it is trifles that betray character, and Mrs. Budlong was treated with marked coldness by the ladies to whom she had prevaricated.

It was known beyond the question of a doubt that Mrs. Budlong had purchased food and kept it

in her teepee. Therefore, when asked for something to ward off a faint feeling before dinner and she had denied having anything, they were outspoken in their resentment. 270

"There she stood and lied to our faces," Mrs. Appel declared to her husband afterward, "while her mouth was shining. I could smell sardines on her and a big cracker crumb was lying on her bosom. Indeed, it's a true saying they have in this country that to know people you must camp with them. I never would have thought that of Hannah Budlong!"

It was because of this incident, and the strained relations which resulted from her perfidy, that none of her erstwhile friends responded to her invitation to join her in a bath in a beaver dam of which Mr. Hicks told her when they camped early the next afternoon.

Mrs. Budlong's phlegmatic body contained an adventurous spirit, and the delights of a bath in a beaver dam in the heart of a primeval forest appealed to her strongly.

To Mr. Hicks, who sought her out purposely to tell her about it, she confided:

"Hicks, underneath my worldly exterior I am a Child of Nature. I love the simple, the primitive. I would live as a Wild Thing if I could choose my environment."

Mr. Hicks nodded sympathetically and understandingly, and returned the confidence.

"I am convinced that I was a faun when the world was young. There are times when I feel the stirrings of my wild nature." 271

Mrs. Budlong regarded him attentively. She never had thought of him as a faun but now she noticed that his ears *were* peculiar.

Nobody could have been more obliging and interesting than Mr. Hicks as he guided her to the beaver dam and explained its construction. It had long since been abandoned by the industrious animals that had built it, but their work had been so well done that it was in as good condition as when they had left it.

There was nothing to fear from beavers; anyway, Hicks assured her, he never had known a beaver to attack anybody. In this isolated spot she was as safe from intrusion as if she were in her own bathroom, and, after tramping down a spot in the brush for her to stand on, he went away declaring that he was sure she would have an experience she always would remember.

Left alone, Mrs. Budlong felt of the water. It was, as Hicks had said, even warmer than tepid from standing—an ideal temperature. The brush grew high around the pond formed by the back-water and made a perfect shelter. No fear of prying eyes need disturb her.

Then a daring thought came to her which made her black eyes sparkle. Suppose she did not wear any bathing suit! What an adventure to relate to her intimate friends when she returned to Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania! It laid hold of her imaginative mind, and the result was that Mrs. Budlong hung her suit on a bush and went in *au naturelle*. 272

She waded in cautiously, for the bottom was soft and oozy and there were little patches of green floating on the surface that she did not so much like the looks of. Otherwise conditions were perfect, and Mrs. Budlong submerged like a submarine when she reached the middle of it. She came up and stood looking at the sky above her, enjoying the feeling of the sunshine on her skin, and the soft, warm breeze that caressed her. She smiled at an interested blue-jay, then submerged again, deeper, and the tide rose so that the water lapped bushes and pebbles that had not been wet all summer.

Her smile grew wider as she thought what the others were missing, and was considering how much she dared embellish the adventure without being detected, when, suddenly, a look of horror came to her face and stayed there, while screams that sounded more like the screeches of a lynx or mountain-lion than those of a human being scared the blue-jay and brought those in camp up standing. Piercing, hair-raising, unnatural as they were, Mr. Budlong recognized them.

"My wife! Help! Murder! Hicks, where is she? Find a weapon and come with us!"

"I gotta get supper," Hicks replied, heartlessly.

Mr. Appel, Mr. Stott, and old Mr. Penrose dashed into their tents and dashed out carrying firearms that had been sealed by the Park officials, as is customary, while Mr. Budlong in his frenzy snatched a pair of scissors from Miss Eyester and headed the posse which expected to pursue the murderer. He was not a murderer yet, however, for Mrs. Budlong's screams had not diminished in volume, although it was feared that worse than death might already have befallen her. Her shrieks guided them like a lighthouse siren, so they lost no time in taking wrong directions but, at that, it was a considerable distance and Mr. Budlong, in spite of the agonized thoughts which goaded him forward, was so handicapped by his asthma that he gradually fell to the rear of the rescue party. 273

Mr. Stott was then in the lead, with Mr. Appel a close second, until the latter, who was wearing bedroom slippers, stumped his toes against a rock with such force that he believed them broken. He dropped down immediately with the pain of it and sat weaving to and fro, clasping his foot to his breast while the others passed him.

Mr. Stott called that help was arriving as he crashed through the brush in the vicinity of the beaver dam. To his astonishment Mrs. Budlong shrieked:

"Don't come!" and went on screaming. When he reached the pond he stopped short and stood there, and old Mr. Penrose joined him an instant later.

Mr. Appel, alternately limping and hopping yet covering ground with surprising rapidity,

reached the others ahead of Mr. Budlong, who, staggering with exhaustion, huge drops on his pallid face, and wheezing like an old accordeon, all but fainted when he saw the wife of his bosom. 274

Mrs. Budlong, looking like a corn-fed Aphrodite, stood in the middle of the pool, with her fat white back, wet and glistening, flecked with brown particles that resembled decayed vegetation.

"What's the matter, Honey Dumplin'?" cried Mr. Budlong, shocked and bewildered.

For answer, Mrs. Budlong screamed the harder.

"I know!" piped up Mr. Appel. "She's covered with leeches—blood-suckers—and can't get 'em off. I got 'em once swimmin' in stagnant water."

When he spoke he called attention to the fact of his presence and that of Mr. Stott and old Mr. Penrose. Instead of being grateful for the information, and for the assistance the others had expected to render, Mr. Budlong turned upon them all furiously:

"Get out of here you Peeping Toms and spying libertines! Haven't you any shame about you?"

He raised the scissors so threateningly that as soon as they recovered from their astonishment they retreated, but, at that, their haste was not sufficient to appease an outraged husband. Mr. Budlong picked up a pebble and threw it with such a sure aim that it bounced between Mr. Stott's shoulder-blades.

When he had picked off the blood-suckers that were battening on Mrs. Budlong, the two returned to camp and lost no time in serving notice on Wallie that they were leaving by the first passing conveyance if they had to buy it.

Whether or not Mr. Hicks had known of the leeches was a matter for much discussion, and opinion was about equally divided as to his innocence. He disclaimed all knowledge of them, however, and went about with the air of one cruelly maligned. 275

His martyr-like pose was not convincing to Wallie, who could not rid himself of the suspicion that the incident had been planned, though Pinkey contended that he did not believe Hicks was "deep" enough to think of anything like that.

"Anyhow, he's cost us three dudes," said Wallie, which remark was sufficient to set Pinkey figuring with a stick.

"Three head of dudes at $5.00 a day for, say, eleven days is, say——"

"They're gone and that's all there is to it. The thing for us to do is to see that no more leave," Wallie interrupted practically.

"I'm not worryin' about them," Pinkey replied, confidently, "if we can jest hold that cook. We've got to humour him till we git through this trip, then after he's paid off I aim to work him over and leave him for somebody to drag out."

But as if to make amends for the loss he had caused his employers, Hicks' manner grew increasingly saccharine and he redoubled his efforts to provide entertainment for the guests. By the time they arrived at the Cañon Hotel Wallie was questioning his suspicions of Hicks and felt inclined to believe that he had been hasty in his judgment.

He was undoubtedly an asset, for the entire party hung on his words and relied upon him to see that they missed nothing of interest. Mr. Stott was indebted to him for an experience which relegated the Florida hoot-owl to the background, though the thrill of the adventure was so intermingled with anguish that it was impossible to tell where one left off and the other began. 276

Sliding down the snow-covered side of a mountain in a frying-pan was fraught with all the sensations Hicks had described and some he had omitted.

When they had reached the particular spot which he had recommended for the sport, in lieu of a frying-pan, Hicks gave Mr. Stott a well-worn gold-pan that he had found somewhere.

Starting at the top with the party as spectators, Mr. Stott shot down the side like the proverbial bullet, but midway his whoops of ecstasy changed to cries of acute distress, owing to the fact that the friction wore a hole through the pan to the size of a dollar, and Mr. Stott, unable to stop his unique toboggan or endure the torture longer, turned over and finished the trip on his stomach.

Mr. Stott's eyes often rested upon Hicks afterward with a questioning look in them, but the cook's solicitude had been so genuine that cynical as his legal training had made him, he was obliged to think that it was purely an accident which might not happen one time in a million.

No point in the Park had been anticipated more than the camp at the Cañon where Mr. Hicks averred that the bears came in swarms to regale themselves upon the hotel garbage. Their tour thus far had been a disappointment in that the wild animals, with which they had been informed the Park teemed, were nowhere in evidence. 277

A deer had crossed the road ahead of them and they had gazed at a band of elk through Mr. Penrose's field-glasses, but otherwise they had seen nothing that they could not have seen in Pennsylvania.

Mr. Hicks' tales of the bears had aroused their interest to such a point that as soon as the camp site was selected they loaded their cameras and kodaks and set off immediately to get pictures while the light was favourable.

It chanced to be one of the days, however, when the bears had no taste for garbage and although they waited until nearly supper-time not a bear put in its appearance. Mr. Penrose, in particular, was disappointed and vexed about it, and while it was unreasonable to hold Hicks in any way accountable for their absence, he could not refrain from saying disagreeably:

"I think you have exaggerated this bear business, Hicks. I have no doubt that a bear or two may come down occasionally, I have the word of others for it, but as for droves of bears—swarms—I think you have overstated."

Mr. Hicks cringed under the criticism, and admitted with a conciliatory whine in his voice that was rather sickening:

"Perhaps I did enlarge a little, Mr. Penrose. Possibly I was over-anxious to be interesting. I apologize sincerely if I have misled and disappointed you. I hope, however, that you will yet have the opportunity of seeing at least one before we leave here." 278

"No such luck," Mr. Penrose growled at him. "I haven't any idea that I'll see even the tracks. It's a good idea to cut in two everything you're told in this country and then divide it."

Mr. Penrose was so hard on Hicks that Mr. Appel interposed quickly:

"Do they ever come around at night, Cookie?"

"So I have been informed," Mr. Hicks replied, conservatively.

Pinkey was about to say that bears travelled more by night than in daytime, when Mr. Appel declared that he intended to sleep in the sleeping bag he had brought with him but which Mrs. Appel had not permitted him to use because she felt nervous alone, in her teepee.

Mrs. Appel protested against Mr. Appel thus recklessly exposing himself to danger but Mr. Appel was mulish in the matter.

"If, by chance, one *should* come into camp I would have a good look at him. I may never have another such opportunity."

"If you want to take your life in your hands, well and good."

So, after supper, Mr. Appel unrolled his sleeping bag and spread it on a level spot not far from the supply wagon. Then he kissed Mrs. Appel, who turned her cheek to him, and buttoned himself into the bag.

The talk of bears had made Aunt Lizzie Philbrick so nervous that as an extra precaution she 279
pinned the flap of her tent down securely with a row of safety-pins and Mr. Stott not only slept in more of his clothes than usual but put a pair of brass knuckles under his pillow.

These brass knuckles had been presented to Mr. Stott by a grateful client for whom he had obtained damages from a street railway company for injuries received through being ejected from a saloon six months prior to the date upon which he had fallen off the car step.

Brass knuckles and a convenient length of lead-pipe were favourite weapons with the clientele which gave to the waiting room of Mr. Stott's law office an odour reminiscent of a Wayfarers' Lodging House.

The night was a dark one, so dark in fact that old Mr. Penrose felt some little hesitation when it came bed-time over going off to sleep by himself in the brush where, owing to his unfortunate habit of snoring so loud as to be beyond anything human, they now placed his teepee.

There was not a glimmer of moonlight or starlight to guide him as he went stumbling and crashing through the brush to his rag residence. His thoughts were not so much of four-footed visitors as of footpads and the ease with which they could attack him and get away with his grandfather's watch which he was wearing.

Out in the open, Mr. Appel was enjoying the novelty tremendously, though he was a little too warm for comfort in his fleece-lined bag. But after the last candle had been extinguished he 280
called to his wife cheerily:

"Are you all right, dearie?"

Mrs. Appel was not to be so easily propitiated and did not answer, so he called again:

"This is great—simply great! I wish you were with me."

Only Mr. Appel and his Maker knew that he screwed up his cheek and winked at the fabrication.

Sleep came quickly to the tired tourists, and soon there was no sound save the distant tinkle of the bell on one of the horses and the faint rumble of Mr. Penrose's slumbers.

It was eleven o'clock or thereabouts, and the clouds had rifted letting through the starlight, when dark forms began to lumber from the surrounding woods and pad around the camp, sniffing at various objects and breathing heavily.

There were bears of all sizes and ages, ranging from yearlings to grandfathers whose birthdays were lost in antiquity. Mr. Appel, who was a light sleeper and the first to discover them, would have sworn on a monument of Bibles that there were at least fifty of them—the size of mastodons.

Palpitating in his sleeping bag in the midst of them, he may be excused for exaggeration, although, exactly, there were only eight of them.

The cold sweat broke out on Mr. Appel and he thought that surely the thumping of his heart

must attract their attention. In such mortal terror as he never had experienced or imagined he quaked while he speculated as to whether the bear that first discovered him would disembowel him with one stroke of his mighty paw, and leave him, or would scrunch his head between his paws and sit down and eat on him? 281

But once the bears had located the supply-wagon, they went about their business like trained burglars. Standing on their hind legs, they crowded about it, tearing open sacks, scattering food, tossing things hither and thither, jostling each other and grunting when they found something to their liking.

Their grunting and quarrelling finally awakened Hicks and McGonnigle, who started up in their blankets, yelling. Their whoops aroused everybody except old Mr. Penrose, who was sleeping with his deaf ear uppermost and would not have heard a Big Bertha.

Mr. Stott slipped on his brass knuckles and stood with his head out of the tent opening, adding his shouts to those of Hicks and McGonnigle, who, by now, were hurling such missiles as they could lay their hands on. Instead of having hysterics as might have been expected, Aunt Lizzie Philbrick astonished herself and others by standing out in the open with her petticoat over her nightgown, prepared to give battle with the heel of her slipper to the first bear that attacked her.

It was not until Mr. Hicks got hold of two washbasins and used them as cymbals that the bears paid any attention. But this sound, added to the pandemonium of screaming women, finally frightened them. Then, scattering in all directions, they started back to the shadows. 282

Suddenly Mr. Appel let out such a cry as seemed that it must not only split his throat but rend the very heavens. Small wonder! A cinnamon bear weighing in the neighbourhood of eight hundred pounds planted its left hind foot in the pit of his stomach as it went galloping away to the timber.

In the brush where Mr. Penrose had been sleeping tranquilly other things were happening. In the midst of his slumbers, a dream in which he thought he was being dragged to the fire like a calf for branding came to him. The dream grew so real that it awakened him. He received a swift and unpleasant impression that he was moving, then he was startled to find that he was not only moving, but moving so rapidly that the canvas bottom of his tent was scraping on the rocks and brush over which it travelled.

Mr. Penrose was enraged instantly. At best he had little patience with practical jokers and none at all with one who had the impudence to awaken him. He called out angrily.

The tent stopped moving and there was quiet.

Mr. Penrose, who had raised himself on his elbow, laid down and was about to begin where he had left off when his domicile resumed its journey.

Now thoroughly aroused, he sprang up and tore at the flap-fastenings.

"This is going to stop right here!" he cried, furiously. "I do not appreciate this odious Western humour. You have chosen the wrong person to play your jokes on!" 283

He reached for the pointed fish-pole which was lying in its case in the bottom of the tent and stepped through the opening.

A burly figure in a big overcoat stood in the deep shadow confronting him.

Mr. Penrose was bare-footed and his soles were tender but he advanced far enough to bring the pole down with a thwack upon the head of the intruder.

"Woof! Woof!"

The answer raised his hair and galvanized his whiskers.

"Woof! Woof!" A great paw fanned the air—he could feel the wind from it plainly as it reached out to cuff him—and the claws on the end of it tore the front of the flannel shirt in which he slept to ribbons.

"Woof! Woof!" And then a roar that reverberated through the timber.

Mr. Penrose swore afterward that the hot breath of the brute was in his face, but the statement is open to question since at the first "Woof!" he had fallen into his tent backward.

No one dreamed of the adventure Mr. Penrose was having until he appeared among them with his shirt bosom in shreds and trembling like an aspen. In one hand he carried a sizeable chunk of bacon.

"This," he cried, brandishing it, "is what I found tied to my teepee!"

The explanation was obvious, someone had baited his tent for bear on purpose, and, since there was no way of obtaining evidence against the culprit, Mr. Penrose in his unreasoning rage accused everybody. 284

"Ever since I came, you have all had a pick on me!" He glared at them. "You needn't think you're so smart I haven't seen it."

Everyone was so surprised at the accusation that they could only stare, speechless, at him. With his white beard, rags, and bare-footed, Mr. Penrose looked like the Count of Monte Cristo telling the world what he was going to do to it as he added, waving the bacon:

"I'm going home to-morrow—to Delaware—back to my peach orchard—and if any one of you

ever say you know me—much less speak to me—I shall deny it. I'm done with the whole caboodle of you!"

Protestations were useless and efforts to dissuade him from his purpose of leaving. The next morning he packed his bag and started down the road without saying good-bye to any one.

His departure reduced the party to half its original number, and that was bad enough, but when by lunch-time Mr. Appel had developed a soreness which led him to believe he was injured internally and should consult a physician, the situation became infinitely worse to Wallie and Pinkey.

As a matter of course they expected his wife to accompany him, but what they had not known was that Miss Gaskett had been put in Mrs. Appel's charge by her parents and in the light of her indiscreet conduct with Mr. Stott it was deemed best that she should return with them. 285

It was a terrible disappointment to Miss Gaskett, who cried bitterly and in an unguarded moment told her age, approximately, sobbing that it was preposterous that one of her years should not be permitted to finish a trip which she was so enjoying.

But Mrs. Appel was obdurate, declaring that she did not care to take the responsibility of leaving her without a proper chaperon, since Aunt Lizzie was too unworldly to be a safe guardian and Miss Eyester was herself unmarried.

Miss Gaskett was compelled to succumb to the argument and the three were driven to the nearest hotel after luncheon, leaving Wallie and Pinkey with the sickening knowledge that now it was not possible to "break even," to say nothing of a profit. Every day they were out would put them in debt a little deeper, but they both were agreed they would finish the trip whatever happened.

The evening was a gloomy one as compared to others, and although they built a camp-fire as usual there was none of the customary gaiety around it.

Mr. Stott sat alone on his saddle-blanket lost in meditation of a sombre nature, and Pinkey and Miss Eyester whispered apart.

Wallie was in no mood for conversation, while Mr. Hicks, with the delicacy which now marked his every action, smoked alone in the shadow, making no effort to intrude himself upon his betters. Even "Red" McGonnigle, reclining on his elbow staring into the embers, seemed pensive 286 and disinclined to take advantage of the opportunity which the silence gave him to hear his own voice. So only Aunt Lizzie Philbrick remained to give life to the party, and Aunt Lizzie, while a woman of high principle and fine character, was, admittedly, not stimulating.

Aunt Lizzie had snow-white hair drawn tightly from her forehead and a corpse-like pallor to match it. She could not possibly look any different in her coffin, because so far as appearances went she might have been dead for a decade. Her manner was helpless, her voice gentle and hesitating, while in repose she ordinarily gave the impression of being in a state of suspended animation.

But to-night she was strangely restless, her thin white hands fluttered nervously, and she moved her camp chair so often that everyone wondered silently what was the matter with her. There was a red spot on either cheek which might have been the heat of the fire or excitement. At any rate, it was plain to the least observant that Aunt Lizzie was perturbed by something.

Finally, during one of her frequent movings, she inadvertently set the leg of her camp chair in a hole and went over backward. Mr. Hicks, who bounded from the shadow, was the first to reach her and everyone was astonished to hear her cry, when he would have assisted her.

"Don't touch me!"

Everyone felt rather sorry for Hicks when he returned to his seat crestfallen while Aunt Lizzie 287 went off at a stiff-legged trot to her teepee without saying good-night to anybody.

When some extraordinary accident was not befalling Aunt Lizzie, who seemed the essence of mediocrity, she was always doing the unexpected, so little was thought of it after the first surprise at her rudeness, and the others shortly said good-night and retired also.

Wallie stood alone by the dying camp-fire, wondering what the morrow might hold for him—if any bad luck could come that had not already happened. If so, he could not imagine it, for it seemed he had run the gamut of misfortune.

In this he was mistaken, for when they stopped at noon-day he received a blow from the last quarter he had expected—Aunt Lizzie.

The day had not begun too auspiciously, for when something like two miles on their journey Mr. Stott remembered that he had left his soap on a rock, and since it was expensive soap felt he must return for it. He had galloped the distance and back again, joining the party with his horse sweating, and Wallie had warned him curtly that the day promised to be a hot one and he must ride slowly.

"*Please* do not get ahead of the grub-wagon," Wallie had said with emphasis.

Mr. Stott had done as requested just so long as it suited him, and then passing Wallie with a little laugh of defiance had raced to lead the procession. In consequence, when Hicks pulled to the roadside for lunch somewhat earlier than usual, Mr. Stott did not know it and continued 288 riding.

The heat was terrific, and animals and humans suffered alike while the gypsum dust which rose

in clouds added to the discomfort. Gnats and mosquitoes, deer-flies and "no-see-ems" attacked in clouds and as viciously as if they had double rows of teeth and rapiers. It was the most unpleasant day they had encountered, everyone's nerves were on edge, and there has been more gaiety in a mourner's carriage than in the surrey where "Red" tried vainly to interest Aunt Lizzie.

Wallie was too angry with Mr. Stott to care for luncheon, so after a bite he betook himself to the shade of a tree, and sat down to smoke, with his back against it.

He was thinking of the buckskin and how jaded it had looked that morning and wondering if its already stiffened shoulders would get over it if he pulled off its shoes and turned it into a soft pasture. His speculations were interrupted by Aunt Lizzie, who stood before him twisting her fingers in embarrassment.

A peerless beauty could not have passed unscathed through such a morning, but the havoc it had wrought in Aunt Lizzie's looks was nothing short of startling.

Her lids were inflamed and swollen from the bites of the "no-see-ems," her nose was red, and her eyes watered from the gypsum dust which affected her like hay-fever, her sailor hat had slipped to the back of her head and her "scolding locks" were hanging like a fringe over a soiled linen collar. One would have said that Aunt Lizzie could have traversed the earth unmolested, not excepting the bandits because of whom she had fled Mexico.

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Something of the sort passed through Wallie's mind as he waited the explanation of her obvious confusion.

"I have something—very awkward—to say to you, Wallie."

The harried expression which was becoming chronic leaped into his eyes at the introduction, as he asked himself what now might be portending.

"It's rather indelicate to discuss with a gentleman," she continued, braiding her fingers.

Wallie was alarmed but, anxious to set her at her ease, he said encouragingly:

"You can talk as freely to me as if I were your—father."

He had not had time to visualize himself as Aunt Lizzie's father when she went on in a short-breathed fashion:

"I fear that I shall have to leave you, Wallie, as soon as possible."

Wallie's wonder grew, but he said nothing.

"I think—I fear—I believe," she stammered, "that Mr. Hicks is of a very ardent temperament."

Wallie could not have spoken now had he wanted to.

"Since yesterday I have found him looking at me frequently in a peculiar manner. Last night he stared at me with his burning eyes until I could feel his hypnotic influence. I hope—I trust you will believe I have not given him any encouragement?"

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Wallie's jaw, which had fallen, prevented him from reassuring her that he believed her blameless.

"So far, the tongue of scandal has never laid hands on me," she declared, mixing her metaphors in her agitation, "but I feel that it is a risk I should not take to travel about the country with a company of men and only an unmarried woman in the party."

Wallie managed to mumble:

"You are as safe here as if you were in a convent, Aunt Lizzie."

It would have seemed from her expression that she preferred not to think so, however.

"You understand how I feel, don't you?" she pleaded.

"Perfectly! Perfectly!" Wallie replied, too dazed to make any other answer. He would have been only a little less astounded if the old lady had announced her intention of opening a dance-hall upon her return to Prouty.

Aunt Lizzie's desertion, and for such a reason, was the last thing he had anticipated. It seemed like the final straw laid upon a back already breaking. He watched her toddle away, and sat down again gloomily.

At the supply-wagon Mr. Hicks was putting the food away, commenting profanely upon the flies, the heat, the tardiness of Mr. Stott, the injustice of things in general, and in particular the sordid necessity which obliged him to occupy this humble position when he was so eminently fitted to fill a higher one.

He threw a stick at a "camp-robber" that had flown down and taken a pick at a plate on a stump which contained the lunch he had saved for Mr. Stott, and his expression was so diabolic that it was the first time for many days that he had looked natural.

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"Red" McGonnigle, with his hat over his face, dozed in the shade of the bed-wagon. Aunt Lizzie busied herself with preparations for departure. Miss Eyester perused the testimonials for a patent medicine contained in a pamphlet left by previous campers. Insects droned, heat waves shimmered, the horses stood sleeping in their nose-bags. It was a peaceful noon-day scene, but Macpherson and Company, now sitting on their heels discussing their prospects, or lack of them, had no eye for it.

One thought was uppermost, their bubble was punctured, they were worse than ruined, for their horses and outfit were mortgaged almost up to their value, and in addition, they had borrowed at the bank, counting on paying off all their indebtedness when the Park trip was finished.

"I s'pose I can git a job herdin' sheep—they's good money in it—but I'll be an old man before I can afford to git married, to say nothin' of the disgrace of it." Pinkey's voice sounded hopeless.

The plaint gave Wallie such a pang that he could not answer, but with a twig played a game of tick-tack-toe in the dust, while he thought bitterly that no one could blame Helene Spenceley for preferring Canby to a person who seemed destined to failure in whatever he attempted. 292

He was another of the "four-flushers," he told himself, and the country was full of them, who just fell short of doing something and being somebody. Probably, in time, he would have no ambition beyond working for a "grub-stake" in summer so he could "shack up" in winter. He would let his hair grow, and go sockless, and buy new clothes rather than wash his old ones, and eat from soiled dishes, and read mail-order catalogues for entertainment, and dog-gone it! why couldn't he bring himself to think of marrying some respectable girl like the blacksmith's daughter there in Prouty, who had no chin and a fine complexion and cooked like an angel and never said a cross word to anybody?

Since Wallie was too uncommunicative to be interesting, Pinkey got up and left him to his reflections, remarking philosophically as he departed to join Miss Eyester:

"Well, I never heard of anybody bein' hanged for owin' money, so I guess there's no use in us goin' around with the double-breasted blues over it. We might as well whistle and say we like it."

Wallie looked after his partner almost angrily.

Oh, yes, it was well enough for him to talk about being cheerful and not worrying, but he guessed he would not be so chipper and so easily resigned to disappointment if he had nothing more to which to look forward than he had.

The lugubrious voice of Mr. Hicks declaiming reached him: 293

> "Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring
> Your Winter-garment of Repentance fling!
> The Bird of Time has but a little way
> To flutter—and the bird is on the wing."

That was the worst of it, Wallie thought despairingly. The Bird of Time had but a little way to flutter. He was so old—twenty-seven! The realization that he was still a failure at this advanced age increased his misery. He was a fool to go on hoping that he meant anything to Helene Spenceley or ever would; but, just the same—Wallie stood up and squared his shoulders—if he couldn't have the woman he wanted there wouldn't be any other! He would sell his place for what he could get for it, pay his debts, and go to Tahiti and be a beach-comber, or to Guatemala and start a revolution, or live a hermit in the Arctic Circle, trapping for a fur company! He would do whatever he could to forget her.

Then, suddenly, he wished that he was a little boy again and could sit on Aunt Mary's lap and lay his head on her shoulder the way he used to when he came home from school with a sick headache. It always had comforted him. A heartache was worse than a headache by a whole lot. Somehow he was so lonely—so inexpressibly lonely. He had not felt like this even that first winter on his homestead.

A lump rose in his throat to choke him, and he was about to turn away lest someone see the mist in his eyes that blinded him, and that he felt horribly ashamed of, when the sound of hoofs attracted his attention and caused him to grow alert in an instant. 294

He was sure that it was Stott returning, and then he caught a glimpse of him through the trees—galloping.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed that person, irritably, as he turned off the road and came through the brush toward Wallie.

There was a bright shine in Wallie's eyes as he walked toward him.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to camp in the middle of the morning?" Stott demanded in his rasping voice as he dismounted.

Wallie returned evenly:

"You know as well as I do that choosing a camp is left to Hicks' judgment. I told you not to get ahead of the supply-wagon."

"If you think I'm going to poke along behind like a snail, you're mistaken!" Stott retorted.

Wallie's face went white under its tan, though his voice was quiet enough as he answered:

"You'll 'poke' this afternoon, I'm thinking."

Stott turned sharply.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said. Look at that horse!"

The buckskin's head was hanging, its legs were trembling, there was not a dry hair on it and the sweat was running in rivulets. Its sides were swollen at the stirrup where the spurs had pricked

it, and the corners of its mouth were raw and bleeding.

Wallie continued and his voice now was savage:

"You're one of the people, and there's plenty like you, that ought to be prevented by law from owning either a horse or a gun. This afternoon you'll ride in the surrey or walk, as suits you." 295

Stott laughed insolently.

"Oh, I guess not!"

Wallie calmly loosened the latigo.

Stott took a step toward him with his heavy jaw thrust out and his hand sought his hip pocket.

"Don't you take the saddle off that horse!" His tone was menacing.

A machine that had been purring in the distance passed, slowed up, and stopped a little way beyond the camp. Wallie heard it but did not look to see whom it might be bringing, as in answer to Stott's threat he dropped the cinch and laid his hand upon the horn.

"If you think I'm bluffing——"

For answer, Wallie pulled off the saddle.

Stott hesitated for the fraction of a second, then his arm shot out and Wallie dropped heavily from the blow beneath the ear which Stott dealt him.

There was a sharp cry behind him, but Wallie did not look around as, still dazed, he got to his feet slowly, with his eyes upon his antagonist.

"I warned you!" Stott chortled, and he put his hand behind him to conceal the brass knuckles he was wearing.

Helene Spenceley was there; her voice had told him; but he took no account of that in the choking, blinding rage which now controlled him.

Before Stott could use his cowardly weapon again Wallie sprang for him, and with the force and rapidity of a trained fighter landed blow after blow on the heavy jaw which made a fine target. 296

"You——horse-killer! You——braggart and cheapskate! You——shyster and ambulance chaser!" And with every epithet Wallie landed a punch that made the lawyer stagger.

It was not "nice" language; it was not a "nice" thing to do, possibly, and perhaps the "soft answer" would have been better, but the time had passed when Wallie set any store by being merely "nice," and he had forgotten Helene Spenceley's presence, though in any event it would have made no difference.

There was only one thought in his mind as he sat astride Stott's chest when Stott went down finally, and that was to make him say "Enough!" if he had to hammer him past recognition.

This did not require so long as one would have thought, considering that person's boasts as to his courage, but, at that, Stott might well be excused for wishing to end the punishment he was receiving. In the face above him, almost brutal in the fury that stamped it, there was no trace to remind Stott of the youth who had painted cabbage roses and knit sweaters.

"Let me up!" he cried, finally, struggling under the merciless blows that rained upon him.

"Say it!" Wallie's voice was implacable.

"'Nough!" Stott whined it.

Wallie stopped immediately, and the attorney got to his feet, sullen and humiliated. He stood for a moment rubbing his neck and eyeing Wallie; then with a return of defiance flung at him: 297

"You'll pay for this, young fellow!"

Wallie's short laugh was mocking.

"Why don't you sue me for damages? I'd be flattered to death at the implication that I had any money. It might help my credit."

With a shrug he turned and walked toward Helene Spenceley. Her eyes were shining, and there was a singular smile on her face as he went up to her, but whether she smiled or frowned did not seem to matter much to Wallie.

He was not a pretty sight at the moment, and he knew it. A lump had risen on his jaw and one eye was closing, his hair was powdered with gypsum dust, and the sleeve of his shirt was torn out at the shoulder, but he had no apologies to make for anything and there was that in his manner which said so.

Helene laughed as she put out her hand to him.

"Was that a part of the regular programme or an impromptu feature of the day's entertainment?"

"It's been brewing," Wallie replied, briefly.

"Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"Not particularly."

"Or glad?"

"I'm always that."

"This came yesterday while I was in Prouty, and I volunteered to deliver it. I thought it might be important." She handed him a telegram. 298

"That was good of you." His face softened a little, and still more as he read the message.

He passed it to Helene:

> Will you come home if I tell you I was wrong and want you?
>
> AUNT MARY.

Wallie mused softly:

"It must have been hard for her to write that."

"Will you go?" Helene asked, quickly.

Wallie did not answer. He stood motionless, staring at the road where the heat waves shimmered, his absent gaze following a miniature cyclone that picked up and whirled a little cloud of powdered gypsum, while Helene waited.

Her eyes were upon his face with an expression that would have arrested his attention if he had seen it, but he seemed to have forgotten her and her question.

When he spoke, finally, it was to himself, rather, as if in denunciation of the momentary temptation which the telegram had been to him.

"No!" emphatically, "I'm not going back like a prodigal who can't stand the gaff any longer! I won't slink into a soft berth because it's offered, and admit that I'm not man enough to stand up and take what comes to me! I'm licked again—proper—and," harshly, "I don't expect anybody to believe in me, but I won't *stay* licked if I can help it!"

"I'm said to be a good 'picker,' and I've always believed in you, Wallace Macpherson," Helene said, slowly. 299

He stared his incredulity, then replied with ungracious irony:

"You've concealed it well."

"Flattery is bad for growing boys," she smiled mischievously.

"I'm sure you've never spoiled any one by it. You've treated me like a hound, mostly."

Her eyes sparkled as she answered:

"I like hounds, if they have mettle."

"Even when they run themselves down following a cold trail?" he asked in self-derision.

Her reply was interrupted by voices raised in altercation in the vicinity of the supply-wagon. A clump of bushes concealed the disputants, but they easily recognized the rasping nasal tones of Mr. Stott and the menacing bellow peculiar to the cook in moments of excitement.

The wrangle ended abruptly, and while Helene and Wallie stood wondering as to what the silence meant, Pinkey with a wry smile upon his face came toward them.

"Well, I guess we're out of the dude business," he said, laconically.

"What's the matter now?" Wallie demanded so savagely that the two burst out laughing.

"Nothin' much, except that Hicks is runnin' Stott with the butcher-knife and aims to kill him. I don't know as I blame him. He said his grub was full of ants and looked like scraps for Fido."

Wallie was alarmed, but Pinkey reassured him.

"Don't worry! He won't catch him, unless he's got wings, the gait Stott was travellin'. He'll be at the hotel in about twenty minutes—it's only five miles. What do you make of this, pardner?" Pinkey handed him a worn and grimy envelope as he added in explanation: 300

"I found it stuck in the cupboard of the wagon."

Wallie took the envelope, wondering grimly as he turned it over if there was anything left that could surprise him. There was. On the back was written:

> Ellery Hicks INSULTED August 3rd, this year of our Lord, 1920.

Below, in pencil, was a list of the party with every name crossed out save Mr. Stott's, and at the bottom, ornamented with many curlicues and beautifully shaded, was the significant sentence, with the date as yet blank:

> Ellery Hicks AVENGED, August —— this year of our Lord, 1920.

301

CHAPTER XXV

Mr. Cone stood at his desk, looking all of ten years younger for his rest at the Sanatorium. Indeed, it was difficult to reconcile this smiling, affable host of the Magnolia House with the glaring maniac of homicidal tendencies who had hung over the counter of The Colonial Hotel, fingering the potato pen-wiper and hurling bitter personalities at his patrons.

The Florida hostelry had just opened and the influx of guests promised a successful season, yet there was a regret and a wistfulness in Mr. Cone's brown eyes as they scanned the register, for in the long list there was no name of any member of The Happy Family.

As all the world knows, sentiment has no place in business, yet for sentimental reasons solely Mr. Cone had to date refused to rent to strangers the rooms occupied for so many winters by the same persons. Ordinarily, it was so well understood between them that they would return and occupy their usual quarters that he reserved their rooms as a matter of course and they notified him only when something occurred to change their plans or detain them. But this winter, owing to the circumstances in which they had parted, his common sense told him that if 302
they intended to return to the Magnolia House they would have so informed him.

Nevertheless, so strong were the ties of friendship that Mr. Cone determined to give them forty-eight hours longer, and if by then he had no word from them, of course there was nothing to think but that the one-time pleasant relations were ended forever.

There were strangers aplenty, the "newcomers" had arrived, and Miss Mary Macpherson, but he wanted to see Henry Appel sitting on his veranda, and Mrs. Budlong and "C. D.," and Miss Mattie Gaskett—in fact, he missed one not more than another.

What did it matter, after all, he reflected, if "Cutie" had kittens in the linen closet, and that Mrs. Appel used the hotel soap to do her laundry? As Mr. Cone looked off across the blue waters of the Gulf, which he could see through the wide open doorway, he wished with all his heart that he had not "flown off the handle."

The Happy Family had been friends as well as patrons, and without friends what did life amount to? The hotel was full of new people, but in spite of his professional affability Mr. Cone was not one to "cotton" to everybody, and it would be a long time, he told himself sadly, before these old friends could be replaced in his affections.

He would have listened gladly to the story of how Mr. Appel got his start in life; he was hungry 303
for the sight of Mrs. C. D. Budlong sitting like a potted oleander; he would have welcomed——

Mr. Cone's generous ears seemed suddenly to quiver, almost they went forward like those of a startled burro. A voice—obstinate, cantankerous—a voice that could belong to no one on earth but old Mr. Penrose, was engaged outside in a wrangle with a taxi-cab driver!

Before Mr. Cone could get around the desk and at the door to greet him, Mr. Penrose was striding across the office with the porter behind him, round-shouldered under the weight of two portmanteaux and a bag of golf clubs.

Mr. Penrose was the same, yet different in an elusive way that Mr. Cone could not define exactly. There was an air about him which on the spur of the moment he might have called "brigandish"—the way he wore his hat, a slight swagger, a something lawless that surely he never had acquired in his peach orchard in Delaware. When Mr. Penrose extended his hand across the counter Mr. Cone noticed that he was wearing a leather bracelet.

As they greeted each other like reunited brothers there was nothing in the manner of either to indicate that they had parted on any but the happiest terms, though Mr. Penrose's gaze wavered for an instant when he asked:

"Is my room ready?"

"Since the day before yesterday," replied Mr. Cone, turning to the key-rack. Then generously: 304

"What kind of a summer did you have? I trust, a pleasant one."

Mr. Penrose's faded eyes grew luminous. His voice quavered with eager enthusiasm as he ignored the efforts of the bell-boy to draw his attention to the fact that he was waiting to open his room for him.

"Superb! Magnificent! A wonderful experience! The Land of Adventure! Cone," Mr. Penrose peered at him solemnly from under his bushy eyebrows, "I know what it is to look into the jaws of Death, literally!" Mr. Penrose could look into Mr. Cone's jaws also, for he was so impressive that the lower one dropped automatically. He added: "I am thankful to be alive to tell the story."

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes. Alone, unarmed, I defended myself against an attack from one of the savage grizzlies of the Rocky Mountains."

Mr. Cone's eyes were as round as a child's awaiting a fairy tale. If Mr. Penrose had needed encouragement they would have furnished it. He continued:

"We were camped near the Cañon Hotel where the bears swarm—swarm like flies over the garbage. A remarkable sight. It was a very dark night—so dark, in fact, that I hesitated to go to my teepee, which was placed apart that I might not be disturbed by the others. I must have my rest, as you will remember.

"I had been asleep only a few minutes when I was awakened by the feeling that something was happening. It was. My tent was moving—actually bounding over rocks and hummocks. 305

"Believing myself the victim of a practical joke, I sprang out and brought my fish-pole down on what I supposed to be the head of a fellow disguised in a big overcoat. There was a roar that was plainly heard for miles, and a monster grizzly struck at me.

"If it had not been for my presence of mind, that would have been the end of me. Now it was all that saved me. As the bear, on his hind legs, came toward me with his arms outstretched, to grapple, I ducked and came up between them, and so close to his body that he was unable to sink his terrible claws into me.

"He let out another roar—simply appalling—it will ring in my ears forever—almost deafened me. Again my remarkable presence of mind came to my rescue. I reached up and held his jaws open. It was my purpose to dislocate the lower one, if possible.

"For fifteen minutes—twenty—perhaps—we fought desperately. Writhing, struggling, I could feel the brute's hot breath on my face and his lolling tongue dripped saliva. Finally, his heavy breathing told me he was getting winded, and I knew that if my strength did not fail me I should be the victor. Fortunately, I was in splendid physical condition. Not once did I lose my presence of mind in this terrible crisis. I was as calm as I am this minute, while the bear was letting out roars of rage and pain that curdled the blood of those who heard them. 306

"At last I made a superhuman effort and backed the brute up against a tree. Gripping his nose and jaw, I had doubled up my leg and thrust my knee into his stomach, which was of course cruel punishment—when, just then——"

A slight cough made Mr. Penrose turn quickly. Miss Mattie Gaskett, whose eyes were nearly as large as Mr. Cone's at this version of the encounter, was standing behind him with "Cutie" in a wicker basket.

Mr. Penrose looked disconcerted for a moment, and then that presence of mind of which he boasted came to his assistance and he said ingratiatingly:

"This young lady will vouch for the fact that my clothes were in shreds—ribbons——"

"Why—er—yes, you had lost your shirt bosom," Miss Gaskett agreed, doubtfully.

Remarking that he would finish the story when Mr. Cone had more leisure, Mr. Penrose "skedaddled" after the bell-boy with unmistakable alacrity.

"And how is kitty?" inquired Mr. Cone, beaming upon Miss Gaskett. "Did you take her with you this summer?"

As he lifted the cover and looked in the basket, "Cutie's" pupils enlarged and she shrank from him. "Cutie" had a good memory.

"Luckily for her I did not," Miss Gaskett answered. "If I had, I should have lost her."

"Lost her?"

"Coyotes."

"They would have *eaten* her?" 307

Miss Gaskett nodded.

"Undoubteely. They were thick as anything. They howled hideously every morning before sunrise, and it was not safe to leave one's tent at night without a weapon."

"Whew!" Mr. Cone's lips puckered in a whistle.

His astonishment inspired Miss Gaskett to continue:

"Yes, indeed! And once when I was out walking ever so far from everybody I met one face to face. My first impulse was to run, but I thought if I did so it might attack me, so, trying not to show that I was frightened, I picked up a stick, and just then——"

Seeing that Mr. Cone's gaze wandered, Miss Gaskett paused to learn the cause of it. She flushed as she found that Mrs. Budlong, with a smile wreathing her face, was listening to the recital.

"I'll tell you the rest when you are not so busy," Miss Mattie said, taking her key from Mr. Cone hastily.

Mrs. Budlong declared that her pleasure equalled his own when Mr. Cone expressed his delight at seeing her, and there was no thought on the minds of either as to the hotel rules she had violated or the food she had carried away from the table in the front of her blouse and her reticule.

"You are looking in splendid health, Mrs. Budlong," he asserted, quite as if that lady ever had looked otherwise.

"Yes, the change benefited me greatly." A stranger might have gathered from the plaintive note in her voice that prior to her trip she had been an invalid. 308

"You, too, found the Western country interesting?"

"Oh, very! At heart, Mr. Cone, I am a Child of Nature, and the primitive always appeals to me strongly," Mrs. Budlong hesitated and seemed debating. Having made her decision she asked in an undertone:

"I can trust you?"

"*Absolutely*," replied Mr. Cone with emphasis, which intimated that the torture chamber could not wring from him any secret she chose to deposit.

"I had a very peculiar experience in the Yellowstone. I should never mention it, if you were not more like a brother to me than a stranger. It is altogether shocking."

Mr. Cone's eyes sparkled.

"Purely in a spirit of adventure, I took a bath in a beaver dam. It was in a secluded spot, and so well protected that I went in—er—I did not wear my bathing suit. The birds twittered. The arched trees made a green canopy above me. The sunshine sparkled on the placid bosom of the water. A gentle breeze, warm, sweet-scented, caressed me as I drank in the beauty of the scene.

"Then I plunged in—the temperature was warmer than tepid—delightful. I felt like a nymph, a water-sprite, or something, as I swam out to the middle and found a footing. The bottom was rather oozy, and there were green patches floating on the surface, otherwise it was ideal. 309

"Noticing a brown spot on my arm, I touched it. It was squashy and pulpy. Then it moved! A leech—and it sunk a million feet into me as soon as I attempted to remove it. I was *black* with them, if you will believe me, literally *covered*. Repulsive, disgusting—blood-suckers, sucking my blood like vacuum-cleaners, Mr. Cone! Imagine my horror."

Mr. Cone tried to.

"Another woman would have screamed or fainted," Mrs. Budlong continued, "but I come of different stock, and ancestry will tell at such moments. I am a Daughter of the Revolution and my father fought all through the Civil War as a sutler. Not a sound passed my lips as I got back to shore, somehow, and, weak from loss of blood, sank down to consider how to get rid of the leeches.

"In emergencies I am a resourceful woman. Recalling that I had a match—only one little match—in my sweater pocket, it occurred to me that I might build a smudge and smoke them off. I scraped some leaves together, struck my match, and, just then——"

But just then Mr. Budlong, who had stopped to look after the trunks, scuffled in the doorway, and in his eagerness to greet him Mr. Cone forgot completely the narrative Mrs. Budlong was reciting for his benefit. Nor did he ever hear its termination.

Even as the proprietor stood at his desk wondering if the later train had brought any more prodigals, a commotion on the veranda was followed by the appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Appel.

Mr. Appel was using a stick and walking with such difficulty that Mr. Cone hurried forward and 310
asked with real solicitude:

"My dear friend, whatever is the matter? Has your old enemy Rheumatism again got his clutches on you?"

"Rheumatism!" Mr. Appel snorted. "You lie on your back with 2,000 pounds on top of you and see how you like it!"

Mr. Cone was puzzled, and said so.

Mr. Appel explained tersely:

"A bear walked on me—that's all that happened. A silvertip stood on the pit of my stomach and ground his heel into me."

"*Tsch! tsch! tsch!*" Mr. Cone's eyes were popping.

"If it were not for the fact that I'm quick in the head my wife would be a widow. I was in my sleeping bag and saw the bear coming. I knew what was going to happen, and that I had one chance in a thousand. It flashed through my mind that a horned toad when threatened with danger will inflate itself to such an extent that a wagon may pass over it, leaving the toad uninjured. I drew a deep breath, expanded my diaphragm to its greatest capacity, and lay rigid. It was all that saved me."

Again Mr. Cone's tongue against his teeth clicked his astonishment at this extraordinary experience, and while he congratulated Mr. Appel upon his miraculous escape he noted that he was wearing souvenirs of his trip in the way of an elk-tooth scarf-pin and a hat-band of braided horse hair.

The same train had brought Mrs. J. Harry Stott apparently, for the elevator was barely closed 311
upon the victim of the picturesque accident to which Mr. Cone had just listened, when the office was illumined by her gracious presence.

The last time that lady had extended a supine hand it had been to offer him one of the most serious affronts that can befall a self-respecting landlord; now the hand contained only cordiality, and in that spirit Mr. Cone took it.

"You enjoyed your summer?" As Mr. Cone passed the pen for her to register.

"Delightful! Altogether unique! Do you know, Mr. Cone, I never before have fully appreciated my husband—his splendid courage?"

"Is that so?" Mr. Cone replied with polite interest.

"Yes, when put to the test he was magnificent. You see, we had a cook, oh, a most offensive—a

rully violent and dangerous person. In fact, it was because of him that I left the party prematurely.

"It was plain that both Wallie and Pinkey were afraid of him, and dared not discharge him, so, one day when he had been more objectionable than usual, my husband took things into his own hands—he simply *had* to!

"Hicks—his name was Hicks—was disrespectful when Mr. Stott reprimanded him for something, and then he attempted to strike my husband with a pair of brass knuckles. Brass knuckles, it seems, are not a gentleman's weapon, and the cowardly attack so infuriated Mr. Stott that he knocked the bully down and took them away from him. He still has them. Before he let him up 312
he pummelled him well, I assure you. Mr. Stott doesn't know how strong he is when angry. Such muscles!

"He punished the cook until he begged for mercy and promised to do better. But as soon as he was on his feet he tried to *stab* my husband with a bread-knife. Fancy! Mr. Stott took this away from him, also, and ran him down the road with it. He ran him for seven miles—*seven miles*, mind you! The cook was nearly dead when Mr. Stott let up on him. I had to *drag* this story from my husband, little by little. But wasn't it exciting?"

Mr. Cone, who never had thought of Mr. Stott as such a warrior, tried to visualize the episode, and though he failed to do so he was greatly impressed by it.

He stood for some time after Mrs. Stott had left him, reflecting enviously that his life was dull and uneventful, and that he must seem a poor stick to the heroes and heroines of such adventures. He wished that he could think of some incident in his past to match these tales of valour, but as he looked back the only thing that occurred to him was the occasion upon which the laundress had stolen the cooking sherry and gone to sleep in her chemise on the front veranda. She had fought like a tiger when the patrol wagon came for her, and he had been the one to hold her feet as she was carried to it. At the time he had been congratulated upon the able and fearless manner in which he had met the emergency, but a bout with an intoxicated laundress, though it had its dangers, seemed a piffling affair as compared to a hand-to-hand 313
combat with a grizzly.

Gazing absently through the doorway and comforting himself by thinking that perhaps he, too, had latent courage which would rise to heights of heroism in propitious circumstances, he did not see Miss Eyester, who had come in the side entrance, until she stood before him.

He had not expected Miss Eyester, because she was usually employed during the winter, and it was only when a well-to-do relative sent her a check that she could afford a few weeks in Florida. But Miss Eyester was one of his favourites, and he immediately expressed the hope that she was to stay the entire season, while he noticed that she was wearing a mounted bear-claw for a hat-pin.

"No," she replied, blushing.

Not until then had Mr. Cone observed the Montana diamond flashing on her finger.

"Ah-h?" He raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Miss Eyester nodded.

"In January."

"A Western millionaire, I venture?" he suggested playfully.

"A stockman."

"Indeed?" A new respect was in Mr. Cone's manner. "Cattle?"

"Sheep," replied Miss Eyester, proudly. "Mr. Fripp is herding at present."

In a week Mr. Cone was as familiar with the glorious summer which The Happy Family had 314
spent in the West as if he had been there. Although he knew the story by heart he still thrilled when Mr. Penrose backed the bear up against a tree and separated its jaws until it "moaned like a human."

He continued to listen with flattering attention to the recital of the intrepid spinster who would have given battle to a hungry coyote if it had attacked her, as he did to the account of Mr. Stott's reckless courage in putting to flight a notorious outlaw who had hired out as a cook for some sinister purpose.

But, gradually, Mr. Cone began to detect discrepancies, and he noticed also that the descriptions not only varied but grew more hair-raising with repetition. Also, he guessed shrewdly that the reason the members of The Happy Family never contradicted one another was that they dared not.

The day came, finally, when Mr. Cone found it not only expedient but necessary to arrange a signal with the operator at the switchboard for certain contingencies. A close observer might have noticed that a preliminary "That reminds me" was invariably followed by an imperative announcement from the operator that Mr. Cone was wanted on the telephone.

A haste which resembled flight frequently marked the departure of other guests when a reminiscence seemed threatening until, forsooth, the time arrived when they had only themselves for audience and their "That reminds me" became "Do you remember?" The only wonder was, to those less travelled, that The Happy Family ever had brought themselves to 315

leave that earthly paradise in Wyoming, even for the winter.

The only person whom their enthusiasm did not weary was Miss Mary Macpherson, because directly and indirectly it all redounded to the credit of her nephew, whom she now carefully called Wallace, as more befitting the dignity of a successful "Dude Wrangler" than the diminutive.

Wallie's refusal to accept her offer had brought tears of disappointment to the eyes of the lonely woman, yet secretly she respected his pride and boasted to strangers of his independence.

"My nephew, Wallace Macpherson—you may have heard of him? He has large interests in Wyoming. Went West without a penny, practically; too proud to accept help from any one—that's the Macpherson of it—and now, they tell me, he is one of the important men of the country."

She was sometimes tempted to mention the extent of his holdings, and put the acreage well up into the thousands, but since Miss Macpherson was a truthful woman with a sensitive conscience, she contented herself with declaring, merely:

"My nephew, Wallace Macpherson, has a large ranch, oh, a very large place—several days' ride around it."

He was all she had, and blood is far thicker than water. She was hungry for a sight of him, and every day increased her yearning. While letters from him now arrived regularly, he said nothing in any of them of coming to Florida. His extensive interests, she presumed, detained him, and he was too good a business man to neglect affairs that needed him. 316

She had promised to go to him next summer, but next summer was a long way off and there were times when she was strongly tempted to make the journey in winter in spite of the northern blizzards of which, while fanning themselves, they read with gusto.

A blizzard was raging at present, according to the paper from which Mr. Appel was reading the headlines aloud to the group on the veranda. All trains were stalled west of the Mississippi and there was three feet of snow on the level in Denver.

"That reminds me——"

Only too well Mr. Cone knew what Mr. Budlong's remark portended. The hotel proprietor was having an interesting conversation with Mrs. Appel upon the relative merits of moth-preventatives, but he arose abruptly.

Mr. Budlong squared away again.

"That reminds me that I was wondering this morning how deep the snow would be at that point where Mr. Stott slid down the glacier in the gold-pan. By the way, Mr. Cone, have you heard that story? It's a good one."

Edging toward the doorway, Mr. Cone fairly chattered in his vehemence:

"Oh, yes—yes—yes!"

Mr. Penrose interrupted eagerly:

"The drifts must be about forty feet high on that stretch south of The Lolabama. There's a gap in the mountain where the wind comes through a-whoopin'. I mean the place where the steer chased Aunt Lizzie—did any one ever tell you that yarn, Cone?" 317

Mr. Cone, with one foot over the door-sill and clinging to the jamb, as if he half expected they would wrench him loose and make him go back and listen, answered with unmistakable irony:

"I think I recall having heard someone mention it."

It required more than irony to discourage Mr. Penrose, however, and he insisted petulantly:

"Come on back here, Cone! I'll explain just how Wallie jumped that steer and went to the ground with him. It's worth listening to twice."

Twice! Mr. Cone had heard it more times than he had fingers and toes.

"The telephone's ringing," he pleaded.

"Go answer it, then; looks like you'd want to learn something!"

Miss Macpherson had heard the story an even greater number of times than Mr. Cone, but now she urged Mr. Penrose to repeat it, and he did so with such spirit and so vividly that she shuddered almost continuously through the telling. He concluded by asserting emphatically that if it had not been for his foresight in providing himself with field-glasses, the steer would have been running over the flat with Aunt Lizzie empaled on its horns like a naturalist's butterfly, before any one could have prevented it.

Mr. Appel opined, when Mr. Penrose had finished, that "Canby made a poor showing."

"I could have done as well myself if I had been able to get there." He added speculatively: "I suppose Canby and Miss Spenceley are engaged by now—or married. Wallie hasn't mentioned it in his letters, has he?" 318

Miss Macpherson replied in the negative.

"He might not, anyway," remarked Mrs. Appel. "Helene was a nice girl, and attractive, but I could see that she did not interest him."

Mrs. Budlong, who had one eye closed trying to thread a needle without her glasses, observed succinctly:

"Men are funny."

She intended to qualify her statement by saying that some are funnier than others, only, before she had time to do so, an exclamation from Miss Macpherson attracted her attention. Following Miss Macpherson's unbelieving stare she saw Helene and Wallie getting out of the motor-bus with a certain air which her experienced eye recognized as "married."

Mrs. Budlong specialized in detecting newly wedded people and she was seldom mistaken. Her cleverness along this line sometimes amounted to clairvoyancy, but, in this instance, no one needed to be supernaturally gifted to recognize the earmarks, for no man could look so radiantly happy as Wallie unless he had inherited a million dollars—or married the girl he wanted.

Miss Mary Macpherson threw her arms about her nephew's neck and kissed him with an impetuosity seemingly incompatible with a lady who wore a high starched collar in summer, and the others welcomed him with a sincerity and warmth which made his eyes grow misty.

It was hard to believe, as he looked at them beaming upon him in genuine fondness, that only a few short months before they had been barely speaking to him, or that he had wished The Happy Family had, as the saying is, a single neck that he might wring it.

Above the volley of questions and chatter he heard old Mr. Penrose's querulous voice reproaching him:

"I hope you have the grace to be ashamed of yourself for not telling us, Wallace!"

"If I look sheepish," Wallie replied, smiling, "it may be due to the nature of my new occupation. You see," in reply to their looks of inquiry, "Canby bought me out, to get rid of me, and for a far more munificent sum than I ever expected. I re-invested, and am now," with mock dignity, "a wool-grower—with one Mr. Fripp engaged as foreman." Wallie's eyes twinkled as he added:

"I trust that the percentage of loss will not be so great as in the dude business."

THE END

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