

Red Saunders eBook

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Page 1

A Chance Shot

Reddy and I were alone at the Lake beds. He sat outside the cabin, braiding a leather hat-band—eight strands, and the “repeat” figure—an art that I never could master.

I sat inside, with a one-pound package of smoking tobacco beside me, and newspapers within reach, rolling the day’s supply of cigarettes.

Reddy stopped his story long enough to say: “Don’t use the ‘Princess’ Slipper,’ Kid—that paper burns my tongue—take the ‘Granger’; there’s plenty of it.”

Well, as I was saying, I’d met a lot of the boys up in town this day, and they threw as many as two drinks into me; I know that for certain, because when we took the parting dose, I had a glass of whisky in both my right hands, and had just twice as many friends as when I started.

When I pulled out for home, I felt mighty good for myself—not exactly looking for trouble, but not a-going to dodge it any, either. I was warbling “Idaho” for all I was worth—you know how pretty I can sing? Cock-eyed Peterson used to say it made him forget all his troubles. “Because,” says he, “you don’t notice trifles when a man bats you over the head with a two-by-four.”

Well, I was enjoying everything in sight, even a little drizzle of rain that was driving by in rags of wetness, when a flat-faced swatty at Fort Johnson halted me.

Now it’s a dreadful thing to be butted to death by a nanny-goat, but for a full-sized cowpuncher to be held up by a soldier is worse yet.

To say that I was hot under the collar don’t give you the right idea of the way I felt.

“Why, you cross between the Last Rose of Summer and a bobtailed flush!” says I, “what d’yer mean? What’s got into you? Get out of my daylight, you dog-robber, or I’ll walk the little horse around your neck like a three-ringed circus. Come, pull your freight!”

It seems that this swatty had been chucked out of the third story of Frenchy’s dance emporium by Bronc. Thompson, which threw a great respect for our profesh into him. Consequently he wasn’t fresh like most soldiers, but answers me as polite as a tin-horn gambler on pay-day.

Says he: “I just wanted to tell you that old Frosthead and forty braves are some’ers between here and your outfit, with their war paint on and blood in their eyes, cayoodling and whoopin’ fit to beat hell with the blower on, and if you get tangled up with them, I reckon they’ll give you a hair-cut and shampoo, to say nothing of other trimmings. They say they’re after the Crows, but it’s a ten-dollar bill against a last year’s bird’s-nest that

they'll take on any kind of trouble that comes along. Their hearts is mighty bad, they state, and when an Injun's heart gets spoiled, the disease is d—d catching. You'd better stop awhile."

"Now, cuss old Frosthead, and you too!" says I. "If he comes crow-hopping on my reservation; I'll kick his pantalettes on top of his scalp-lock."

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"All right, pardner!" says he. "It's your own funeral. My orders was to halt every one going through; but I ain't a whole company, so you can have it your own way. Only, if your friends have to take you home in a coal-scuttle, don't blame me. Pass, friend!"

So I went through the officers' quarters forty miles an hour, letting out a string of yells you might have heard to the coast, just to show my respect for the United States army.

Now this has always been my luck: Whenever I made a band-wagon play, somebody's sure to strike me for my licence. Or else the team goes into the ditch a mile further on, and I come out about as happy as a small yaller dog at a bob-cat's caucus.

Some fellers can run in a rhinecaboo that 'd make the hair stand up on a buffeler robe, and get away with it just like a mice; but that ain't me. If I sing a little mite too high in the cellar, down comes the roof a-top of me. So it was this day. Old Johnny Hardluck socked it to me, same as usual.

Gosh a'mighty! The liquor died in me after a while, and I went sound asleep in the saddle, and woke up with a jar—to find myself right in the middle of old Frosthead's gang; the drums "*boom-blipping*" and those forty-odd red tigers "*hyah-hayahing*" in a style that made my skin get up and walk all over me with cold feet.

How in blazes I'd managed to slip through those Injuns I don't know. 'Twould have been a wonderful piece of scouting if I'd meant it. You can 'most always do any darn thing you don't want to do. Well, there I was, and, oh Doctor! but wasn't I in a lovely mess! That war-song put a crimp into me that Jack Frost himself couldn't take out.

It was as dark as dark by this time. The moon just stuck one eye over the edge of the prairie, and the rest of the sky was covered with cloud. A little light came from the Injuns' camp-fire, but not enough to ride by, and, besides, I didn't know which way I ought to go.

Says I to myself, "Billy Sanders, you are the champion all-around, old-fashioned fool of the district. You are a jackass from the country where ears less'n three foot long are curiosities. You sassed that poor swatty that wanted to keep you out of this, tooting your bazoo like a man peddling soap; but now it's up to you. What are you going to do about it?" and I didn't get any answer, neither.

Well, it was no use asking myself conundrums out there in the dark when time was so scarce. So I wraps my hankercher around. Laddy's nose to keep him from talking horse to the Injun ponies, and prepared to sneak to where I'd rather be.

Laddy was the quickest thing on legs in that part of the country—out of a mighty spry little Pinto mare by our thoroughbred Kentucky horse—and I knew if I could get to the open them Injuns wouldn't have much of a chance to take out my stopper and examine

my works—not much. A half-mile start, and I could show the whole Sioux nation how I wore my hair.

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I cut for the place where the Injuns seemed thinnest, lifting myself up till I didn't weigh fifteen pound, and breathing only when necessary. We got along first-rate until we reached the edge of 'em, and then Laddy had to stick his foot in a gopher-hole, and walloped around there like a whale trying to climb a tree.

Some dam cuss of an Injun threw a handful of hay on the fire, and, as it blazed up, the whole gang spotted me.

I unlimbered my gun, sent the irons into Laddy, and we began to walk.

I didn't like to make for the ranch, as I knew the boys were short-handed, so I pointed north, praying to the good Lord that I'd hit some kind of settlement before I struck the North Pole.

Well, we left those Injuns so far behind that there wasn't any fun in it. I slacked up, patting myself on the back; and, as the trouble seemed all over, I was just about to turn for the ranch, when I heard horses galloping, and as the moon came out a little I saw a whole raft of redskins a-boiling up a draw not half a mile away. That knocked me slab-sided. It looked like I got the wrong ticket every time the wheel turned.

I whooped it up again, swearing I wouldn't stop this deal short of a dead sure thing. We flew through space—Laddy pushing a hole in the air like a scart kiyote making for home and mother.

A ways down the valley I spotted a little shack sitting all alone by itself out in the moonlight. I headed for it, hollering murder.

A man came to the door in his under-rigging.

"Hi, there! What's eating you?" he yells.

"Injuns coming, pardner! The country's just oozing Injuns! Better get a wiggle on you!"

"All right—slide along, I'll ketch up to you," says he.

I looked back and saw him hustling out with his saddle on his arm. "He's a particular kind of cuss," I thought; "bareback would suit most people."

Taking it a little easier for the next couple of miles, I gave him a chance to pull up.

We pounded along without saying anything for a spell, when I happened to notice that his teeth were chattering.

"Keep your nerve up, pardner!" says I. "Don't you get scared—we've got a good start on 'em."



He looked at me kind of reproachful.

“Scared be derved!” says he. “I reckon if you was riding around this nice cool night in your drawers, *your* teeth ’ud rattle some, too.”

I took a look at him, and saw, sure enough, while he had hat, coat, and boots on, the pants was missing. Well, if it had been the last act, I’d have had to laugh.

“Couldn’t find ’em nohow,” says he; “hunted high and low, jick, Jack, and the game—— Just comes to my mind now that I had ’em rolled up and was sleeping on ’em. I don’t like to go around this way’—I feel as if I was two men, and one of ’em hardly respectable.”

“Did you bring a gun with you?”

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He gave me another stare. "Why, pardner, you must think I have got a light and frivolous disposition," says he, and with that he heaves up the great-grand-uncle of all the six-shooters I ever did see. It made my forty-five-long look like something for a kid to cut its teeth on. "That's the best gun in this country," he went on.

"Looks as if it might be," says I. "Has the foundry that cast it gone out of business? I'd like to have one like it, if it's as dangerous as it looks."

"When I have any trouble with a man," says he, "I don't want to go pecking at him with a putty-blower, just irritating him, and giving him a little skin complaint here and there; I want something that'll touch his conscience."

He had it, for a broadside from that battery would scatter an elephant over a township.

We loped along quiet and easy until sun-up. The Grindstone Buttes lay about a mile ahead of us. Looking back, we saw the Injuns coming over a rise of ground 'way in the distance.

"Now," says my friend, "I know a short cut through those hills that'll bring us out at Johnson's. They've got enough punchers there to do the United States army up—starched and blued. Shall we take it?"

"Sure!" says I. "I'm only wandering around this part of the country because this part of the country is here—if it was anywheres else I'd be just as glad."

So in we went. It was the steepest and narrowest kind of a canon, looking as if it had been cut out of the rock with one crack of the axe. I was just thinking: "Gee whiz! but this would be a poor place to get snagged in," when bang! says a rifle right in front of us, and m-e-arr! goes the bullet over our heads.

We were off them horses and behind a couple of chunks of rock sooner than we hoped for, and that's saying a good deal.

"Cussed poor shot, whoever he is," says my friend. "Some Injun holding us here till the rest come up, I presume."

"That's about the size of it—and I'd like to make you a bet that he does it, too, if I thought I'd have a chance to collect."

"Oh, you can't always tell—you might lose your money," says he, kind of thoughtful.

"I wouldn't mind that half as much as winning," says I. "But on the square, do you think we can get out? I'll jump him with you if you say so, although I ain't got what you might call a passion for suicide."

“Now you hold on a bit,” says he. “I don’t know but what we’d have done better to stick to the horses, and run for it, but it’s too late to think of that. Jumping him is all foolishness; he’d sit behind his little rock and pump lead into us till we wouldn’t float in brine—and we can’t back out now.”

He talked so calm it made me kind of mad. “Well,” says I, “in that case, let’s play ‘Simon says thumbs up’ till the rest of the crowd comes.”

“There you go!” says he. “Just like all young fellers—gettin’ hosstyle right away if you don’t fall in with their plans. Now, Sonny, you keep your temper, and watch me play cushion carroms with our friend there.”

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"Meaning how?"

"You see that block of stone just this side of him with the square face towards us? Well, he's only covered in front, and I'm a-going to shoot against that face and ketch him on the glance."

"Great, if you could work it!" says I. "But Lord!"

"Well, watch!" says he. Then he squinched down behind his cover, so as not to give the Injun an opening, trained his cannon and pulled the trigger. The old gun opened her mouth and roared like an earthquake, but I didn't see any dead Injun. Then twice more she spit fire, and still there weren't any desirable corpses to be had.

"Say, pardner," says I, "you wouldn't make many cigars at this game!"

"Now, don't you get oneasy," says he. "Just watch!"

"*Biff!*" says the old gun, and this time, sure enough, the Injun was knocked clear of the rock. I felt all along that he wouldn't be much of a comfort to his friends afterwards, if that gun did land on him.

Still, he wasn't so awful dead, for as we jumped for the horses he kind of hitched himself to the rock, and laying the rifle across it, and working the lever with his left hand, he sent a hole plumb through my hat.

"Bully boy!" says I. I snapped at him, and smashed the lock of his rifle to flinders. Then, of course, he was our meat.

As we rode up to him, my pard held dead on him. The Injun stood up straight and tall, and looked us square in the eye—say, he was a man, I tell you, red-skin or no red-skin. The courage just stuck out on him as he stood there, waiting to pass in his checks.

My pardner threw the muzzle of his gun up. "D—n it!" says he, "I can't do it—he's game from the heart out! But the Lord have mercy on his sinful soul if he and I run foul of each other on the prairie again!"

Then we shacked along down to Johnson's and had breakfast.

"What became of Frosthead and his gang?" Oh, they sent out a regiment or two, and gathered him in—'bout twenty-five soldiers to an Injun. No, no harm was done. Me and my pard were the only ones that bucked up against them. Chuck out a cigarette, Kid; my lungs ache for want of a smoke.

A Red-Haired Cupid

“How did I come to get myself disliked down at the Chanta Seechee? Well, I’ll tell you,” said Reddy, the cow-puncher. “The play came up like this. First, they made the Chanta Seechee into a stock company, then the stock company put all their brains in one think, and says they, ‘We’ll make this man Jones superintendent, and the ranch is all right at once.’ So out comes Jones from Boston, Massachusetts, and what he didn’t know about running a ranch was common talk in the country, but what he thought he knew about running a ranch was too much for one man to carry around. He wasn’t a bad-hearted feller in some ways, yet on the whole he felt it was an honour to a looking-glass

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to have the pleasure of reflecting him. Looking-glass? I should say he had! And a bureau, and a boot-blackening jigger, and a feather bed, and curtains, and truck in his room. Strange fellers used to open their eyes when they saw that room. 'Helloo-o!' they'd say, 'whose little birdie have we here?' And other remarks that hurt our feelings considerable. Jonesy, he said the fellers were a rank lot of barbarians. He said it to old Neighbour Case's face, and he and the old man came together like a pair of hens, for Jonesy had sand in spite of his faults, That was a fight worth travelling to see. They covered at least an acre of ground; they tore the air with upper swats and cross swipes; they hollered, they jumped and they pitched, and when the difficulty was adjusted we found that Jonesy's coat was painfully ripped up the back and Neighbour Case had lost his false teeth. One crowd of fellers patted Jones on the back and said, 'Never mind your coat, old horse; you've licked a man twice your age,' and the other comforted Neighbour, saying, 'Never mind, Case; you can ease your mind by thinking how you headed up that rooster, and he fifty pounds lighter than you.'

"Jonesy put on airs after that. He felt he was a hard citizen. And then he had the misfortune to speak harshly to Arizona Jenkins when Old Dry Belt was in liquor. Then he got roped and dragged through the slough. He cried like a baby whilst I helped him scrape the mud off, but not because he was scared! No, sir! That little runt was full of blood and murder.

"'You mark me, now, Red,' says he, the tears making bad-land water courses through the mud on his cheeks, 'I shall fire upon that man the first time I see him—will you lend me your revolver?'

"'Lord, Jones, see here,' says I, 'don't you go making any such billy-goat play as that—keep his wages until he apologizes; put something harmful in his grub; but, as you have respect for the Almighty's handiwork as represented by your person, don't pull a gun on Arizona Jenkins—that's the one thing he won't take from nobody.'

"'D-d-darn him!' snivels Jonesy, 'I ain't afraid o-o-of him;' and the strange fact is that he wasn't. Well, I saw he was in such a taking that he might do something foolish and get hurt, so I goes to Arizona and says I, 'You ought to apologize to Jones.' What Zony replied ain't worth repeating—'and you along with him,' he winds up.

"'Now ain't that childish?' I says. 'A six-footer like you that can shoot straight with either hand, and yet ain't got generosity enough to ease the feelings of a poor little devil that's fair busting with shame.'

"'Well, what did he want to tell me to shut up my mouth for?' cried Old Dry Belt. 'Men have died of less than that.'

“Aw, shucks, Zony,’ I says, ‘a great, big man like you oughtn’t to come down on a little cuss who’s all thumb-hand-side and left feet.’

“That be blowed,’ says he—only he says it different. ‘I’d like to know what business such a sawed-off has to come and tell a full-grown man like me to shut up his mouth? He’d ought to stay in a little man’s place and talk sassy to people his own size. When he comes shooting off his bazoo to a man that could swallow him whole without loosening his collar, it’s impidence; that’s what it is.’

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“Well, as a favour to me?’ I says.

“Well, if you put it in that way—I don’t want to be small about it.’

“So Arizona goes up to Jones and sticks out his hand. ‘There’s my hand, Jones,’ he says. ‘I’m mighty sorry you told me to shut up my mouth,’ says he.

“So am I,’ says Jones heartily, not taking in the sense of the words, but feeling that it was all in good intention. So that was all right and I stood in with the management in great shape for fixing up the fuss so pleasant. But it didn’t last. They say nothing lasts in this world. There’s some pretty solid rocks in the Coeur d’Alene, however, and I should like to wait around and see if they don’t hold out, but I’ll never make it. I’ve been in too much excitement.

“Well, the next thing after Jonesy got established was that his niece must come out during vacation and pay him a visit. ‘Jee-rusalem!’ thinks I, ‘Jonesy’s niece!’ I had visions of a thin, yaller, sour little piece, with mouse-coloured hair plastered down on her head, and an unkind word for everybody. Jonesy told me about her being in college, and then I stuck a pair of them nose-grabber specks on the picture. I can stand ‘most any kind of a man, but if there’s anything that makes the tears come to my eyes it’s a botch of a woman. I know they may have good qualities and all that, but I don’t like ‘em, and that’s the whole of it. We gave three loud groans when we got the news in the bull-pen. And I cussed for ten minutes straight, without repeating myself once, when it so fell out that the members of the board rolled out our way the day the girl had to be sent for, and Jonesy couldn’t break loose, and your Uncle was elected to take the buckboard and drive twenty miles to the railroad. I didn’t mind the going out, but that twenty miles back with Jonesy’s niece! Say, I foamed like a soda-water bottle when I got into the bull-pen and told the boys my luck.

“Well,’ says Kyle Lambert, ‘that’s what you might expect; your sins have found you out.’

“No, they ain’t; they’ve caught me at home as usual,’ says I. ‘Well, I’ll give that Eastern blossom an idea of the quality of this country anyhow.’ So I togs myself up in the awfulest rig I could find; strapped two ca’tridge belts to me, every hole filled, and a gun in every holster; put candle-grease on my mustache and twisted the ends up to my eye-winkers; stuck a knife in my hatband and another in my boot; threw a shotgun and a rifle in the buckboard, and pulled out quick through the colt-pens before Jonesy could get his peeps onto me.

“Well, sir, I was jarred witless when I laid my eyes on that young woman. I’d had my mind made up so thorough as to what she must be that the facts knocked me cold. She was the sweetest, handsomest, healthiest female I ever see. It would make you believe in fairy stories again just to look at her. She was all the things a man ever wanted in this world rolled up in a prize package.

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Tall, round and soople, limber and springy in her action as a thoroughbred, and with something modest yet kind of daring in her face that would remind you of a good, honest boy. Red, white, and black were the colours she flew. Hair and eyes black, cheeks and lips red, and the rest of her white. Now, there's a pile of difference in them colours; when you say 'red,' for instance, you ain't cleaned up the subject by a sight. My top-knot's red, but that wasn't the colour of Loy's cheeks. No; that was a colour I never saw before nor since. A rose would look like a tomater alongside of 'em. Then, too, I've seen black eyes so hard and shiny you could cut glass with 'em. And again that wasn't her style. The only way you could get a notion of what them eyes were like would be to look at 'em; you'd remember 'em all right if you did. Seems like the good Lord was kind of careless when he built Jonesy, but when he turned that girl out he played square with the fambly.

"I ain't what you might call a man that's easily disturbed in his mind, but I know I says to myself that first day, 'If I was ten year younger, young lady, they'd never lug you back East again.' Gee, man! There was a time when I'd have pulled the country up by the roots but I'd have had that girl! I notice I don't fall in love so violent as the years roll on. I can squint my eye over the cards now and say, 'Yes, that's a beautiful hand, but I reckon I'd better stay out,' and lay 'em down without a sigh; whereas, when I was a young feller, it I had three aces in sight I'd raise the rest of the gathering right out of their foot-leather—or get caught at it. Usually I got caught at it, for a man couldn't run the mint long with the kind of luck I have.

"Well, I was plumb disgusted with the fool way I'd rigged myself up, but, fortunately for me, Darragh, the station-man, came out with the girl. 'There's Reddy, from your ranch now, ma'am,' says he, and when he caught sight of me, 'What's the matter, Red; are the Injuns up?'

"Darragh was a serious Irishman, and that's the mournfullest thing on top of the globe; and besides, he believed anything you'd tell him. There ain't any George Washington strain in my stock, so I proceeded to get out of trouble.

"'They ain't up exactly,' says I, 'but it looked as if they were a leetle on the rise, and being as I had a lady to look out for, I thought I'd play safe.'

"The colour kind of went out of the girl's cheeks. Eastern folks are scandalous afraid of Injuns.

"'Perhaps I'd better not start?' says she.

"'Don't you be scart, miss,' says Darragh. 'You're all right as long as you're with Red—he's the toughest proposition we've got in this part of the country.'

“‘I’m obliged to you, Darragh,’ says I. He meant well, but hell’s full of them people. I’d have given a month’s wages for one lick at him. Nice reputation to give me before that girl! She eyed me mighty doubtful.

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"I stepped up to her, with my hat in my hand. 'Miss Andree,' says I (she was Jonesy's sisters child), 'if you come along with me I'll guarantee you a safe journey. If any harm reaches you it will be after one of the liveliest times in the history of the Territory.'

"At this she laughed. 'Very well,' says she, 'I'll chance it, Mr. Red.'

"His name ain't Red,' puts in Darragh, solemn. 'His name's Saunders. We call him Red becus uf his hair.'

"I'm sure I beg your pardon,' says Miss Loys, all of a fluster.

"That's all right, ma'am; no damage done at all,' says I. 'It's useless for me to try to conceal the fact that my hair is a little on the auburn. You mustn't mind what Darragh says. We've had a good deal of hot weather lately and his brains have gone wrong. Now hop in and we'll touch the breeze,' So I piled her trunk in and away we flew.

"Bud and Dandy were a corking little team. They'd run the whole distance from the railway to the ranch if you'd let 'em—and I never interfered. A straight line and the keen jump hits me all right when I'm going some place, although I can loaf with the next man on occasion. So we missed most of the gulleys.

"The ponies were snorting and pulling grass, the buckboard bouncing behind 'em like a rubber ball, and we were crowding into the teeth of the northwest wind, which made it seem as if we were travelling 100 per cent. better than a Dutch clock would show.

"Goodness gracious!' says the girl, 'do you always go like this in this country? And aren't there any roads?'

"Why, no,' says I. 'Hike!' and I snapped the blacksnake over the ponies' ears, and they strung themselves out like a brace of coyotes, nearly pulling the buckboard out from under us. 'Sometimes we travel like *this*,' I says. 'And as for roads, I despise 'em. You're not afraid, are you?'

"Indeed I'm not. I think it's glorious. Might I drive?'

"If I can smoke,' says I, 'then *you* can drive.' I'd heard about young women who'd been brought up so tender that tobacker smoke would ruin their morals or something, and I kind of wondered if she was that sort.

"That's a bargain,' says she prompt. 'But how you're going to light a cigar in this wind I don't see.'

"Cigarette,' says I. 'And if you would kindly hold my hat until I get one rolled I'll take it kind of you.'



“But what about the horses?’ says she.

“Put your foot on the lines and they’ll make. That’s the main and only art of driving on the prairie—not to let the lines get under the horses’ feet—all the rest is just sit still and look at the scenery.’

“She held my hat for a wind-break, and I got my paper pipe together. And then—not a match. I searched every pocket. Not a lucifer. That is more of what I got for being funny and changing my clothes. And then she happened to think of a box she had for travelling, and fished it out of her grip.

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“‘Young lady,’ I says, ‘until it comes to be your bad luck—which I hope won’t ever happen—to be very much in love with a man who won’t play back, you’ll never properly know the pangs of a man that’s got all the materials to smoke with except the fire. Now, if I have a chance to do as much for you sometime, I’m there.’

“She laughed and crinkled up her eyes at me. ‘All right, Mr. Saunders. When that obdurate man disdains me, I’ll call for your help.’

“‘The place for the man that would disdain you is an asylum,’ says I. ‘And the only help I’d give you would be to put him there.’ She blushed real nice. I like to see a woman blush. It’s a trick they can’t learn.

“But I see she was put out by my easy talk, so I gave her a pat on the back and says, ‘Don’t mind me, little girl. We fellers see an eighteen-carat woman so seldom that it goes to our heads. There wasn’t no offence meant, and you’ll be foolish if you put it there. Let’s shake hands.’

“So she laughed again and shook. I mean *shook*. It wasn’t like handing you so much cold fish—the way some women shake hands. And Loys and me, we were full pards from date.

“I made one more bad break on the home trip.

“‘Jonesy will be powerful glad to see you,’ says I.

“‘Jonesy!’ says she, surprised. ‘Jonesy! Oh, is that what you call Uncle Albert?’

“‘Well, it does sometimes happen that way,’ says I. And then my anti-George Washington blood rose again. ‘You see, he was kind of lonesome out there at first, and we took to calling him Jonesy to cheer him up and make him feel at home,’ I says.

“‘Oh!’ says she. And I reckon she didn’t feel so horribly awful about it, for after looking straight towards the Gulf of Mexico for a minute, suddenly she bust right out and hollered. It seems that Jones cut a great deal of grass to a swipe when he was back home in his own street. It’s astonishing how little of a man it takes to do that in the East. We had an argument once on the subject. ‘It’s intellect does it,’ says Silver Tompkins. ‘Oh, that’s it, eh?’ says Wind-River Smith. ‘Well, I’m glad I’m not troubled that way. I’d rather have a forty-four chest than a number eight head any day you can find in the almanac.’ And I’m with Smithy. This knowing so much it makes you sick ain’t any better than being so healthy you don’t know nothing, besides being square miles less fun. Another thing about the Eastern folks is they’re so sot in their views, and it don’t matter to them whether the facts bear out their idees or not.

“‘Here, take a cigar,’ says one of the Board of Directors to me—a little fat old man, who had to draw in his breath before he could cross his legs—‘them cigarettes’ll ruin your

health,' says he. Mind you, he was always kicking and roaring about his liver or stummick, or some of his works. I'm a little over six-foot-three in my boots when I stand up straight,

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and I stood up straight as the Lord would let me and gazed down at that little man. 'Pardner,' says I, 'I was raised on cigarettes. When I was two years old I used to have a pull at the bottle, and then my cigarette to aid digestion. It may be conceit on my part,' I says, 'but I'd rather be a wreck like me than a prize-fighter like you.' They're queer; you'd think that that little fat man would have noticed the difference without my pointing it out to him.

"Well, I don't have to mention that Loys stirred things up considerable around the Chanta Seechee and vicinity. Gee! What a diving into wannegans and a fetching out of good clothes there was. And trading of useful coats and things for useless but decorating silk handkerchers and things! And what a hair cutting and whisker trimming!

"But Kyle was the man from the go in. And it was right it should be so. If ever two young people were born to make trouble for each other it was Kyle and Loys.

"A nice, decent fellow was Kyle. Nothing remarkable, you could say, and that was one of his best points. Howsomever, he had a head that could do plain thinking, a pair of shoulders that discouraged frivolling, and he was as square a piece of furniture as ever came out of a factory. More'n that; he had quite a little education, saved his money, never got more than good-natured loaded, and he could ride anything that had four legs, from a sawhorse to old tiger Buck, who would kick your both feet out of the sturrups and reach around and bite you in the small of the back so quick that the boys would be pulling his front hoofs out of your frame before you'd realize that the canter had begun. Nice horse, Buck. He like to eat Jonesy up one morning before Sliver and me could get to the corral. Lord! The sounds made my blood run cold! Old Buck squealing like a boar-pig in a wolf trap, and Jonesy yelling, 'Help! Murder! Police!' Even that did not cure Jones from sticking his nose where it wasn't wanted. Why, once—but thunder! It would take me a long while to tell you all that happened to Jones.

"One thing that didn't hurt Kyle any in the campaign was that he was 'most as good-looking for a man as she was for a woman. They made a pair to draw to, I tell you, loping over the prairie, full of health and youngness! You wouldn't want to see a prettier sight than they made, and you could see it at any time, for they were together whenever it was possible. Loys was so happy it made you feel like a boy again to see her. She told me in private that it was wonderful how the air out here agreed with her, and I said it was considered mighty bracing, and never let on that they proclaimed their state of mind every time they looked at each other. I reckon old smart-Aleck Jonesy was the only party in the township who didn't understand. Kyle used to put vinegar in his coffee and things like that, and if you'd ask him, 'What's that fellow's name that runs the clothing store in town?' he'd come out of his trance and say 'Yes,' and smile very amiable, to show that he thoroughly admitted you were right.

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“Well, things went as smooth and easy as bob-sledding until it came time for Loys to be moseying back to college again.

“Then Kyle took me into his confidence. I never was less astonished in my whole life, and I didn’t tell him so. ‘Well, what are you going to do about it?’ says I.

“He kind of groaned and shook his head. ‘I dunno,’ says he. ‘Do you think she likes me, Red?’ I felt like saying, ‘Well, if you ain’t got all the traits but the long ears, I miss my guess,’ but I made allowances, and says I, ‘Well, about that, I don’t think I ought to say anything; still, if I had only one eye left I could see plain that her education’s finished. She don’t want any more college, that girl don’t.’

“‘Think not?’ says he, bracing up. And then, by-and-by, they went out to ride, for Jonesy was good to the girl, I’ll say that for him. He was willing to do anything for her in reason, according to his views. But Kyle wasn’t in them views; he was out of the picture as far as husbands went.

“They came back at sunset, when the whole world was glowing red the same as they were. I reached for the field glasses and took a squint at them. There was no harm in that, for they were well-behaved young folks. One look at their faces was enough. There were three of us in the bull-pen—Bob, and Wind-River Smith, and myself. We’d brought up a herd of calves from Nanley’s ranch, and we were taking it easy. ‘Boys,’ says I, under my breath, ‘they’ve made the raffle.’

“‘No!’ says they, and then everybody had to take a pull at the glasses.

“‘Well, I’m glad,’ says Smithy. And darn my buttons if that old hardshell’s voice didn’t shake. ‘They’re two of as nice kids as you’d find in many a weary day,’ says he. ‘And I wish ‘em all the luck in the world.’

“‘So do I,’ says I, ‘and I really think the best we could do for ‘em would be to shoot Jones.’

“‘Man! Won’t he sizz!’ says Bob. And you can’t blame us old codgers if we had a laugh at that, although it was such a powerful serious matter to the youngsters.

“‘Let’s go out and meet ‘em,’ says I. And away we went. They weren’t a particle surprised. I suppose they thought the whole universe had stopped to look on. We pump-handled away and laughed, and Loys she laughed kind of teary, and Kyle he looked red in the face and proud and happy and ashamed of himself, and we all felt loosened up considerable, but I told him on the quiet, ‘Take that fool grin off your face, unless you want Uncle Jones to drop the moment he sees you.’

“Now they only had three days left to get an action on them, as that was the time set for Loys to go back to college.

“Next day they held a council behind the big barn, and they called in Uncle Red—otherwise known as Big Red Saunders, or Chanta Seechee Red, which means ‘Bad-heart Red’ in Sioux language, and doesn’t explain me by a durn sight—to get the benefit of his valuable advice.

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“‘Skip,’ says I. ‘Fly for town and get married, and come back and tell Jonesy about it. It’s a pesky sight stronger argument to tell him what you have done than what you’re going to do.’

“They couldn’t quite agree with that. They thought it was sneaky.

“‘So it is,’ says I. ‘The first art of war is understanding how to make a grand sneak. If you don’t want to take my advice you can wait.’ That didn’t hit ’em just right either.

“‘What will we wait for?’ says Kyle.

“‘Exercise—and the kind you won’t take when you get as old and as sensible as me. You’re taking long chances, both of you; but it’s just like playing cards, you might as well put all your money on the first turn, win or lose, as to try and play system. Systems don’t work in faro, nor love affairs, nor any other game of chance. Be gone. Put your marker on the grand raffle. In other words take the first horse to town and get married. Ten chances to one Jonesy will have the laugh on you before the year is out.’

“‘I don’t think you are a bit nice to-day, Red,’ says Loys.

“‘He’s jealous,’ says Kyle.

“‘That’s what I am, young man,’ says I. ‘If I had ten years off my shoulders, and a little of the glow off my hair, I’d give you a run for your alley that would leave you breathless at the wind-up.’

“‘I think your hair is a beautiful color, Red,’ says Loys. ‘Many a woman would like to have it.’

“‘Of course they would,’ I answered. ‘But they don’t get it. I’m foxy, I am.’ Still I was touched in a tender spot. That young woman knew Just the right thing to say, by nature. ‘Well, what are you young folks going to do?’ I asked them.

“They decided that they’d think it over until next day, but that turned out to be too late, for what must Kyle do but get chucked from his horse and have his leg broke near the hip. You don’t want to take any love affairs onto the back of a bad horse, now you mark me! There was no such thing as downing that boy when he was in his right mind.

“Now here was a hurrah! Loys, she dasn’t cry, for fear of uncle, and Kyle, he used the sinfullest language known to the tongue of man. ‘Twas the first time I’d ever heard him say anything much, but he made it clear that it wasn’t because he couldn’t.

“‘What will we do, Red? What will we do?’ says he.

“‘Now,’ says I, ‘don’t bile over like that, because it’s bad for your leg.’

“He cussed the leg.

“Go on and tell me what we can do,’ says he.

“‘When you ask me that, you’ve pulled the right bell,’ says I. ‘I’ll tell you exactly what we’ll do. I go for the doctor. Savvy? Well, I bring back the minister at the same time. Angevine, he loses the Jersey cow over in the cane-break, and uncle and Angevine go hunting her, for not even Loys is ace high in uncle’s mind alongside that cow. The rest is easy.’

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“Red, you’re a brick—you’re the best fellow alive,’ says Kyle, nearly squeezing the hand off me.

“I’ve tried to conceal it all my life, but I knew it would be discovered some day,’ says I. ‘Well, I suppose I’d better break the news to Loys—’twouldn’t be any more than polite.’

“Oh, Lord! I wonder if she’ll be willing?’ says he.

“No reason I shouldn’t turn an honest dollar on the transaction—I’ll bet you a month’s wages she is,’ says I. He wanted to do it, thinking I was in earnest, but I laughed at him.

“She was willing all right—even anxious. There’s some women, and men, too, for that matter, who go through life like a cat through a back alley, not caring a cuss for either end or the middle. They would have been content to wait. Not so Loys. She wanted her Kyle, her poor Kyle, and she wanted him quick. That’s the kind of people for me! Your cautious folk are all the time falling down wells because their eyes are up in the air, keeping tabs so that they can dodge shooting stars.

“Now, I had a minister friend up in town, Father Slade by name. No, he was not a Catholic, I think. They called him ‘Father’ because it fitted him. His church had a steeple on it, anyhow, so it was no maverick. Just what particular kind of religion the old man had I don’t know, but I should say he was a homeopath on a guess. He looked it. ‘Twas a comfort to see him coming down the street, his old face shining in his white hair like a shrivelled pink apple in a snowdrift, God-blessing everything in sight—good, bad, or indifferent. He had something pleasant to say to all. We was quite friends, and every once in a while we’d have a chin about things.

“‘Are you keeping straight, Red?’ he’d ask when we parted.

“‘Um,’ I’d say, ‘I’m afraid you’d notice a bend here and there, if you Slid your eyes along the edge.’

“‘Well, keep as straight as you can; don’t give up trying, my boy,’ he’d tell me, mighty earnest, and I’d feel ashamed of myself clear around the corner.

“I knew the old man would do me a favour if it could be done, so I pulled out easy in my mind.

“First place, I stopped at the doctor’s, because I felt they might fix up the marrying business some other time, but if a leg that’s broke in the upper joint ain’t set right, you can see a large dark-complected hunk of trouble over the party’s left shoulder for the rest of his days. The doctor was out, so I left word for him what was wanted, and to be ready when I got back, and pulled for Father Slade’s. The old gentleman had the rheumatism, and he groaned when I come in. Rheumatism’s no disease for people who can’t swear.

“‘How are you, my boy?’ says he; ‘I’m glad to see you. Here am I, an old man, nipped by the leg, and much wanting to talk to somebody.’

“I passed the time of day to him, but felt kind of blue. This didn’t look like keeping my word with the kids. I really hated to say anything to the old man, knowing his disposition; still I felt I had to, and I out with my story.

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“‘Dear! dear!’ says he. ‘The hurry and skurry of young folks! How idle it seems when you get fifty years away from it, and see how little anything counts! For all that, I thank God,’ says he, ‘that there’s a little red left in my blood yet, which makes me sympathise with them. But the girl’s people object you say?’

“‘I made that all clear to him. The girl’s *always* all right, Father,’ says I, ‘and as for the man in this case, my word for him.’

“‘Now it ain’t just the right thing for me to say, but seeing as I’ve never had anything in particular to be modest about, and I’m proud of what the old gentleman told me, I’m going to repeat it.

“‘Your word is good for me, Red,’ says he. ‘You’re a mischievous boy at times, but your heart and your head are both reliable; give me your arm to the waggon.’

“‘Then I felt mighty sorry to think of lugging that poor old man all that ways.

“‘Here!’ says I. ‘Now you sit down again; don’t you do anything of the sort—you ain’t fit.’

“‘He put his hand on my shoulder and hobbled his weight off the game leg.

“‘Reddy, I was sitting there thinking when you came in—thinking of how comfortable it was to be in an easy-chair with my foot on a stool, and then I thought, “If the Lord should send me some work to do, would I be willing?” Now, thanks be to Him! I am willing, and glad to find myself so, and I do not believe there’s any work more acceptable to Him than the union of young folk who love each other. Ouch!’ says he, as that foot touched the ground. ‘Perhaps you’d better pick me up and carry me bodily.’

“‘So I did it, the old housekeeper following us with an armful of things and jawing the both of us—him for a fool and me for a villain. She was a strong-minded old lady, and I wish I could remember some of her talk—it was great.

“‘We went around and got the doctor.

“‘Hoo!’ says he. ‘Is it as bad as that?’ I winked at Father Slade.

“‘It’s a plenty worse than that,’ says I; ‘you won’t know the half of it till you get down there.’

“‘But of course we had to tell him, and he was tickled. Funny what an interest everybody takes in these happenings. He wanted all the details.

“‘By Jove!’ says he, ‘the man whose feelings ain’t the least dimmed by a broken leg—horse rolled on him, you said? Splintered it, probably—that man is one of the right sort. He’ll do to tie to.’

“When we reached the ranch the boys were lined up to meet us. ‘Hurry along!’ they called. ‘Angey can’t keep uncle amused all day!’

“So we hustled. Kyle was for being married first, and then having his leg set, but I put my foot down flat. It had gone long enough now, and I wasn’t going to have him crippling it all his life. But the doctor worked like a man who gets paid by the piece, and in less than no time we were able to call Loys in.

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"Wind-River Smith spoke to get to give the bride away, and we let him have it.

"We'd just got settled to business when in comes Angevine, puffing like a buffalo. 'For Heaven's sakes! Ain't you finished yet?' says he; 'well, you want to be at it, for the old man ain't over two minutes behind me, coming fast. I took the distance in ten-foot steps. Just my luck! Foot slipped when I was talking to him, and I dropped a remark that made him suspicious—I wouldn't have done it for a ton of money—but it's too late now. I'll down him and hold him out there if you say so.'

"Well, sir, at this old Father Slade stood right up, forgetting that foot entirely.

"'Children, be ready,' says he, and he went over the line for a record.

"'Hurry there!' hollers old Bob from the outside, where he was on watch; 'here comes uncle up the long coulee!'

"'What are your names?' says Father Slade. They told him, both red'ning.

"'Do you, Kyle, take this woman, Loys, to have and keep track of, come hell or high water, her heirs and assigns for ever?'—or such a matter—says he, all in one breath, They both said they did.

"Things flew till we came to the ring. There was a hitch. We had plumb forgotten that important article. For a minute I felt stingy; then I cussed myself for a mean old long-horn, and dived into my box.

"'Here, take this!' I says. 'It was my mother's!'

"'Oh, Red! You mustn't part with that!' cried Loys, her eyes filling up.

"'Don't waste time talking; I put through what I tackle. Hurry, please, Father.'

"'Has anybody any objections to these proceedings?' says he.

"'I have,' says I, 'but I won't mention 'em. Give them the verdict.'

"'I pronounce you man and wife. Let us pray,' says he.

"'What's that?' screeches Uncle Jonesy from the doorway. And then he gave us the queerest prayer you ever heard in your life. He stood on one toe and clawed chunks out of the air while he delivered it.

"He seemed to have it in for me in particular. 'You villain! You rascal! You red-headed rascal! You did this! I know you did!'

““Oh, uncle!’ says I, ‘forgive me!’ With that I hugged him right up to me, and he filled my bosom full of smothered language.

““Cheese it, you little cuss!’ I whispered in his ear, ‘or I’ll break every rib in your poor old chest!’ I came in on him a trifle, Just to show him what I could do if I tried.

““Nuff!’ he wheezes. ‘Quit. ‘Nuff.’

““Go up and congratulate ‘em,’ I whispered again.

““I won’t,’ says he. ‘Ouch! Yes, I will! I will!’ So up he goes, grinding his teeth.

““I wish you every happiness,’ he grunts.

““Won’t you forgive me, uncle?’ begs Loys.

““Some other time; some other time!’ he hollers, and he pranced out of the house like a hosstyle spider, the maddest little man in the Territory.

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“Loys had a hard time of it until Kyle got so he could travel, and they went up to the Yellowstone with a team for a wedding trip.

“The rest of Loys’s folks was in an unpleasant frame of mind, too. They sent out her brother, and while I’d have took most anything from Loys’s brother, there comes a place where human nature is human nature, and the upshot of it was I planked that young man gently but firmly across my knees. Suffering Ike! But he was one sassy young man! Howsomever, the whole outfit came round in time—all except uncle and me. He used to grit his teeth together till the sparks flew when he saw me. I was afraid he’d bust a blood-vessel in one of them fits, so I quit. I hated to let go of the old ranch, but I’m pretty well fixed—I’m superintendent here. It’s Kyle’s ranch, you know. That’s his brand—the queer-looking thing on the left hip of that critter, over the vented hash-knife. Loys’s invention, that is. She says it’s a cherublim, but we call it the ‘flying flap-jack.’ There’s a right smart lot of beef critters toting that signal around this part of the country. Kyle’s one of the fellers that rises like a setting of bread—quiet and gentle, but steady and sure. He’s going to the State Legislature next year. ’Twon’t do no harm to have one honest man in the outfit.

“Now, perhaps if I’d married some nice woman I might have had 1,000 steers of my own, and a chance to make rules and regulations for my feller-citizens—and then again I might have took to gambling and drinking and raising blazes, and broke my poor wife’s broom-handle with my hard head. So I reckon we’ll let it slide as it is. Now you straddle that cayuse of yours and come along with me and I’ll show you some rattling colts.”

The Golden Ford

Reddy was on the station platform, walking up and down, looking about him anxiously. We caught sight of each other at the same time.

“Hi, there!” said he and jumped for me. “Gad-dog your little hide!” he cried as he put my right hand in line for a pension. “I thought I was booked to go without saying good-bye to you—you got the note I pinned on your shack?”

“Sure.”

“Well, there’s time for a chin before the choo-choo starts—thought I’d be early, not savvying this kind of travelling a great deal. Darned if you ain’t growed since I saw you—getting fat, too! Well, how’s everything? I didn’t say nothing to the other boys about pulling my freight, as I wanted to go sober for once. You explain to ’em that old Red’s head ain’t swelled, will you? Seems kind of dirty to go off that way, but I’m bound for God’s country and the old-time folks, and somehow I feel that I must cut the budge out of it. ’Nother thing is I’m superstitious, as you may or may not have noticed, and I

believe if you try the same game twicet you'll get just as different results as can be the second time—you heard how I hit it

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in the mines, didn't you? No? Well, that's so; you dint seen many people out on the flat, have you? Hum. I don't know principally where to begin. You remember Wind-River Smith's pardner that the boys called Shadder, because he was so thin? Nice feller, always willing to do you a favour, or say something comical when you least expected it—had kind of a style with him, too. Yes, sir, that's the man. Well him and me was out in the Bend one day, holding a mess of Oregon half-breeds that was to be shipped by train shortly, when old Smithy comes with the mail. 'Letter for you, Shadder,' says Smith, and passes over a big envelope with wads of sealing wax all over it. Shadder reads his letter, and folds it up. Then he takes a look over the county—the kind of a look a man gives when he's thinking hard. Then says he, 'Red, take off your hat.' I done it. 'Smithy, take off your hat.' 'All right,' says Smith; 'but you tell me why, or I'll snake the shirt off you to square things.'

"'Boys,' says Shadder, 'I'm Lord Walford.'

"'Lord Hellford;' hollers Smithy. 'You'd better call somebody in to look at your plumbing—what you been drinkin', Shadder?'

"'Read for yourself,' says Shadder, and he handed him the letter.

"'Wish't you could have seen old Smithy's face as he read it! He thought his pardner had been cut out of his herd for ever.

"'It's the God's truth, Red,' says he slowly, and he had a sideways smile on his face as he turned to Shadder. 'Well, sir,' says he, 'I suppose congratulations are in order?'

"Shadder's hand stopped short on its way to the cigarette, and he looked at Smithy as if he couldn't believe what he saw.

"'To hell with 'em!' says he, as savage as a wildcat, and he jabbed the irons in and whirled his cayuse about on one toe, heading for the ranch.

"'Now you go after him, you jealous old sore-head,' says I. 'Go on!' I says, as he started to argue the point, 'or I'll spread your nose all the way down your spinal column!' The only time to say 'no' to me is when I'm not meaning what I say, so away goes Wind-River, and they made it up all right in no time. Well, Shadder had to pull for England to take a squint at the ancestral estates, and all of us was right here at this station to see him off—Lord! it seems as if that happened last world!—well, it took a little bit the edge off any and all drunks a ranch as an institution had ever seen before. There was old Smithy crying around, wiping his eyes on his sleeve, and explaining to a lot of Eastern folks that it wasn't Shadder's fault—gad-hook it all! He was the best, hootin', tootin' son-of-a-sea-cook that ever hit a prairie breeze, in spite of this dum foolishness.

“They can’t make no “lord” of Shadder!’ hollers Smithy. ‘That is, not for long—he’s a *man*, Shadder is—ain’t cher, yer damned old gangle-legged hide-rack?’

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“And Shadder never lost his patience at all, though it must have been kind of trying to be made into such a holy show before the kind of people he used to be used to. All he’d say was ‘Bet your life, old boy!’ Well, it was right enough too, as Smithy had nursed him through small-pox one winter up in the Shoshonee country, and mighty near starved himself to death feeding Shadder out of the slim grub stock, when the boy was on the mend; still some people would have forgot that.

“But did your uncle Red get under the influence of strong drink? *Did* he? Oh *my!* Oh *my!* I wish I could make it clear to you. The vigilantes put after a horse thief once in Montana, and they landed on him in a butt-end canon, and there was all the stock with the brands on ‘em as big as a patent medicine sign, as the lad hadn’t had time to stop for alterations.

“‘Well,’ says they, ‘what have you got to say for yourself?’ He looked at them brands staring him in the face, and he bit off a small hunk of chewing ‘Ptt-chay!’ Says he, ‘Gentlemen, I’m at a loss for words!’ And they let him go, as a good joke is worth its price in any man’s country. I’m in that lad’s fix; I ain’t got the words to tell you how seriously drunk I was on that occasion. I remember putting for what I thought was the hotel, and settling down, thinking there must be a lulu of a scrap in the barroom from the noise; then somebody gave me a punch in the ribs and says, ‘Where’s your ticket?’ and I don’t know what I said nor what he said after that, but it must have been all right. Then it got light and I met a lot of good friends I never saw before nor since; then more noise and trouble and at last I woke up.—in a hotel bedroom, all right, but not the one I was used to. I went to the window, heaved her open and looked out. It was a bully morning and I felt A1. There was a nice range of mountains out in front of me that must have come up during the night. ‘I’d like to know where I am,’ I thinks. ‘But somebody will tell me before long, so there is no use worrying about that—the main point is, have I been touched?’ I dug down into my jeans and there wasn’t a thing of any kind to remember me by. ‘No,’ I says to myself, ‘I ain’t been touched—I’ve been grabbed—they might have left me the price of a breakfast! Well, it’s a nice looking country, anyhow!’ So down I walks to the office. A cheerful-seeming plump kind of a man was sitting behind the desk. ‘Hello!’ says he, glancing up and smiling as I came in. ‘How do you open up this morning?’

“‘Somebody saved me the trouble,’ says I. ‘I’m afraid I’ll have to give you the strong arm for breakfast.’

“He grinned wide. ‘Oh, it ain’t as bad as that, I hardly reckon,’ says he. He dove into a safe and brought out a cigar-box.

“‘When a gentleman’s in the condition you was in last night,’ he says, ‘I always make it a point to go through his clothes and take out anything a stranger might find useful, trusting that there won’t be no offence the next morning. Here’s your watch and the rest of your valuables, including the cash—count your money and see if it’s right.’

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“Well, sir! I was one happy man, and I thanked that feller as I thumbed over the bills, but when I got up to a hundred and seventy I begun to feel queer. Looked like I’d made good money on the trip.

“‘What’s the matter?’ says he, seeing my face. ‘Nothing wrong, I hope!’

“‘Why, the watch and the gun, and the other things is all right,’ says I. ‘But I’m now fifty dollars to the good, even figuring that I didn’t spend a cent, which ain’t in the least likely, and here’s ten-dollar bills enough to make a bed-spread left over.’

“‘Pshaw!’ says he. ‘Blame it! I’ve mixed your plunder up with the mining gentleman that came in at the same time. You and him was bound to fight at first, and then you both turned to to lick me, and what with keeping you apart and holding you off, and taking your valuables away from you all at the same time, and me all alone here as it was the night-man’s day-off, I’ve made a blunder of it. Just take your change out of the wad, and call for a drink on me when you feel like it, will you?’

“I said I would do that, and moreover that he was an officer and a gentleman, and that I’d stay at his hotel two weeks at least to show my appreciation, no matter where it was, but to satisfy a natural curiosity, I’d like to know what part of the country I was at present inhabiting.

“‘You’re at Boise, Idaho,’ says he, ‘one of the best little towns in the best little Territory in the United States of America, including Alaska.’

“‘Well . . .’ says I. ‘Well . . .’ for again I was at a loss for words. I had no idea I’d gone so far from home. ‘I believe what you say,’ says I. ‘What do you do around these parts?’

“‘Mining,’ says he. ‘You’re just in time—big strike in the Bob-cat district. Poor man’s mining. Placer, and durned good placer, right on the top of the ground. The mining gentleman I spoke about is having his breakfast now. Suppose you go in and have a talk with him? Nice man, drunk or sober, although excitable when he’s had a little too much, or not quite enough. He might put you onto a good thing. I’m not a mining person myself.’

“‘Thanks,’ says I, and in I went to the dining room.

There was a great, big, fine-looking man eating his ham and eggs the way I like to see a man eat the next morning. He had a black beard that was so strong it fairly jumped out from his face.

“‘Mornin’,’ says I.

“‘Good morning’, sir!’ says he. ‘A day of commingled lucent clarity and vernal softness, ain’t it?’

“‘Well, I wouldn’t care to bet on that without going a little deeper into the subject,’ says I; ‘but it smells good at least—so does that ham and eggs. Mary, I’ll take the same, with coffee extra strong.’

“‘You have doubtless been attracted to our small but growing city from the reports—which are happily true—of the inexhaustible mineral wealth of the surrounding region?’ says he.

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“No-o—not exactly,” says I; ‘but I do want to hear something about mines. Mr. Hotel-man out there (who’s a gentleman of the old school if ever there lived one) told me that you might put me on to a good thing.’

“Precisely,” says he. ‘Now, sir, my name is Jones—Agamemnon G. Jones—and my pardner, Mr. H. Smith, is on a business trip, selling shares of our mine, which we have called “The Treasury” from reasons which we can make obvious to any investor. The shares, Mr. -----’

“Saunders—Red Saunders—Chantay Seeche Red.’

“Mr. Saunders, are fifty cents apiece, which price is really only put upon them to avoid the offensive attitude of dealing them out as charity. As a matter of fact, this mine of ours contains a store of gold which would upset the commercial world, were the bare facts of its extent known. There is neither sense nor amusement in confining such enormous treasure in the hands of two people. Consequently, my pardner and I are presenting an interest to the public, putting the nominal figure of fifty cents a share upon it, to save the feelings of our beneficiaries.’

“What the devil do I care?’ says I. ‘I’m looking for a chance to dig—could you tell a man where to go?’

“Oh!’ says he, ‘when you come to that, that’s different. Strictly speaking, my pardner Hy hasn’t gone off on a business trip. As a matter of fact, he left town night before last with two-thirds of the money we’d pulled out of a pocket up on Silver Creek, in the company of two half-breed Injuns, a Chinaman, and four more sons-of-guns not classified, all in such a state of beastly intoxication that their purpose, route, and destination are matters of the wildest conjecture. I’ve been laying around town here hating myself to death, thinking perhaps I could sell some shares in a mine that we’ll find yet, if we have good luck. If you want to go wild-catting over the hills and far away, I’m your huckleberry.’

“That hits me all right,” says I. ‘For, what I don’t know about mining, nobody don’t know. When do we start?’

“This, or any other minute,” says he, getting up from the table.

“Wait till I finish up these eggs,” says I. ‘And there’s a matter of one drink coming to me outside—I may as well put that where it won’t harm any one else before we start.’

“All right!” says he, waving his hand. ‘You’ll find me outside—at your pleasure, sir.’

“I swallowed the rest of my breakfast whole and hustled out to the bar, where my friend and the Hotel-man was waiting. ‘Now I’ll take that drink that’s coming, and rather than be small about it, I’ll buy one for you too, and then we’re off,’ says I.

“‘You won’t do no such thing,’ says the Hotel-man. ‘It’s a horse on me, and I’ll supply the liquor. Mr. Jones is in the play as much as anybody.’

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“So the Hotel-man set 'em up, and that made one drink. Then Jones said he'd never let a drink suffer from lonesomeness yet when he had the price, and that made two drinks. I had to uphold the honour of the ranch, and that made three drinks. Hotel-man said it was up-sticks now, and he meant to pay his just debts like an honest man, and that made four drinks, then Jones said—well, by this time I see I needn't have hurried breakfast so much. More people came in. I woke up the next morning in the same old bedroom. Every breakfast Aggy and me got ready to pull for the mines, and every morning I woke up in the bedroom. I should like to draw a veil over the next two weeks, but it would have to be a pretty strong veil to hold it. I tried to keep level with Aggy, but he'd spend three dollars to my one, and the consequence of that was that we went broke within fifteen minutes of each other.

“Well, sir, we were a mournful pair to draw to that day. We sat there and cussed and said, 'Now, why didn't we do this, that, and t'other thing instead of blowing our hard earned dough?'—till bimeby we just dripped melancholy, you might say. Howsomever, we weren't booked for a dull time just yet. That afternoon there was a great popping of whips like an Injun skirmish and into town comes a bull train half-a-mile long. Twelve yoke of bulls to the team; lead, swing, and trail waggons for each, as big as houses on wheels. You don't see the like of that in this country. Down the street they come, the dust flying, whips cracking and the lads hollering 'Whoa haw, Mary—up there! Wherp! whoa haw.'

“And those fellers had picked up dry throats, walking in the dust. Also, they had a month's wages aching in their pockets. We hadn't much mor'n got the thump of their arrival out of our ears, when who comes roaring into town but the Bengal Tiger gang, and they had four months' wages. Owner of the mine got on a bender and paid everybody off by mistake. You can hardly imagine how this livened up things. There ain't nobody less likely to play lame-duck than me, but there was no dodging the hospitality. The only idea prevailing was to be rid of the money as soon as possible. The effects showed right off. You could hear one man telling the folks for their own good that he was the Old Missouri River, and when he felt like swelling his banks, it was time for parties who couldn't swim to hunt the high ground; whilst the gentleman on the next corner let us know that he was a locomotive carrying three hundred pounds of steam with the gauge still climbing and the blower on. When he whistled three times, he said, any intelligent man would know that there was danger around.

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“Well, sir, I put the Old Missouri River to bed that night, and he'd flattened out to a very small streamlet indeed, while the locomotive went lame before supper, and had to be put in the round-house by a couple of pushers. That's the way with fine ideas. Cold facts comes and puts a crimp in them. Once I knew a small feller I could have stuck in my pocket and forgot about, but when we went out and took several prescriptions together on a day, he spoke to me like this. 'Red,' says he, 'put your little hand in mine, and we'll go and take a bird's-eye view of the Universe.' Astonishin' idea, wasn't it? And him not weighing over a hundred pound. Howsomever, he didn't take any bird's-eye view of the Universe—he only become strikingly indisposed.

“Well, to get back to Boise, you never in all your life saw so many men and brothers as was gathered there that day, and old Aggy, he was one of the centres of attraction. That big voice and black beard was always where the crowd was thickest, and the wet goods flowing the freest. 'Gentlemen!' says he, 'Let's lift up our voices in melody!' That was one of Ag's delusions—he thought he could sing. So four of 'em got on top of a billiard table and presented 'Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep' to the company, which made me feel glad that I hadn't been brought up that way. After Ag had hip-locked the last low note, another song-bird volunteered.

“This was a little fat Dutchman, with pale blue eyes and a mustache like two streaks of darning cotton. He had come to town to sell a pair of beef-steers, but got drawn into the general hilarity, and now he didn't care a cuss whether he, she, or it ever sold another steer. He got himself on end and sung 'Leeb Fadderlont moxtrue eckstein' in a style that made you wonder that the human nose could stand the strain.

“‘Aw, cheese that!’ says a feller near the door. ‘Come get your steers, one of 'em's just chased the barber up a telegraph pole!’

“So then we all piled out into the street to see the steers. Sure enough, there was the barber, sitting on the cross-piece, and the steer pawing dirt underneath.

“‘He done made me come a fast heat from de cohner,’ says the barber. ‘I kep' hollerin' “next!” but he ain't pay no 'tention—he make it “next” fur me, shuah! Yah, yah, yah! You gents orter seen me start at de bottom, an' slide all de way up disyer telegraft pole!’

“One of the bull-whackers went out to rope the steers, and Ag gave directions from the sidewalk. He wasn't very handy with a riata, and that's a fact, but the way Ag lit into him was scandalous. When he'd missed about six casts of his rope, Ag opened up on him:

“‘Put a stamp on it and send it to him by mail,’ says Aggy, in his sourcastic way. ‘Address it, “Bay Steer, middle of Main St., Boise, Idaho. If not delivered within ten days, return to owner, who can use it to hang himself.” Blast my hide if I couldn't stand here and throw a box-car nearer to the critter! Well, well, well! How many left hands

have you got, anyhow? Do it up in a wad and heave it at him for general results—he might get tangled in it.'

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"It rattled the bull-whacker, having so much attention drawn to him, and he stepped on the rope and twisted himself up in it and was flying light generally.

"Say!" says Ag, appealing to the crowd, 'won't some kind friend who's fond of puzzles go down and help that gentleman do himself?'

"That made the whacker mad. He was as red in the face as a lobster.

"You come down and show what *you* can do," says he. 'You've got gas enough for a balloon ascension, but that may be all there is to you.'

"Oh, I ain't so much," says Aggy, 'although I'm as good a man to-day as ever I was in my life—but I have a little friend here who can rope, down, and ride that critter from here to the brick-front in five minutes by the watch; and if you've got a twenty-five dollar bill in your pocket, or its equivalent in dust, you can observe the experiment.'

"I'll go you, by gosh!" says the bull-whacker, slapping his hat on the ground and digging for his pile.

"Say, if you're referring to me, Ag," I says, 'it's kind of a sudden spring—I ain't what you might call in training, and that steer is full of triple-extract of giant powder.'

"G'wan!" says Ag. 'You can do it—and then we're twenty-five ahead.'

"But suppose we lose?'

"Well . . . It won't be such an awful loss.'

"Now you look here, Agamemnon G. Jones," says I, 'I ain't going to stand for putting up a summer breeze ag'in' that feller's good dough—that's a skin game, to speak it pleasantly.'

"Then Aggy argues the case with me, and when Aggy started to argue, you might just as well 'moo' and chase yourself into the corral, because he'd get you, sure. Why, that man could sit in the cabin and make roses bloom right in the middle of the floor; whilst he was singing his little song you could see 'em and smell 'em; he could talk a snowbank off a high divide in the middle of February. Never see anybody with such a medicine tongue, and in a big man it was all the stranger. 'Now,' he winds up, 'as for cheating that feller, *you* ought to know me better, Red—why, I'll give him my note!'

"So, anyhow, I done it. Up the street we went, steer bawling and buck-jumping, my hair a-flying, and me as busy as the little bee you read about keeping that steer underneath me, 'stead of on top of me, where he'd ruther be, and after us the whole town, whoopin', yellin', crackin' off six-shooters, and carryin' on wild.

“Then we had twenty-five dollars and was as good as anybody. But it didn’t last long. The tin-horns come out after pay-day, like hop-toads after a rain. ’Twould puzzle the Government at Washington to know where they hang out in the meantime. There was one lad had a face on him with about as much expression as a hotel punkin pie. He run an arrow game, and he talked right straight along in a voice that had no more bends in it than a billiard cue.

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“Here’s where you get your three for one any child may do it no chance to lose make your bets while the arrow of fortune swings all gents accommodated in amounts from two-bits to double-eagles and bets paid on the nail,’ says he.

“Red,’ says Aggy, ‘I can double our pile right here—let me have the money. I know this game.’ You’d hardly believe it, but I dug up. ‘Double-or-quits?’ says he to the dealer.

“Let her go,’ says the dealer; the arrow swung around. ‘Quits,’ says the dealer, and raked in my dough. It was all over in one second.

“I grabbed Aggy by the shoulder and took him in the corner for a private talk. ‘I thought you knew this game?’ says I.

“I do,’ says he. ‘That’s the way it always happens.’ And once more in my life I experienced the peculiar feeling of being altogether at a loss for words.

“Aggy,’ says I at last, ‘I’ve got a good notion to lay two violent hands on you, and wind you up like an eight-day clock, but rather than make hard feelings between friends, I’ll refrain. Besides you are a funny cuss, that’s sure. One thing, boy, you can mark down. We leave here to-morrow morning.’

“All right,’ says Ag. ‘This sporting life is the very devil. I like out doors as well as the next man, when I get there.’

“So the morrow morning, away we went. All we had for kit was the picks, shovels, and pans; the rest of our belongings was staying with the Hotel-man until we made a rise.

“Ag said he’d be cussed if he’d walk. A hundred and fifty miles of a stroll was too many.

“But we ain’t got a cent to pay the stage fare,’ says I.

“Borrow it of Uncle Hotel-keep,’ says he.

“Not by a town site,’ says I. ‘We owe him all we’re going to, at this very minute—you’ll have to hoof it, that’s all.’

“I tell you I won’t. I don’t like to have anybody walk on my feet, not even myself. I can stand off that stage driver so easy, that you’ll wonder I don’t take it up as a profession. Now, don’t raise any more objections—please don’t,’ says he. ‘I can’t tell you how nervous you make me, always finding some fault with everything I try to do. That’s no way for a hired man to act, let alone a pardner.’

“So, of course, he got the best of me as usual, and we climbed into the stage when she come along. Now, our bad luck seemed to hold, because you wouldn’t find many men in that country who wouldn’t stake two fellers to a waggon ride wherever they wanted to



go, and be pleasant about it, I'd have sure seen that the man got paid, even if Aggy forgot it, but the man that drove us was the surliest brute that ever growled. When you'd speak to him, he'd say, 'Unh'—a style of thing that didn't go well in that part of the country. I kept my mouth shut, as knowing that I didn't have the come-up-with weighed on my spirits; but Aggy gave him the jolly. He only meant it in fun, and there was plenty of reason

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for it, too, for you never seen such a game of driving as that feller put up in all your life. The Lord save us! He cut around one corner of a mountain, so that for the longest second I've lived through, my left foot hung over about a thousand feet of fresh air. I'd have had time to write my will before I touched bottom if we'd gone over. I don't know as I turned pale, but my hair ain't been of the same rosy complexion since.

“Well!’ says Aggy in a surprised tone of voice when we got all four wheels on the ground again. ‘Here we are!’ says he. ‘Who’d have suspected it? I thought he was going to take the short cut down to the creek.’

“The driver turned round with one corner of his lip h’isted—a dead ringer of a mean man—Says he to Aggy, ‘Yer a funny bloke, ain’t yer?’

“Why!’ says Ag, ‘that’s for you to say—wouldn’t look well coming from me—but if you press me, I’ll admit I give birth to a little gem now and then.’

“Our bold buck puts on a great swagger. ‘Well yer needn’t be funny in this waggon,’ says he. ‘The pair of yer spongin’ a ride! Yer needn’t be gay—yer hear me, don’t cher?’

“Why, I hear you as plain as though you set right next me,’ says Ag. ‘Now, you listen and see if I’m audible at the same range—You’re a blasted chump!’ he roars, in a tone of voice that would have carried forty mile. Did *you* hear that, Red?’ he asks very innocent. I was so hot at the driver’s sass—the cussed low-downness of doing a feller a favour and then heaving it at him—that you could have lit a match on me anywheres, but to save me I couldn’t help laughing—Ag had the comicallest way!

“At that the driver begins to larrup the horses. I ain’t the kind to feel faint when a cayuse gets what’s coming to him for raising the devil, but to see that lad whale his team because there wasn’t nothing else he dared hit, got me on my hind legs. I nestled one hand in his hair and twisted his ugly mug back.

“Quit that!’ says I.

“You let me be—I ain’t hurting *you*,’ he hollers.

“That ain’t to say I won’t be hurting you soon,’ says I. ‘You put the bud on them horses again, and I’ll boot the spine of your back up through the top of your head till it stands out like a flag-staff. Just one more touch, and you get it!’ says I.

“He didn’t open his mouth again till we come to the river. Then he pulled up. ‘This is about as far as I care to carry you two gents for nothin’,’ he says. ‘Of course you’re two to one, and I can’t do nothing if you see fit to bull the thing through. But I’ll say this: if

either one or both of you roosters has got the least smell of a gentleman about him, he won't have to be told his company ain't wanted twice.'

"Now, mind you, Ag and me didn't have the first cussed thing—not grub, nor blankets, nor gun, nor nothing; and this the feller well knew.

"Red,' says Aggy, 'what do you say to pulling this thing apart and seeing what makes it act so?'

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“No,” says I, ‘don’t touch it—it might be catching. Now, you whelp!’ says I to the driver, ‘you tell us if there’s a place where we can get anything to eat around here?’ We’d expected to go hungry until we hit the camp some forty mile further on, where we knew there’d be plenty for anybody that wanted it.

“Yes,” says he; ‘there’s a man running a shack two mile up the river.’

“All right,” says I. ‘Drive on. You’ve played us as dirty a trick as one man can play another. If we ever get a cinch on you, you can expect we’ll pull her till the latigoes snap.’

“He kept shut till he got across the river, where he felt safe.

“It’s all right about that cinch!’ he hollers back, grinning. ‘Only wait till you get it, yer suckers! Sponges! Beats! Dead-heads! Yah!’

“Well, a man can’t catch a team of horses, and that’s all there is about it, but I want to tell you he was on the anxious seat for a quarter of a mile. We tried hard.

“When we got back to where we started and could breathe again, we held a council of war.

“Now Aggy,” says I, ‘we’re dumped—what shall we do?’

He sat there awhile looking around him, snapping pebbles with his thumb.

“Tell you what it is, Red,” he says at last, ‘we might as well go mining right here. This is likely gravel, and there’s a river. If that bar in front of you had been further in the mountains, it would have been punched full of holes. It’s only because it’s on the road that nobody’s taken the trouble to see what was in it. This road was made by cattle ranchers, that didn’t know nothing about mining, and every miner that’s gone over the trail had his mouth set to get further along as quick as possible—just like us. Do you see that little hollow running down to the river? Well you try your luck there. I give you that place as it’s the most probable, and you as a tenderfoot in the business will have all the luck. I’ll make a stab where I am.’

“Well, sir, it sounds queer to tell it, and it seems queerer still to think of the doing of it, but I hadn’t dug two feet before I come to bed rock, and there was some heavy black chunks.

“Aggy,” says I, ‘what’s these things?’ throwing one over to him. He caught it and Stared at it.

“Where did you get that?’ says he, in almost a whisper.

“‘Why, out of the hole, of course!’ says I, laughing. ‘Come take a look!’

“Aggy wasn’t the kind of man to go off the handle over trifles, but when he looked into that hole he turned perfectly green. His knees give out from under him and he sat on the ground like a man in a trance, wiping the sweat off his face with a motion like a machine.

“‘What the devil ails you?’ says I astonished. I thought maybe I’d done something I hadn’t ought to do, through ignorance of the rules and regulations of mining.

“‘Red,’ says he dead solemn, ‘I’ve mined for twenty year, and from Old Mexico to Alaska, but I never saw anything that was ace-high to that before. Gold laying loose in chunks on top of the bed-rock is too much for me—I wish Hy could see this.’

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“Gold!” says I. “What you talking about? What have those black hunks to do with gold?”

“The only answer he made was to lay the one I had thrown to him on top of a rock and hit her a crack with a pick. Then he handed it to me. Sure enough! There under the black was the yellor. Of course, it I’d known more about the business I could have told it by the weight, but I’d never seen a piece of gold fresh off the farm before in my life. I hadn’t the slightest idea what it looked like, and I learned afterward it all looks different. Some of it shines up yaller in the start; some of it’s red, and some is like ours, coated black with iron-crust.

“So I looked at Ag, and Ag looked at me, neither one of us believing anything at all for awhile. I simply couldn’t get hold of the thing—I ain’t yet, for that matter. I expect to wake up and find it a pipe dream, and in some ways I wouldn’t mind if it was. I never was so completely two men as I was on that occasion. One of ’em was hopping around and hollering with Ag, yelling ‘hooray!’ and the other didn’t take much interest in the proceedings at all. And it wasn’t until I thought, ‘Now I can pay that cussed cayote of a stage driver what I owe him!’ that I got any good out of it. That brought it home to me. When I spoke to Ag about paying the driver, he says, ‘That’s so,’ then he takes a quick look around. ‘We can pay him in full, too, old horse!’ he hollers, and there was a most joyful smile on his face.

“Red,” say he, “do you know this is the only ford on the river for—I don’t know how many miles—perhaps the whole length of her?”

“Well?” says I.

“Our little placer claim,” says Aggy slowly, rubbing his hands together, “covers that ford; and by a judicious taking up of claims for various uncles and brothers and friends of ours along the creek on the lowlands, we can fix it so they can’t even bridge it.”

“Do you mean they can’t cross our claim if we say they can’t?”

“Sure thing!” says Aggy. “There’s you and me and the law to say “no” to that—I wish I had a gun.”

“You don’t need any gun for that skunk of a driver.”

“Of course not, but there’ll be passengers, and there’s no telling how excited them passengers will be when they find they’ve got to go over the hills ford-hunting.”

“Are you going to send ’em all around, Ag?”

“The whole bunch. Anybody coming back from the diggings has gold in his clothes, so it won’t hurt ’em none, and I propose to give that stage line an advertising that won’t do it a bit of good. Come along, Red; let’s see that lad that has the shack up the river. We

need something to eat, and maybe he's got a gun. If he's a decent feller, we'll let him in on a claim. Never mind about the hole!—it won't run away, and there's nobody to touch anything—come on.'

"So we went up the river. The man's name was White, and he was a white man by nature, too. He fed us well, and was just as hot as us when we told him about the stage driver's trick. Then we told him about the find and let him in.

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“Now,’ says Aggy, ‘have you got a gun?’

“I have *that*,’ says the man. ‘My dad used to be a duck-hunter on Chesapeake bay. When you say “gun,” I’ll show you a gun.’ He dove in under his bunk and fetched out what I should say was a number one bore shot gun, with barrels six foot long.

“Gentlemen,’ says he, holding the gun up and patting it lovingly, ‘if you ram a quarter-pound of powder in each one of them barrels, and a handful of buck-shot on top of that, you’ve got an argument that couldn’t be upset by the Supreme Court. I’ll guarantee that when you point her anywheres within ten feet of a man not over a hundred yards away, and let her do her duty, all the talent that that man’s fambly could employ couldn’t gather enough of him to recognise him by, and you won’t be in bed more’n long enough to heal a busted shoulder.’

“I hope it ain’t going to be my painful line of performance to pull the trigger,’ says Aggy. ‘I think the sight of her would have weight with most people. When’s the stage due back?’

“Day after to-morrow, about noon.’

“That gives us lots of time to stake, and to salt claims that can’t show cause their own selves,’ says Aggy. ‘I think we’re all right.’

“The next day we worked like the Old Harry. We had everything fixed up right by nightfall, and there was nothing to do but dig and wait.

“Curious folks we all are, ain’t we? I should have said my own self that if I’d found gold by the bucketful, I’d be more interested in that, than I would be in getting even with a mut that had done me dirt, but it wasn’t so. Perhaps it was because I hadn’t paid much attention to money all my life, and I had paid the strictest attention to the way other people used me. Living where there’s so few folks accounts for that, I suppose.

“Getting even on our esteemed friend the stage driver was right in your Uncle Reddy’s line, and Aggy and our new pard White seemed to take kindly to it, also.

“If ever you saw three faces filled with innocent glee, it was when we heard the wheels of that stage coming—why, the night before I was woke up by somebody laughing. There was Aggy sound asleep, sitting up hugging himself in the moonlight.

“Oh, my! Oh, MY!’ says he. ‘It’s the only ford for four thousand miles!’

“We planted a sign in the middle of the road with this wording on it in big letters, made with the black end of a stick.

NOTICE!!

THIS AND ADJOINING CLAIMS ARE THE
PROPERTY OF AGAMEMNON G. JONES,
RED SAUNDERS, JOHN HENRY WHITE,
ET AL.

TRESPASSING DONE AT YOUR OWN
RISK. OWNERS WILL NOT BE RESPONSIBLE
FOR THE REMAINS.

“There was a stretch of about a mile on the level before us. When the stage come in plain sight Aggy proceeds to load up ‘Old Moral Suasion,’ as he called her, so that the folks could see there was no attempt at deception. They come pretty fairly slow after that. At fifty yards, Ag hollers ‘Halt!’ The team sat right down on their tails.

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“Now, Mr. Snick’umfritz,’ says Aggy, ‘you that drives, I mean, come here and read this little sign.’

“Suppose I don’t?’ says the feller, trying to be smart before the passengers.

“It’s a horrible supposition,’ says Aggy, and the innocent will have to suffer with the guilty.’ Then he cocks the gun.

“God sakes! Don’t shoot!’ yells one of the passengers. ‘Man, you ought to have more sense than to try and pick him out of a crowd with a shot-gun! Get down there, you fool, and make it quick!’

“So the driver walked our way, and read. He never said a word. I reckon he realized it was the only ford for four thousand miles, more or less, just as Aggy had remarked. There he stood, with his mouth and eyes wide open.

“I’d like to have you other gentlemen come up and see our first clean up, so you won’t think we’re running in a windy,’ says Aggy. They wanted to see bad, as you can imagine, and when they did see about fifteen pound of gold in the bottom of my old hat, they talked like people that hadn’t had a Christian bringing up.

“Oh Lord!’ groans one man. ‘Brigham Young and all the prophets of the Mormon religion! This is my tenth trip over this line, and me and Pete Hendricks played a game of seven-up right on the spot where that gent hit her, not over a month ago, when the stage broke down! Somebody just make a guess at the way I feel and give me one small drink.’ And he put his hand to his head. ‘Say, boys!’ he goes on, ‘you don’t want the whole blamed creek, do you? Let *us* in!’

“How’s that, fellers?’ says Ag to me and White. We said we was agreeable.

“All right, in you come!’ says Aggy. ‘There ain’t no hog about our firm—but as for you,’ says he, walking on his tip-toes up to the driver, ‘as for you, you cock-eyed whelp, around you go! Around you go!’ he hollers, jamming the end of Moral Suasion into the driver’s trap. ‘Oh, and WON’T you go ‘round, though!’ says he. ‘Listen to me, now: if any one of your ancestors for twenty-four generations back had ever done anything as decent as robbing a hen-coop, it would have conferred a kind of degree of nobility upon him. It wouldn’t be possible to find an ornerier cuss than you, if a man raked all hell with a fine-toothed comb. Now, you stare-coated, mangey, bandy-legged, misbegotten, out-law coyote, fly!—fly!’ whoops Aggy, jumping four foot in the air, ‘before I squirt enough lead into your system to make it a paying job to melt you down!’

“The stage driver acted according to orders. Three wide steps and he was in the waggon, and with one screech like a p’izened bob-cat, he fairly lifted the cayuses over the first ridge. Nobody never saw him any more, and nobody wanted to.



“So that’s the way I hit my stake, son, just as I’d always expected—by not knowing what I was doing any part of the time—and now, there comes my iron-horse coughing up the track! I’ll write you sure, boy, and you let old Reddy know what’s going on—and on your life, don’t forget to give it to the lads straight why I sneaked off on the quiet! I’ve got ten years older in the last six months. Well, here we go quite fresh, and damned if I altogether want to, neither—too late to argue though—by-bye, son!”

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When the Chinook Struck Fairfield

I

Miss Mattie sat on her little front porch, facing the setting sun. Across the road, now ankle deep in June dust, was the wreck of the Peters place: back-broken roof, crumbling chimneys, shutters hanging down like broken wings, the old house had the pathetic appeal of ship-wrecked gentility. A house without people in it, even when it is in repair, is as forlorn as a dog who has lost his master.

Up the road were more houses of the nondescript village pattern, made neither for comfort nor looks. God knows why they built such houses—perhaps it was in accordance with the old Puritan idea that any kind of physical perfection is blasphemy. Some of these were kept in paint and window glass, but there were enough poor relations to spoil the effect.

Down the road, between the arches of the weeping willows, came first the brook, with the stone bridge—this broken as to coping and threadbare in general—then on the hither side of the way some three or four neighbour's houses, and opposite, the blacksmith's shop and post-office, the latter, of course, in a store, where you could buy anything from stale groceries to shingles.

In short, Fairfield was an Eastern village whose cause had departed. A community drained of the male principle, leaving only a few queer men, the blacksmith, and some halfling boys, to give tone to the background of dozens of old maids.

An unsympathetic stranger would have felt that nothing was left to the Fairfieldians but memory, and the sooner they lost that, the better.

Take a wineglassful of raspberry vinegar, two tablespoonsful of sugar, half a cup each of boneset and rhubarb, a good full cup of the milk of human kindness, dilute in a gallon of water, and you have the flavor of Fairfield. There was just enough of each ingredient to spoil the taste of all the rest.

Miss Mattie rested her elbow on the railing, her chin in her hand, and gazed thoughtfully about her. As a matter of fact, she was the most inspiring thing in view. At a distance of fifty yards she was still a tall, slender girl. Her body retained the habit, as well as the lines of youth; a trick of gliding into unexpected, pleasing attitudes, which would have been awkward but for the suppleness of limb to which they testified, and the unconsciousness and ease of their irregularity.

Her face was a child's face in the ennobling sense of the word. The record of the years written upon it seemed a masquerade—the face of a clear-eyed girl of fourteen made up to represent her own aunt at a fancy dress party. A face drawn a trifle fine, a little

ascetic, but balanced by the humour of the large, shapely mouth, and really beautiful in bone and contour. The beauty of mignonette, and doves, and gentle things.

You could see that she was thirty-five, in the blatant candor of noon, but now, blushed with the pink of the setting sun, she was still in the days of the fairy prince.

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Miss Mattie's revery idled over the year upon year of respectable stupidity that represented life in Fairfield, while her eyes and soul were in the boiling gold of the sky-glory. She sighed.

A panorama of life minced before Miss Mattie's mind about as vivid and full of red corpuscles as a Greek frieze. Her affectionate nature was starved. They visited each other, the ladies of Fairfield—these women who had rolled on the floor together as babies—in their best black, or green or whatever it might be, and gloves! This, though the summer sun might be hammering down with all his might. And then they sat in a closed room and talked in a reserved fashion which was entirely the property of the call. Of course, one could have a moment's real talk by chance meeting, and there were the natural griefs of life to break the corsets of this etiquette, although in general, the griefs seemed to be long drawn out and conventional affairs, as if nature herself at last yielded to the system, conquered by the invincible conventionality and stubbornness of the ladies of Fairfield. It was the unspoken but firm belief of each of these women, that a person of their circle who had no more idea of respectability than to drop dead on the public road would never go to Heaven.

Poor Miss Mattie! Small wonder she dropped her hands, sat back and wondered, with another sigh, if it were for this she was born? She did not rebel—there was no violence in her—but she regretted exceedingly. In spite of her slenderness, it was a wide, mother-lap in which her hands rested, an obvious cradle for little children. And instinctively it would come to you as you looked at her, that there could be no more comfortable place for a tired man to come home to, than a household presided over by this slow-moving, gentle woman. There was nothing old-maidish about Miss Mattie but the tale of her years. She had had offers, such as Fairfield and vicinity could boast, and declined them with tact, and the utmost gratitude to the suitor for the compliment; but her “no” though mild was firm, for there lay within her a certain quiet valiant spirit, which would rather endure the fatigue and loneliness of old age in her little house, than to take a larger life from any but the man who was all. A commonplace in fiction; in real life sometimes quite a strain.

The sun distorted himself into a Rugby football, and hurried down as though to be through with Fairfield as soon as possible. It was a most magnificent sun-set; flaming, gorgeous, wild—beyond the management of the women of Fairfield—and Miss Mattie stared into the heart of it with a longing for something to happen. Then the thought came, “What could happen?” she sighed again, and, with eyes blinded by Heaven-shine, glanced down the village street.

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She thought she saw—she rubbed her eyes and looked again—she did see, and surely never a stranger sight was beheld on Fairfield's street! Had a Royal Bengal tiger come slouching through the dust it could not have been more unusual. The spectacle was a man; a very large and mighty shouldered man, who looked about him with a bold, imperious, keep-the-change regard. There was something in the swing of him that suggested the Bengal tiger. He wore high-heeled boots outside of his trousers, a flannel shirt with a yellow silk kerchief around his neck, and on his head sat a white hat which seemed to Miss Mattie to be at least a yard in diameter. Under the hat was a remarkable head of hair. It hung below the man's shoulders in a silky mass of dark scarlet, flecked with brown gold. Miss Mattie had seen red hair, but she remembered no such color as this, nor could she recall ever having seen hair a foot-and-a-half long on a man. That hair would have made a fortune on the head of an actress, but Miss Mattie was ignorant of the possibilities of the profession.

The face of the man was a fine tan, against which eyes, teeth, and moustache came out in brisk relief. The moustache avoided the tropical tint of the upper hair and was content with a modest brown. The owner came right along, walking with a stiff, strong, straddling gait, like a man not used to that way of travelling.

Miss Mattie eyed him in some fear. He would be by her house directly, and it was hardly modest to sit aggressively on one's front porch, while a strange man went by—particularly, such a very strange man as this! Yet a thrill of curiosity held her for the moment, and then it was too late, for the man stopped and asked little Eddie Newell, who was playing placidly in the dust—all the children played placidly in Fairfield—asked Eddie, in a voice which reached Miss Mattie plainly, although the owner evidently made no attempt to raise it, if he knew where Miss Mattie Saunders lived?

Eddie had not noticed the large man's approach, and nearly fell over in a fright; but seeing, with a child's intuition, that there was no danger in this fierce-looking person, he piped up instantly.

"Y-y-yessir!—I kin tell yer where she lives—Yessir! She lives right down there in that little house—I kin go down with you jes' swell 's not! Why, there she is now, on the stoop!"

"Thankee sonny," said the big voice. "Here's for miggles," and Miss Mattie caught the sparkle of a coin as it flew into the grimy fists of Eddie.

"Much obliged!" yelled Eddie and vanished up the street.

Miss Mattie sat transfixed. Her breath came in swallows and her heart beat irregularly. Here was novelty with a vengeance! The big man turned and fastened his eyes upon her. There was no retreat. She noticed with some reassurance that his eyes were grave and kindly.

As he advanced Miss Mattie rose in agitation, unconsciously putting her hand on her throat—what could it mean?

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The gate was opened and the stranger strode up the cinder walk to the porch. He stopped a whole minute and looked at her. At last.

"Well, Mattie!" he said, "don't you know me?"

A flood of the wildest hypotheses flashed through Miss Mattie's mind without enlightening her. Who was this picturesque giant who stepped out of the past with so familiar a salutation? Although the porch was a foot high, and Miss Mattie a fairly tall woman, their eyes were almost on a level, as she looked at him in wonder.

Then he laughed and showed his white teeth. "No use to bother and worry you, Mattie," said he, "you couldn't call it in ten years. Well, I'm your half-uncle Fred's boy Bill—and I hope you're a quarter as glad to see me as I am to see you."

"What!" she cried. "Not little Willy who ran away!"

"The same little Willy," he replied in a tone that made Miss Mattie laugh a little, nervously, "and what I want to know is, are you glad to see me?"

"Why, of course! But, Will—I suppose I should call you Will? I am so flustered—not expecting you—and it's been so warm to-day. Won't you come in and take a chair?" wound up Miss Mattie in desperation, and fury at herself for saying things so different from what she meant to say.

There was a twinkle in the man's eye as he replied in an injured tone:

"Why, good Lord, Mattie! I've come two thousand miles or more to see you, and you ask me to take a chair. Just as if I'd stepped in from across the way! Can't you give a man a little warmer welcome than that?"

"What shall I do?" asked poor Miss Mattie.

"Well, you might kiss me, for a start," said he.

Miss Mattie was all abroad—still one's half-cousin, who has come such a distance, and been received so very oddly, is entitled to consideration. She raised her agitated face, and for the first time in her life realised the pleasure of wearing a moustache.

Then Red Saunders, late of the Chanta Seeche Ranch, North Dakota, sat him down.

"I'm obliged to you, Mattie," he said in all seriousness. "To tell you the truth, I felt in need of a little comforting—here I've come all this distance—and, of course, I *heard* about father and mother—but I couldn't believe it was true. Seemed as if they *must* be waiting at the old place for me to come back, and when I saw it all gone to ruin—Well, then I set out to find somebody, and do you know, of all the family, there's only you and



me left? That's all, Mattie, just us two!—whilst I was growing up out West, I kind of expected things to be standing still back here, and be just the same as I left them—hum—Well, how are you anyhow?"

"I'm well, Will, and"—laying her hand upon his, "*don't* think I'm not glad to see you—*please* don't. I'm so glad, Will, I can't tell you—but I'm all confused—so little happens here."

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"I shouldn't guess it was the liveliest place in the world, by the look of it," said Red. "And as far as that's concerned, I kinder don't know what to say myself. There's such a heap to talk about it's hard to tell where to begin—but we've got to be friends though, Mattie—we've just *got* to be friends. Good Lord! We're all there's left! Funny, I never thought of such a thing! Well, blast it! That's enough of such talk! I've brought you a present, Mattie." He stretched out a leg that reached beyond the limits of the front porch, and dove into his trousers pocket, bringing out a buck-skin sack. He fumbled at the knot a minute and then passed it over saying, "You untie it—your fingers are soopler than mine," Miss Mattie's fingers were shaking, but the knots finally came undone, and from the sack she brought forth a chain of rich, dull yellow lumps, fashioned into a necklace. It weighed a pound. She spread it out and looked at it astounded. "Gracious, Will! Is that *gold*?" she asked.

"That's what," he replied. "The real article, just as it came out of the ground: I dug it myself. That's the reason I'm here. I'd never got money enough to go anywheres further than a horse could carry me if I hadn't taken a fly at placer mining and hit her to beat h—er—the very mischief."

Miss Mattie looked first at the barbaric, splendid necklace and then at the barbaric, splendid man. Things grew confused before her in trying to realise that it was real. What two planets so separated in their orbits as her world and his? She had the imagination that is usually lacking in small communities, and the feeling of a fairy story come true, possessed her.

"And now, Mattie," said he, "I don't know what's manners in this part of the country, but I'll make free enough on the cousin part of it to tell you that I could look at some supper without flinching. I've walked a heap to-day, and I ain't used to walking."

Miss Mattie sprang up, herself again at the chance to offer hospitality.

"Why, you poor man!" said she. "Of course you're starved! It must be nearly eight o'clock! I almost forget about eating, living here alone. You shall have supper directly. Will you come in or sit a spell outside?"

"Reckon I'll come in," said Red. "Don't want to lose sight of you now that I've found you."

It was some time since Miss Mattie had felt that anyone had cared enough for her not to want to lose sight of her, and a delicate warm bloom went over her cheeks. She hurried into the little kitchen.

"Mattie!" called Red.

"What is it, Will?" she answered, coming to the door.



“Can I smoke in this little house?”

“Cer—tainly! Sit right down and make yourself comfortable. Don’t you remember what a smoker father was?”

Red tried the different chairs with his hand. They were not a stalwart lot. Finally he spied the home-made rocker in the corner. “There’s the lad for me,” he said, drawing it out. “Got to be kinder careful how you throw two-hundred-fifty pounds around.”

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"Mercy!" cried Miss Mattie, pan in hand. "Do you weigh as much as that, Will?"

"I do," returned Red, with much satisfaction. "And there isn't over two pounds of it fat at that."

"What a great man you have grown up to be, Will!"

Red took in a deep draught of tobacco and sent the vapor clear across the little room.

"On the hay-scales, yes," he answered, with a sort of joking earnestness—"but otherwise, I don't know."

The return to the old home had touched the big man deeply, and as he leaned back in his chair there was a shade of melancholy on his face that became it well.

Miss Mattie took in the mass of him stretched out at his ease, his legs crossed, and the patrician cut of his face, to which the upturned moustache gave a cavalier touch. They were good stock, the Saunders, and the breed had not declined in the only two extant.

"He's my own cousin!" she whispered to herself, in the safety of the kitchen. "And such a splendid looking man!" She felt a pride of possession she had never known before. Nobody in Fairfield or vicinity had such a cousin as that. And Miss Mattie went on joyfully fulfilling an inherited instinct to minister to the wants of some man. She said to herself there was some satisfaction in cooking for somebody else. But alack-a-day, Miss Mattie's ideas of the wants of somebody else had suffered a Fairfield change. Nothing was done on a large scale in Fairfield. But she sat the little cakes—lucky that she had made them yesterday—and the fried mush, and the small pitcher of milk, and the cold ham, and the cold biscuit on the table with a pride in the appearance of the feast.

"Supper's ready, Will," said she.

Red responded instant. Took a look at the board and understood. He ate the little cakes and biscuit, and said they were the durned best he ever tasted. He also took some pot-cheese under a misapprehension; swallowed it, and said to himself that he had been through worse things than that. Then, when his appetite had just begun to develop, the inroads on the provisions warned him that it was time to stop. Meanwhile they had ranged the fields of old times at random, and as Red took in Miss Mattie, pink with excitement and sparkling as to eyes, he thought, "Blast the supper! It's a square meal just to look at her. If she ain't pretty good people, I miss my guess."

It was a merry meal. He had such a way of telling things! Miss Mattie hadn't laughed so much for years, and she felt that there was no one that she had known so long and so well as Cousin Will. There was only one jarring note. Red spoke of the vigorous celebration that had been followed by the finding of gold. It was certainly well told, but

Miss Mattie asked in soft horror when he had finished, “You didn’t get—*intoxicated*—Will?”

“DID I?” said he, lost in memory, and not noticing the tone. “Well, I put my hand down the throat of that man’s town, and turned her inside out! It was like as if Christmas and Fourth of July had happened on the same day.”

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"Oh, Will!" cried Miss Mattie, "I can't think of you like that—rolling in the gutter." Her voice shook and broke off. Her knowledge of the effect of stimulants was limited to Fairfield's one drunkard—old Tommy McKee, a disreputable old Irishman—but drunkenness was the worst vice in her world.

"Rolling in the gutter!" cried Red, in astonishment. "Why girl! What for would I roll in the gutter? What's the fun in that? Jiminy Christmas! I wanted to walk on the telegraph wires—there wasn't anything in that town high enough for me—what put gutters into your head?"

"I—I supposed people did that when they were—like that."

"I wouldn't waste my money on whisky, if that's all the inspiration I got out of it," replied Red.

"Well, of course I don't know about those things, but I wish you'd promise me one thing."

"Done!" cried Red. "What is it?"

"I wish you'd promise me not to touch whisky again!"

"Phew! That's a pretty big order!" He stopped and thought a minute. "If you'll make that 'never touch it when it ain't needed,' leaving when it's needed to what's my idea of the square thing on a promise, I'll go you, Mattie—there's my hand."

"Oh, I shouldn't have said anything at all, Will! I have no right. But it seemed such a pity such a splendid man—I mean—I think—. You mustn't promise me anything, Will," stammered Miss Mattie, shocked at her own daring.

"Here!" he cried, "I'm no little kid! When I promise I mean it! As for your not having any right, ain't we all there is? You've got to be mother and sister and aunt and everything to me. I ain't as young as I have been, Mattie, and I miss she-ways terrible at times. Now put out your fin like a good pardner, and here goes for no more rhinecabooos for Chantay Seeche Red—time I quit drinking, anyhow," he slipped a ring off his little finger. "Here, hold out your hand," said he, "I'll put this on for luck, and the sake of the promise—by the same token, I've got a noose on you now, and you're my property."

This, of course, was only Cousin Will's joking, but Miss Mattie noticed with a sudden hot flush, that he had chosen the engagement finger—in all ignorance, she felt sure. The last thing she could do would be to call his attention to the fact, or run the risk of hurting his feelings by transferring the ring; besides, it was a pretty ring—a rough ruby in a plain gold band—and looked very well where it was.

Then they settled down for what Red called a good medicine talk. Miss Mattie found herself boldly speaking of little fancies and notions that had remained in the inner shrine

of her soul for years, shrinking from the matter-of-fact eye of Fairfield; yet this big, ferocious looking Cousin Will seemed to find them both sane and interesting, and as her self-respect went up in the arithmetical, her admiration for Cousin Will went up in the geometrical ratio. He frankly admitted weaknesses and fears that the males of Fairfield would have rejected scornfully.

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Miss Mattie spoke of sleeping upstairs, because she could not rid herself of the fear of somebody coming in.

"I know just how you feel about that," said Red. "My hair used to be on its feet most of the time when we were in the hay camp at the lake beds. Gee whizz! The rattlers! We put hair ropes around—but them rattlers liked to squirm over hair ropes for exercise. One morning I woke up and there was a crawler on my chest. 'For God's sake, Pete!' says I to Antelope Pete, who was rolled up next me, 'come take my friend away!' and I didn't holler very loud, neither. Pete was chain lightning in pants, and he grabs Mr. Rattler by the tail and snaps his neck, but I felt lonesome in my inside till dinner time. You bet! I know just how you feel, exactly. I didn't have a man's sized night's rest whilst we was in that part of the country."

It struck Miss Mattie that the cases were hardly parallel. "A rattlesnake on your chest, Will!" she cried, with her hands clasped in terror.

"Oh! it wasn't as bad as it sounds—he was asleep—coiled up there to get warm—sharpish nights on the prairie in August—but darn it! Mattie!" wrinkling up his nose in disgust, "I hate the sight of the brutes!"

"But you wouldn't be afraid of a man, Will!"

"Well, no," admitted he. "I've never been troubled much that way. You see, everybody has a different fear to throw a crimp in them. Mine's rattlesnakes and these little bugs with forty million pairs of legs. I pass right out when I see one of them things. They give me a feeling as if my stummick had melted."

"Weren't the Indians terrible out there, too?" asked Miss Mattie. "I'm sure they must have been."

"Oh, they ain't bad people if you use 'em right," said Red. "Not that I like 'em any better on the ground, than in it," he added hastily, fearful of betraying the sentiment of his country, "but I never had but one real argument, man to man. Black Wolf and I come together over a matter of who owned my cayuse, and from words we backed off and got to shooting. He raked me from knee to hip, as I was kneeling down, doing the best I could by him, and wasting ammunition because I was in a hurry. Still, I did bust his ankle. In the middle of the fuss a stray shot hit the cayuse in the head and he croaked without a remark, so there we were, a pair of fools miles from home with nothing left to quarrel about! You could have fried an egg on a rock that day, and it always makes you thirsty to get shot anyways serious, thinking of which I hollered peace to old Black Wolf and told him I'd pull straws with him to see who took my canteen down to the creek and got some fresh water. He was agreeable and we hunched up to each other. It ain't to my credit to say it, but I was worse hurt than that Injun, so I worked him. He got the

short straw, and had to crawl a mile through cactus, while I sat comfortable on the cause of the disagreement and yelled to him

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that he looked like a badger, and other things that an Injun wouldn't feel was a compliment." Red leaned back and roared. "I can see him now putting his hands down so careful, and turning back every once in awhile to cuss me. Turned out that it was his cayuse, too. Feller that sold it to me had stole it from him. I oughtn't to laugh over it, but I can't help but snicker when I think how I did that Injun."

Generally speaking, Miss Mattie had a lively sense of humour, but the joke of this was lost on her. Her education had been that getting shot was far from funny.

"Why, I should have thought you would have died, Will!"

"What! For a little crack in the leg!" cried Red, with some impatience. "You people must quit easy in this country. Die nothin'. One of our boys came along and took us to camp, and we was up and doing again in no time. 'Course, Black Wolf has a game leg for good, but the worst that's stuck to me is a yank or two of rheumatism in the rainy season. I paid Wolf for his cayuse," he finished shamefacedly. "I had the laugh on him anyhow."

Miss Mattie told him she thought that was noble of him, which tribute Red took as medicine, and shifted the subject with speed, to practical affairs. He asked Miss Mattie how much money she had and how she managed to make out. Now, it was one of the canons of good manners in Fairfield not to speak of material matters—perhaps because there was so little material matter in the community, but Miss Mattie, doomed to a thousand irksome petty economies, had often longed for a sympathetic ear, to pour into it a good honest complaint of hating to do this and that. She could not exactly go this far with Cousin Will, but she could say that it was pretty hard to get along, and give some details. She felt that she knew him so very well, in those few hours! Red heard with nods of assent. He had scented the conditions at once.

"It ain't any fun, skidding on the thin ice," said he, when they had concluded the talk. "I've had to count the beans I put in the pot, and it made me hate arithmetic worse than when I went over yonder to school. Well, them days have gone by for you, Mattie." He reached down and pulling out a green roll, slapped it on the centre table. "Blow that in, and limber up, and remember that there's more behind it."

Miss Mattie's pride rose at a leap.

"Will!" she said, "I hope you don't think I've told you this to get money from you?"

He leaned forward, put his hand on her shoulder and held her eyes with a sudden access of sternness and authority.

"And I hope, Mattie," said he, "that you don't think that I think anything of the kind?"

The cousins stared into each other's eyes for a full minute. Then Miss Mattie spoke. "No, Will," said she, "I don't believe you do."

"I shouldn't think I did," retorted Red. "What in thunder would I do with all that money? Why, good Lord, girl, I could paper your house with ten-dollar bills—now you try to fly them green kites, like I tell you."

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Miss Mattie broke down, the not fully realised strain of fifteen years had made itself felt when the cord snapped. "I don't know how to thank you. I don't know what to say. Oh, William! it seems too good to be true."

"What you crying about, Mattie?" said he in sore distress. "Now hold on! Listen to me a minute! There's something I want you to do for me."

"What is it?" she asked, drying her eyes. "For dinner to-morrow," he replied, "let's have a roast of beef about that size," indicating a wash-tub.

The diversion was complete.

"Why, Will! What would we ever do with it?" said she.

"Do with it? Why, eat it!"

"But we couldn't eat all that!"

"Then throw what's left to the cats. You ain't going to fall down on me the first favour I ask?" with mock seriousness.

"You shall have the roast of beef. 'Pears to me that you're fond of your stomach, Will," said Miss Mattie, with a recovering smile.

"I have a good stomach, that's always done the right thing by me, when I've done the right thing by *it*," said Red. "And moreover, just look at the constitution I have to support. But say, old lady, look at that!" pointing to the clock. "Eleven-thirty; time decent people were putting up for the night."

The words brought to an acute stage a wandering fear which had passed through Miss Mattie's mind at intervals during the evening. Where was she to look for sleeping accommodations for a man? She revolted against the convention, that, in her own mind, as well as the rest of Fairfield, forbade the use of her house for the purpose. Long habit of thought had made these niceties constitutional. It was almost as difficult for Miss Mattie to say "I'll fix up your bed right there on the sofa" as it would have been for Red to pick a man's pocket, yet, when she thought of his instant and open generosity and what a dismal return therefor it would be to thrust him out for reasons which she divined would have no meaning for him, she heroically resolved to throw custom to the winds, and speak.

But the difficulty was cut in another fashion.

"There's a little barn in the back-yard that caught my eye," said Red, "and if you'll lend me a blanket I'll roll it out there."

“Sleep in the barn! You’ll not do any such thing!” cried Miss Mattie. “You’ll sleep right here on the sofa, or upstairs in my bed, just as you choose.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not. So help me Bob! I’d smother in here. Had the darnedest time coming on that ever was—hotels. Little white rooms with the walls coming in on you. Worse than rattlesnakes for keeping a man awake. Reminds me of the hospital. Horse fell on me once and smashed me up so that I had to be sent to get puttied up again, and I never struck such a month as that since I was born. The doc. told me I mustn’t move, but I told him I’d chuck him out of the window if he tried to stop me, and up I got. I’d have gone dead sure if they’d held me a week more. I speak for the barn, Mattie, and I speak real loud; that is, I mean to say I’m going to sleep in the barn, unless there’s somebody a heap larger than you on the premises. Now, there’s no use for you to talk—I’m going to do just as I say.”

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"Well, I think that's just dreadful!" said Miss Mattie. "I'd like to know what folks will think of me to hear I turned my own cousin out in the barn." Her voice trailed off a little at the end as the gist of what they might say if he stayed in the house, occurred to her. "Well," she continued, "if you're set, I suppose I can't object." Miss Mattie was not a good hand at playing a part.

"I'm set," said Red. "Get me a blanket." As she came in with this, he added, "Say, Mattie, could you let me have a loaf of bread? I've got a habit of wanting something to eat in the middle of the night."

"Certainly! Don't you want some butter with it? Here, I'll fix it for you on a plate."

"No, don't waste dish-washing—I'll show you how to fix it." He cut the loaf of bread in half, pulled out a portion of the soft part and filled the hole with butter. "There we are, and nothing to bother with afterwards."

"That's a right smart notion, Will—but you'll want a knife."

In answer he drew out a leather case from his breast pocket and opened it. Within was knife, fork, spoon and two flat boxes for salt and pepper. "You see I'm fixed," said he.

"Isn't that a cute trick!" she cried admiringly. "You're ready for most anything."

"Sure," said Red. "Now, good night, old lady!" He bent down in so natural a fashion that Miss Mattie had kissed him before she knew what she was going to do.

Down to the barn, through the soft June evening, went Red, whistling a Mexican love song most melodiously.

Miss Mattie stood in the half-opened door and listened. Without was balm and starlight and the spirit of flowers, breathed out in odours. The quaint and pretty tune rose and fell, quavered, lilted along as it listed without regard for law and order. It struck Miss Mattie to the heart. Her girlhood, with its misty dreams of happiness, came back to her on the wings of music.

"Isn't that a sweet tune," she said, with a lump in her throat.

She went up into her room and sat down a moment in confusion, trying to grasp the reality of all that had happened. In the middle of the belief that these things were not so, came the regret of a sensitive mind for errors committed. She remembered with a sudden sinking, that she had not thanked him for the necklace—and the money lay even now on the parlor table, where he had cast it! This added the physical fear of thieves. Down she went and got the money, counted out, to her unmitigated astonishment, five hundred dollars and thrust it beneath her pillow with a shiver. She wished she had thought to tell him to take care of it—but suppose the thieves were to

fall on him as he slept? Red's friends would have spent their sympathy on the thieves. She rejoiced that the money was where it was. Then she tried to remember what she had said throughout the evening.

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"Well, I suppose I must have acted like a ninny," she concluded. "But isn't he just splendid!" and as Cousin Will's handsome face, with its daring, kind eyes, came to her vision she felt comforted. "I don't believe but what he'll make every allowance for how excited I was," said she. "He seems to understand those things, for all he's such a large man. Well, it doesn't seem as if it could be true." With a half sigh Miss Mattie knelt and sent up her modest petition to her Maker and got into her little white bed.

In the meantime Red's actions would have awakened suspicion. He hunted around until he found a tin can, then lit a match and rummaged the barn, amid terror-stricken squawks from the inhabitants, the hens.

"One, two, three, four," he counted. "Reckon I can last out till morning on that. Mattie, she's white people—just the nicest I ever saw, but she ain't used to providing for a full-grown man."

He stepped to the back of the barn and looked about him. "Nobody can see me from here," he said, in satisfaction. Then he scraped together a pile of chips and sticks and built a fire, filled the tin can at the brook, sat it on two stones over the fire, rolled himself a cigarette and waited. A large, yellow tom-cat came out of the brush and threw his green headlights on him, meowing tentatively.

"Hello, pussy!" said Red. "You hungry too? Well, just wait a minute, and we'll help that feeling—like bread, pussy?" The cat gobbled the morsel greedily, came closer and begged for more. The tin can boiled over. Red popped the eggs in, puffed his cigarette to a bright coal, and looked at his watch by the light. "Gee! Ten minutes more, now!" said he. "Hardly seems to me as if I could wait." He pulled the watch out several times. "What's the matter with the damn thing? I believe it's stopped," he growled. But at last "Time!" he shouted gleefully, kicked the can over and gathered up its treasures in his handkerchief.

"Now, Mr. Cat, we're going to do some real eating," said he. "Just sit right down and make yourself at home—this is kind of fun, by Jinks!" Down went the eggs and down went the loaf of bread in generous slices, never forgetting a fair share for the cat.

"Woosh! I feel better!" cried Red, "and now for some sleep." He swung up into the hay-loft, spread the blanket on the still fragrant old hay, and rolled himself up in a trice.

"I did a good turn when I came on here," he mused. "If I have got only one relation, she's a dandy—so pretty and quiet and nice. She's a marker for all I've got, is Mattie."

The cat came up, purring and "making bread." He sniffed feline fashion at Red's face.

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"Foo! Shoo! Go 'way, pussy! Settle yourself down and we'll pound our ear for another forty miles. I like you first rate when you don't walk on my face." He stretched and yawned enormously. "Yes sir! Mattie's all right," said he. "A-a-a-ll ri-" and Chantay Seeche Red was in the land of dreams. Here, back in God's country, within twenty miles of the place where he was born, the wanderer laid him down again, and in spite of raid and foray, whisky and poker-cards, wear-and-tear, hard times, and hardest test of all, sudden fortune, he was much the same impulsive, honest, generous, devil-may-care boy who had left there twenty-four years ago.

II

The next morning when Red awoke, arrows of gold were shooting through the holes in the old barn, and outside, the bird life, the twittering and chirping, the fluent whistle and the warble, the cackle and the pompous crow, were in full chorus.

"Where am I at, this time?" said he, as he took in the view. "Oh, I remember!" and his heart leapt. "I'm in my own home, by the Lord!"

He went down to the brook and washed, drying hands and face on the silk neckerchief, which is meant for use as well as for decoration.

In the meantime, Miss Mattie had awakened, with a sense of something delightful at hand, the meaning of which escaped her for the time. And then she remembered, and sprang out of bed like a girl. She went to the window, threw open the shutters and let the stirring morning air flow in. This had been her habit for a long time. The window faced away from the road, and no one could see who was not on Miss Mattie's own premises.

But this morning Red had wandered around. Stopping at the rose bushes he picked a bud.

"That has the real old-time smell," he said, as he held it to his nose. "Sweetbriars are good, and I don't go back on 'em, but they ain't got the fram these fellers have."

Bud in hand he walked beneath Miss Mattie's windows, and he was the first thing her eye fell upon.

Her startled exclamation made him look up before she had time to withdraw.

"Hello there!" he called joyfully. "How do you open up this day? You look pretty well!" he added with a note of admiration. Miss Mattie had the wavy hair which is never in better order than when left to its own devices. Her idea of coiffure was not the most becoming that could have been selected, as she felt that a "young" style of hair dressing

was foolish for a single woman of her years. Now, with the pretty soft hair flying, her eyes still humid with sleep, and a touch of color in her face from the surprise, relieved against the fleecy shawl she had thrown about her shoulders, she was incontestably both a discreet and pretty picture. Yet Miss Mattie could not forget the bare feet and night-gown, although they were hidden from masculine eyes by wood and plaster, and she was embarrassed. Still, with all the super-sensitive fancies, Miss Mattie had a strong back-bone of New England common-sense. She answered that she felt very well indeed, and, to cover any awkwardness, inquired what he had in his hand.

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"Good old rose," replied Red. "Old-time smeller—better suited to you than to me—ketch!"

At the word he tossed it, and Miss Mattie caught it dexterously. Red had an exceedingly keen eye for some things, and he noticed the certainty of the action. He hated fumblers. "A person can do things right if they've got minds that work," was one of his pet sayings. "'Taint the muscles at all—it's in the head, and I like the kind of head that's in use all the time." Therefore this small affair made an impression on him.

"Why, you could be a baseball player," said he.

"I used to play with Joe, when I was a girl," said Miss Mattie, smiling. "I always liked boy's play better than I did girl's. Joe taught me how to throw a ball, too. He said he wouldn't play with me unless I learned not to 'scoop it,' girl fashion. I suppose you will be wanting breakfast?" There was a hint of sarcasm in the doubt of the inquiry.

"That's what I do!" said Red. "You must just hustle down and get things to boiling, or I'll throw bricks through the windows. I've been up for the last two hours."

"Why! I don't believe it!" said Miss Mattie.

"No more do I, but it seems like it,"
replied Red. "Don't you want the fire started?
Come down and open up the house."

When Miss Mattie appeared at the door, in he strode with an armful of wood, dropping it man-fashion, crash! on the floor.

"Skip out of the way!" said he. "I'll show you how to build a fire!"

The early morning had been the most desolate time to Miss Mattie. As the day warmed up the feeling of loneliness vanished, perhaps to return at evening, but not then with the same absoluteness as when she walked about the kitchen to the echo of her own footsteps in the morning.

Now the slamming and the banging which accompanied Red's energetic actions rang in her ears most cheerily. She even found a relish in the smothered oath that heralded the thrust of a splinter in his finger. It was very wicked, but it was also very much alive.

Red arose and dusted off his knees. "Now we're off!" he said as the fire began to roar. "What's next?"

"If you'd grind the coffee, Will?" she suggested.

"Sure! Where's the hand organ?"

He put the mill between his knees, and converted the beans to powder, to the tune of “Old dog Tray” through his nose, which Miss Mattie found very amusing.

She measured out the coffee, one spoonful for each cup, and one for the pot. Red watched her patiently, and when she had finished, he threw in the rest of the contents of the mill-drawer. “I like it fairly strong,” said he in explanation.

“Now, Will!” protested Miss Mattie.
“Look at you! That will be as bitter as boneset!”

“Thin her up with milk and she’ll be all right,” replied Red.

“Well, such wasteful ways I never did see.
Nobody’d think you were a day over fifteen.”

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"I'm not," said Red stoutly, "and," catching her chin in his hand and turning her face up toward him—"Nobody'd put your score much higher than that neither, if they trusted to their eyes this morning."

The compliment hit so tender a place that Miss Mattie lacked the resolution to tear it out, besides, it was so honest that it sounded much less like a compliment than a plain statement of fact. She bent hastily over the fire. "I'm glad I look young, Will," she said softly.

"So'm I!" he assented heartily. "What's the sense in being old, anyhow? I'm as limber and good for myself as ever I was, in spite of my forty years."

"You're not *forty* years old!" exclaimed Miss Mattie. "You're joking!"

"Nary joke—forty round trips from flying snow to roses since I hit land, Mattie—why, you were only a little girl when I left here—don't you remember? You and your folks came to see us the week before I left. I got a thrashing for taking you and Joe to the millpond, and helping you to get good and wet. The thrashing was one of the things that gave me a hankering for the West. Very liberal man with the hickory, father. Spare the clothes and spoil the skin was his motto. He used to make me strip to the waist—phee-hew! Even a light breeze rested heavy on my back when dad got through with me—say, Mattie, perhaps I oughtn't to say so, now that he's gone, but I don't think that's the proper way to use a boy, do you?"

"No, I don't," said Miss Mattie. "Your father meant well, but his way was useless and cruel."

"I've forgiven him the whole sweep," said Red. "But damn me! If I had a boy I wouldn't club the life out of him—I'd try to reason with him first, anyhow. Makes a boy as ugly as anybody else to get the hide whaled off his back for nothing—once in a while he needs it. Boy that's got any life in him gets to be too much occasionally and then a warming is healthful and nourishing. Lord! You'd think I was the father of my country to hear me talk, wouldn't you? If somebody'd write a book, 'What Red Saunders don't know about raising children' it would be full of valuable information—how's that breakfast coming on?"

"All ready—sit right down, Will."

"Go you!" cried Red, and incautiously flung himself upon one of the kitchen chairs, which collapsed instantly and dropped him to the floor.

"Mercy on us! Are you hurt?" cried Miss Mattie, rushing forward.

"Hurt?" said Red. "Try it!—Just jump up in the air and sit on the floor where you are now, and see if you get hurt! Oh, no! I'm not hurt, but I'm astonished beyond measure,



like the man that tickled the mule. I'll take my breakfast right here—shouldn't wonder a bit if the floor went back on me and landed me in the cellar—no sir! I won't get up! Hand me the supplies, I know when I'm well off. If you want to eat breakfast with me come sit on the floor. I'm not going to have my spine pushed through the top of my head twice in the same day."

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"Will! You are the most ridiculous person I ever did see!" said Miss Mattie, and she laughed till she cried in sheer light-heartedness. "But there's a chair you can trust—come on now."

"Well, if you'll take your solemn oath that this one has no moustache to deceive me," said Red doubtfully. "It looks husky—well, I'll try it—Hooray! She didn't give an inch. This kind of reminds me of the time Jimmy Hendricks came back from town and walked off the edge of the bluff in the dark. It just happened that Old Scotty Ferguson's cabin was underneath him. Jim took most of the roof off with him as he went in. He sat awhile to figure out what was trumps, having come a hundred and fifty feet too fast to do much thinking. Then, 'Hello!' he yells. Old Scotty was a sleeper from 'way back, but this woke him up.

"'Hello!' says he. 'Was'er matter?'

"Jim saw he wasn't more than half awake yet, so he says, 'Why, I was up on the bluff there, Scotty, and seeing it was such a short distance I thought I'd drop in!'

"'Aw ri',' grunted Scotty. 'Make y'self t' home,' and with that he rolls over.

"Jim couldn't wait for morning, and though his leg was pretty badly sprained, he made the trip all the way round the trail and woke us up to tell us how he'd gone through Ferguson's roof and the old man asked him to make himself at home. Next morning there was Scotty out in front of his cabin, his thumbs in his vest holes, looking up.

"'What's the matter, Scotty?' says I.

"'Well, I wisht you'd tell me what in the name of God went through that roof!' says he.

"I swallowed a laugh cross-ways and put on a serious face. 'Must have been a rock,' says I.

"'Rock nothin'!' says he. 'If it had been a rock 'twould have stayed in the cabin, wouldn't it! Well, there ain't the first blasted thing of any shape nor description in there but the hole—you can go in and look for yourself.'

"It cost Scotty one case of rye to make us forget those circumstances."

"I should have thought the man would be killed, striking on the roof that way," said Miss Mattie.

"Oh, no! Roof was made of quaking-aspen saplings, just about strong enough to break his fall. Scotty was the sleeper, though! It wasn't hardly natural the way that man could pound his ear through thick and thin. He had quite a surprising time of it once. He'd been prospecting 'round the Ruby refractory ore district and he came out at Hank



Cutter's saw-mill, just at sun-down. Hank's place was full of gold rushers, so Old Scotty thought he'd sleep out-doors in peace and quiet. He discovered some big boxes, that Hank was making for ore bins for the new mill, and as the ground was kind of damp from a thunder-shower they had that day, he spreads his blanket inside the box and goes to sleep; ore bins have to be smooth and dust tight, so it wasn't a bad shanty.

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“Well, there came a jar and waked him up. The box was rolling a little, and going along, going along forty mile an hour. Scotty lit a match and found he was in a kind of big tunnel but the wall was flying by so fast, he couldn’t make out just what kind of a tunnel it was. Now, he’d gone to sleep in peace and quiet on a side hill, and to wake up and find himself boat-riding in a tunnel was enough to surprise anybody. First he pinched himself to see if it was Hank’s pie, or a cold fact, found it was a fact, then he lit another match and leaned over and looked at the black water underneath, but this made the box tip so it scart him and he settled down in the bottom again. He didn’t try to think—what was the use? No man living could have figured things out with the few facts Scotty had before him. All of a sudden the box made a rush and shot out into the air, and Scotty felt they were falling. ‘God sakes!’ he says to himself. ‘What’s next, I wonder?’ Then they hit the water below with a ker-flap that nearly telescoped Scotty and sent the spray flying. After that they went along smooth again. ‘Well,’ says Scotty, ‘I don’t know where I am, nor who I am, nor what’s happened, nor who’s it, nor nothing about this game. So far I ain’t been hurt, though, and I might just as well lie down and get a little more rest.’

“It was broad daylight when he woke up again, and a man was looking into the box. ‘Hello, pardner!’ he says. ‘I hope you’ve had a pleasant journey—do you always travel this way?’

“Scotty raised up and found his craft was aground—high and dry—no water within a hundred feet of it. On one side was quite a little town.

“‘Say,’ says he, ‘could I trouble you to tell me where I am, friend?’

“‘You’re at Placerville,’ answers the other.

“‘Placerville!’ yells Scotty, ‘and I went to sleep at Cutter’s Mill, sixty-five miles from here!—what are you giving us, man?’

“‘I’m putting it to you straight,’ says the stranger. ‘Take a look around you.’

“Scotty looked and there was all kinds of wreckage, from a dead beef critter to a wheel barrow.

“‘What in nation’s all this?’ says he.

“‘Washout,’ says the man. ‘Cloud burst up on the divide—worst we’ve ever had—your box is about high water mark—you see there was water enough for awhile—I reckon you’re about the only thing that came through alive.’

“‘Well, wouldn’t that knock you?’ says Scotty.

—“Whilst the rest of the folk at the mill was taking to the high ground for their lives, with the water roaring and tearing through the gulch, Scotty had peacefully gone off in his

little boat, down the creek, and instead of going over the rapids, where he'd have been done, for all his luck, the box ambles through the flume they was building for the new mill. Of course there was the jounce over the tail race, but that hadn't hurt him much, and after, he rocked in the cradle of the deep, until he got beached at Placerville.

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“Come along, friend,’ says Scotty to the feller, ‘you and me are going to have a little drink on this, if it is the last act.’ And I reckon probably they made it two, for when Scotty got back again he was in a condition that made everybody believe that he’d only guessed at the story he told. But they found out afterward it was a solemn fact. Mattie, give us some more coffee.”

Thus abruptly recalled to Fairfield, Miss Mattie started up.

“Well, Will, it does seem as if that was a dangerous country to live in,” said she.

“Oh, not so awful!” said Red. “Just as many people die here as they do there—this world’s a dangerous place to live in, wherever you strike it, Mattie.”

“That’s so,” said she, thoughtfully.

“And now,” said Red, pushing back his chair, “it’s time I got to work and left you to do the housework undisturbed.”

“What are you going to do, Will?”

“First place, there’s fences and things to be tinkered up, I see. I suppose a millionaire like me ought to hire those things done, but I’d have measles of the mind if I sat around doing nothing.”

“I have been wanting to get the place in good order for some time,” said Miss Mattie, “but what with the money I had to spend for this and that, and not being able to get Mr. Joyce to come in for a day’s work when I wanted him, it’s gone on, until there is a good deal of wrack to it.”

“We’ll wrack it t’other way round in no time—got any tools here?”

“Out in the barn is what’s left of father’s tools—people have borrowed ’em and forgot to return ’em, and they’ve rusted or been lost until I’m afraid there ain’t many of ’em left.”

“Well, I’ll get along to-day somehow, and later on we’ll stock up—want any help around the house?”

“Thank you, no, Will.”

“Then I’m off.”

It was almost with a feeling of terror that Miss Mattie beheld him root up the fence. Her idea of repairing was to put in a picket here and there where it was most needed; Red’s was to knock it all flat first, and set it up in A1 condition afterward. So, in two hours’ time he straightened up and snapped the sweat from his brow, beholding the slain pickets

prone on the grass with thorough satisfaction. Yet he felt tired, for the day was already hot with a moist and soaking sea-coast heat, to which the plainsman was unaccustomed. A three-quarter-grown boy passed by, lounging on the seat of a farm waggon.

"Hey!" hailed Red. The boy stopped and turned slowly around.

"Yes, sir," he answered courteously enough.

"Want a job?" said Red.

"Well, I dunno," replied the boy. He was much astonished at the appearance of his interrogator, and he was a cautious New England boy to boot.

"*You* don't know?" retorted Red. "Well," with some sarcasm, "d'ye suppose I could find out at the post-office?"

The boy looked at Red with a twinkle in his eye, and a comical drawing of his long mouth.

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"I calc'late if you cud fin' out anyweres, 'twould be there," said he.

Red laughed. He had noticed the busy post-mistress rushing out of her store to waylay anyone likely to have information on any subject, a stream of questions proceeding from her through the door.

"Say, you got anything particular to do?"

"No, sir—leastways th'ain't no hurry about it."

"Can I buy stuff to make a fence with, around here?"

"Yes, sir—Mister Pettigrew's got all kinds of buildin' material at his store—two mile over yonder," pointing with the whip.

"You drive over there for me, and get some—just like this here—pickets and posts and whatever you call them long pieces, and I'll make it right with you."

"Yes, sir—how much will I get?"

"Oh, tell him to fill the waggon up with it, and I'll send back what I don't want—hustle, now, like a good boy; I want to get shut of this job; I liked it better before I begun."

When his Mercury had speeded on the journey at a faster gait than Red would have given him credit for, the architect strode down to the blacksmith's shop. There was a larger crowd than usual around the forge, as the advent of the stranger had gotten into the wind, and the village Vulcan was a person who not only looked the whole world in the face, but no one of the maiden ladies of Fairfield could have excelled his interest in looking the whole world as much in the inside pocket as possible. The blacksmith was emphatically a gossip, as well as a hardworking, God-fearing man.

"Say, there he comes now, Mr. Tuttle!" cried one of the loungers, and nudged the smith to look.

"Well, let him come!" retorted the smith, testily, jamming a shoe in the fire with unnecessary force; as a matter of fact, he was embarrassed. The loungers huddled together for moral support, as the big cow-man loomed through the doorway.

"Good morning, friends!" said he.

"Good morning, sir!" replied the blacksmith, rubbing his hands on his apron. "Nice day, sir?"

“For the sake of good fellowship, I’ll say ‘yes’ to that,” responded Red. “But if you want my honest opinion on the subject, it’s damn hot.”

“‘Tis that,” assented the smith, and a silence followed.

“Say, who’s your crack fence-builder around here?” asked Red. “The man that can make two pickets grow where only one grew before and do it so easy that it’s a pleasure to sit and look at him?”

“Hey?” inquired the smith, not precisely getting the meaning of the address.

“Why, I’ve got a fence to build,” exclaimed Red. “And now I want some help—want it so bad, I’ll produce to the extent of three a day and call it a day from now ’till six o’clock—any takers here? Make your bets while the little ball rolls.”

The loungers understood the general drift of this and pricked up their ears, as did the blacksmith. “Guess one of the boys will help you,” said the latter.

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"Well, who's it?" asked Red, glancing at the circle of faces. Three dollars a day was enormous wages in that part of the country. Nobody knew just what to say.

"Oh, well!" cried Red, "let's everybody run—I reckon I can find something to do for the five of you—are you with me?"

"Yes, sir," they said promptly.

"Can I borrow a hammer or so off you, old man?" questioned Red of the smith.

"Certainly, sir," returned the latter heartily. "Take what you want."

"Much obliged—and the gate hinges are out of whack—Miss Saunders' place, you know—come over and take a squint at 'em in the near by-and-by, will you? May as well fix it up all at once—come on, boys!"

It was thus that the greatest enterprise that Fairfield had seen in many a day was undertaken. Miss Mattie was simply astounded as the army bore down upon the house.

"Whatever in the world is Cousin Will doing?" said she; but resting strong in the faith that it was necessarily all right, she was content to wait for dinner and an explanation. Not so the post-mistress. The agonies of unrequited curiosity the worthy woman suffered that morning until she at last summoned up her resolution and asked the smith plump out and out what it all meant, would have to be experienced to be appreciated. And the smith kept her hanging for a while, too, saying to himself in justification, that it wasn't right the way that old gal had to get into everybody's business. The smith was like some of the rest of us; he could see through a beam if it was in his own eye.

III

There was a great din of whacking and hammering that morning. Red worked like a horse, now that he had company. A sudden thought struck him and he went into the house.

"Mattie," said he.

"Well, Will?"

"I see a use for the rest of that nice big roast of beef I smell in the oven—let's have all these fellers stay to dinner, and give 'em one good feed—what do you say?"

"Why, I'd like to. Will—but I don't know—where'll I set them?"

“Couple of boards outside for a table—let them sit on boxes or something—got plates and things enough?”

“My, yes! Plenty of such things, Will.”

“Then if it ain’t too much trouble for you, we’ll let it go.”

“No trouble at all, Will—it will be a regular picnic.”

“Boys, you’ll eat with me this day,” said Red.

They spread the board table beneath an old apple tree, and cleaned up for the repast in the kitchen storm-shed with an apologetic, “Sorry to trouble you, Miss Saunders,” or such a matter as each went in.

Just as Miss Mattie was withdrawing the meat from the oven, there came a knock at the door.

“Goodness, gracious!” she exclaimed. “Who can that be now? Will, will you see who that is? I can’t go.”

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"Sure!" said Red, and went to the door. There stood two women of that indefinite period between forty and sixty, very decently dressed and with some agitation visible in the way they fussily adjusted various parts of their attire.

They started at the sudden spectacle of the huge man who said pleasantly, "Howderdo, ladies!"

"Why, how do you do?" replied the taller instantly, and in a voice she had never heard before. "I hope you're well, sir?" A remark which filled her with surprise.

"Thanks—I'm able to assume the perpendicular, as you can see," responded Red with a handsome smile of welcome. "How do you find yourself?"

"I'm pretty well," said the flustered lady. "How do you do?"

"Durned if we ain't right back where we started from," mourned Red to himself. "If it's one of the customs of this country saying 'howderdo' an hour at a stretch, I pass it up." Aloud, he said, "Coming along fine—how's your father?" "Cuss me if I don't shift the cut a little, anyhow," he added mentally.

"Why, he's very well indeed!" exclaimed the lady with fervor. "How—" She got no further on the query, for the other woman interrupted in a tone of scandal. "Mary Ann Demilt! How can you talk like that! Your father's been dead this five year last August!"

The horror of the moment was broken by the appearance of Miss Mattie, crying hospitably on seeing the visitors, "Why, Mary and Pauline! How do you do?"

The shorter one—Pauline—looked up and said sharply, "We're well enough, Mattie." She was weary of the form.

"Come right in," said Miss Mattie. "You're just in time for dinner."

There was a great protest at this. They "hadn't a moment to spare," they were "just going down to the corner, and had stopped to say," *etc.*, *etc.*

"You've got to help me," said Miss Mattie. "Will here has invited the boys who are working for him to stay to dinner, and it won't be any more than Christian for you to help me out."

"Ladies!" said Red. "If you don't want to starve a man who's deserving of a better fate, take off your fixings and come out to dinner. No," he continued to their protests, which he observed were growing weaker. "It's no trouble at all: there's plenty for everybody—come one, come all, this house shall fly, clean off its base as soon as I—Now for Heaven's sake, ladies, it's all settled—come on."

Whereat they laughed nervously, and took off their hats.

It was a jolly dinner party. The young fellows Red had picked up in the blacksmith's shop were not the ordinary quality of loungers. They were boys of good country parentage, with a common school education, who, unfortunately, could find nothing to do but the occasional odd job. Of course it would not take long to transform them into common n'er-do-wells, but now they were merely thoughtless boys.

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The whole affair had an *al fresco* flavor which stoppered convention. The two women visitors pitched in and had as good a time as anybody.

In the middle of the festivities a young man walked past the front fence; a stranger evidently, for his clothes wore the cut of a city, and a cosmopolitan, up-to-date city at that. He stopped and looked at the house, hesitated a moment and then walked in, back to where the folk were eating.

"Excuse me," said he, as they looked up at him, "but isn't this Mr. Demilt's house?"

A momentary silence followed, as it was not clear whose turn it was to answer. Miss Mattie glanced around and finding Red's eye on her, replied, "No sir—Mr. Demilt's house is about a mile further up the road."

"Dear me!" said the young man ruefully. He was a spic-and-span, intelligent looking man, with less of the dandy about him than the air of a man who had never worn anything but clothes of the proper trim, and become quite used to it. Nevertheless the sweat stood out in drops on his forehead, for Fairfield's front "street" savoured of a less moral region than it really was, on a broiling summer day.

The young man sighed frankly and wiped his head. "Well, that's too bad," he said. "I'm a stranger here—would you kindly tell me where I could get some dinner?"

"What's the matter with that?" inquired Red, pointing to the roast, which still preserved an air of fallen greatness. He had liked the look of the other instantly.

The stranger looked first at Red and then at the roast. "The only thing I can see the matter with that," he answered, "is that it is a slice too thick."

"Keno!" cried Red, "you get it. Mattie, another plate and weapons to fit. Sit down, sir, and rest your fevered feet. If you don't like walking any better than I do, you've probably strewn fragments of one of the commandments all the way from where the stage dropped you to this apple tree."

"It seems to me that I did make some remarks that I never learned at my mother's knee," returned the other laughing. "And I'm exceedingly obliged for the invitation, as there doesn't seem to be a hotel here, and I am but a degree south of starvation."

"Red or black?" asked the host, with a quick glance at his guest.

The other caught the allusion. "I haven't followed the deal," he replied, "but I'll chance it on the red."

Somehow he felt instantly at home and at ease; it was a quality that Red Saunders dispersed wherever he went.

“There you are, sir,” said Red, forwarding a plate full of juicy meat. “The ladies will supply the decorations.”

“Do you like rice as a vegetable, sir?” inquired Miss Mattie.

“No—he doesn’t,” interrupted Red. “He likes it as an animal—never saw anyone who looked less like a vegetable than our friend,” The young man’s laugh rang out above the others.

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Poor Miss Mattie was confused. "It's too bad of you, Will, to put such a meaning on my words," she said.

"The strange part of it is," spoke the young man, seeing an opportunity for a joke, and to deal courteously with his entertainers at the same time. "The peculiar fact is, that my name is Lettis."

"Lettuce?" cried Red. "Mattie, I apologise—he is a vegetable."

At which they all laughed again.

"And now," said Red, "I'm Red Saunders, late of the Chantay Seeche Ranch, Territory of Dakota—State of North Dakota, I mean, can't get used to the State business; there's a Bill and a Dick on this side of me and two Johns and a Sammy on the other. Foot of the table is Miss Mattie Saunders, next to her—just as they run—Miss Pauline Doolittle and Miss Mary Ann Demilt, who may be kin to the gentleman you're seeking."

"Mr. Thomas F. Demilt?" asked the stranger.

"He's my sister," responded Miss Mary Ann. Whereat the youths buried their faces in the plates, as Mr. Thomas F., in spite of many excellent qualities, bore a pathetic resemblance to the title.

"I mean," continued the lady hurriedly, "that I'm his brother."

"By Jimmy, ma'am!" exclaimed Red. "But yours is a strange family!"

"What Miss Demilt wishes to say," cut in Miss Doolittle with some asperity, "is that Mr. Thomas Faulkenstone Demilt is her brother." She did not add, as extreme candour would have urged, "And I have some hope—remote, alas! but there—of becoming sister to Miss Demilt myself."

"Thank you!" said Lettis. "Shall I be able to see him this afternoon?"

"Oh, mercy, yes!" said Miss Mary Ann. "Tom is home all day."

"I can thank the kind fates for that," said Lettis. "I had begun to think he was a myth," and he fell in upon the tender meat with the vigorous appetite of youth and a good digestion.

Nathaniel Lettis was by no means a fool, and he had experience in business, but the mainspring of the young fellow was frankness, and in the course of the dinner he told his errand. Mr. Demilt had written to his firm explaining the advantages of starting a straw-board factory in Fairfield. It was too small a thing for the firm to be interested in, but Lettis had a small capital which he wished to invest in an enterprise of his own

handling, and it had struck him that there might be a chance for independence; therefore he had come to find out the lay of the land.

* * * * *

Red Saunders' first-glance liking of the stranger deepened as he told of his business. The cowman did not blame people who took devious ways and dealt in ambiguities, for his experience in the world, which was pretty fairly complete, had told him that craft was a necessity for weak natures; nevertheless he cared not for those who used it.

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In his part of the West, a man would no more think of giving a false impression of his financial standing to alter his position in one's regard, than he would wear corsets. Money was of small consequence; its sequelae of less. Men spoke openly of how much they made; how they liked the job; how their claims were paying; such matters were neutral ground of chance conversation, as the weather is in the East. The rapid and unpredictable changes of fortune gave a tendency to make light of one's present condition. A man would say "I'm busted" without any more feeling than he would say "I have a cold." Now, in Fairfield, that is not likely lonesome in that respect, one of the principal objects in life was to conceal the poverty which would persist in sticking its gaunt elbows through the cloth of words spread over it. Red asked straight-forward questions—shrewd ones, too—seeing that the other was one of his own kind and would not resent it.

Lettis wanted nothing better than a chance to expand on the subject. It was close to his heart. He had been a subordinate about as long as a proud and masterful young fellow ought to be. Now he was quivering to try his own strength, and seeing, for his part, that his host was inspired with a genuine interest and not curiosity, he gave him all the information in his power.

"But a plant like that is going to cost some money, ain't it?" asked Red.

"Too much for me, I'm afraid," replied Lettis. "I have five thousand to put in, and I suppose I could borrow the rest, but that's saddling the business with too heavy charges right in the beginning. Still, it may not be as bad as I fancy."

Red drummed on the table, thinking. "I wouldn't mind getting into a business of some kind, as long as it was making things," he said. "I don't hanker to keep store much—suppose I go along with you, when you look up how much straw is raised and the rest of it?"

"Would you?" cried the young fellow, eagerly. "By George, sir, I wish you could see your way clear to take hold of it. Could you stand ten thousand, for instance? Excuse the question, but I'm so anxious over this——"

"Lord! What's the harm of asking facts?" said Red. Then with a gleam of genial pride, "Ten thousand wouldn't break me by a durn sight".

Lettis' boyish face fairly glowed. "It was my good angel made me stop in front of your fence," he said. "I saw you all eating in here and you looked so jolly, that I thought I'd stop, on the chance you might be the man I was looking for; now I'll go right on and see Mr. Demilt and find out what he wants to do in the matter."



“Wait for the waggon and you can ride,” said Red. “Boy’s gone home to see his dad about working for me this afternoon; in the meantime, if you’re not too proud to take hold and help us with this dod-ratted fence, I’ll be obliged to you.”

“Bring on your fence! I’m ready,” said Lettis.

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"Come on, boys!" said Red, and the party rose from the table. Later the waggon came up.

"Well, good day, Lettis," said Red. "If you can't get quarters anywhere else, come on and help me hold the barn down."

"Do you sleep in the barn? Then I'll come back sure. Tell you how it is, Mr. Saunders. I've been stuck up in a three-by-nine office for four years—nose held to 'A to M, Western branch,' and if I'm not sick of it there's no such thing as sickness; to get out and breathe the fresh air, to see the country, to be my own master! Well, sir, it just makes me tremble to think of it. I hope you find the straw-board what you want to take up."

"I shouldn't wonder if it would be," answered Red. "We'll make a corking team to do business, Lettis, I can see that—so cautious and full of tricks, and all that."

The young man laughed and then sobered down. "Of course, I know the whole thing would look insane to most people," he said sturdily, "but I've been in business long enough to see sharp gentlemen come to grief in spite of their funny work. I don't believe a man'll come to any more harm by believing people mean well by him than he would by working on the other tack."

"Good boy!" said Red, slapping him on the back. "You stick to that and you'll get a satisfaction out of it that money couldn't buy you. Another thing, you'd never get a cent out of me in this world if you were one of these smooth young men. My eye teeth are cut, son, for all I may seem easy. The man that does me a trick has a chance for bad luck, and you can bet on that."

"Lord! I believe you!" replied Lettis, taking in the dimensions of his new friend. "Well, good-bye for the present, Mr. Saunders—thank you for the dinner and still more for the heart you have put into me."

At six o'clock the fence was not quite finished.

"If you'll stay with me until the thing's done, I'll stand another dollar all around," said Red. "I don't want it to stare me in the face to-morrow."

The eldest spoke up. "We'll stay with you, Mr. Saunders, but we don't want any money for it, do we, fellers?"

"No," they replied in chorus, well meaning what they said.

"Why, you're perfectly welcome to the cash!" said Red.

"And you're welcome to the work," retorted the boy. "We're paid plenty as it is."

“If that’s the way you look at it, I’m much obliged to you,” said Red, who would not have discouraged such a feeling for anything. He said to himself, “This don’t seem much like the kind of people I’ve heard inhabited these parts. Those boys are all right. Reckon it you use people decent they’ll play up to your lead, no matter what country it is.”

At seven thirty the fence was done, gorgeous in a coat of fresh red paint, and the hands departed, each with a slice of Miss Mattie’s chocolate cake, a thing to make the heathen gods feel contemptuous of ambrosia.

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They went straight to the blacksmith's shop, where they were anxiously expected.

"Good Lord!" he said a little later, "it you fellers will talk one at a time, p'r'aps I can make out what's happened. Now, Sammy, sp'ose you do the speaking?"

Whereupon Sammy faithfully chronicled the events of the day. The boys had behaved themselves as if there was nothing out of the common happening while they were with Red, being held up by a sense of pride, but naturally, the splendid physique of the cowman, his picturesque attire, his abandoned way of scattering money around and the air of a frolic he had managed to impart to a day's hard work, all had effect on imagination, and the boys were very much excited.

"I'd like to know how many Injuns that feller's killed!" piped up the youngest. "My! he could grab hold of a man and wring his neck like a chicken."

"Aw, tst!" remonstrated the blacksmith. But the elders stood by the younker this time.

"Yes, he could, Mr. Farrel!" said they. "You ought to seen him when he rolled up his sleeves! He's got an arm on him like the hind leg of a horse, and he uses an ax like a tack-hammer. He got mad once when he pounded his thumb, and busted the post square in two with one crack."

"Well, he looks like a husky man," admitted the blacksmith. "But why didn't you boys take the extry dollar when he made the offer? He 'pears to know what he was about and looks kind of foolish to say 'no' to it."

There was a moment's silence. "We wanted to show him we were just as good as the folks he knew," explained the eldest, somewhat shame-facedly.

The blacksmith straightened himself. "Quite right, too," said he. "We *air*, when you come to that." A little pride is a wonderful tonic. Each unit of that gathering felt himself the better for the display of it.

* * * * *

In the meantime, Red was repairing the ravages of the day opposite Miss Mattie at a supper table which was bountifully spread. Miss Mattie put two and two together, and found they meant a larger sum of eatables than she had hitherto felt sufficient, and with a little pang at the thought of the inadequacy of her first offering to her cousin, provided such fatness as the land of Fairfield boasted.

They discussed the events of the day with satisfaction.

"My!" said Miss Mattie. "You do things wholesale while you are about it, Will, don't you?"

Red smiled in pleased acknowledgment. "I'm no peanut stand, old lady," said he. "I like to see things move."

Then Miss Mattie broached the question she had been hovering around ever since her guests had taken their leave.

"Do you think you'll really go into business with that young man who was here to dinner?" she asked.

"Why, I think it's kinder likely," said Red.

"But you don't know anything about him, Will," she continued, putting the weak side of her desire forward, in order to rest more securely if that stood the test.

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"No, I don't," agreed Red. "But here's the way I feel about that: I want to be doing something according to my size; besides that, it would be a good thing for this place if some kind of a live doings was to start here. All right, that's my side of it. Now, as far as not knowing that young feller's concerned, I might think I knew him from cyclone-cellar to roof-tree, and he might do me to a crowded house. My idea is that life's a good deal like faro—you know how that is."

"I remember about his not letting the people go, but I'm afraid I don't know my Bible as well as I ought to, Will," apologised Miss Mattie, rather astonished at his allusion.

"Let the people go? Bible?" cried Red, laying down his knife and fork, still more astonished at her allusion. "Will you kindly tell me what that has to do with faro-bank? Girl, one of us is full of ghost songs, and far, far off the reservation. What in the name of Brigham Young's off-ox are you talking about?"

"Why, you spoke of Pharaoh, Will, and I can remember about his holding the children of Israel captive, and the plagues, but I really don't see just how it applies."

"Oh!" said Red, as a great light broke upon him. "Oh, I see what you're thinking about. The old boy who corralled the Jews, and made 'em work for the first and last time in their history, and they filled him full of fleas, and darkness, and all kinds of unpleasant experiences to break even? Well, I was not talking about him at all. My faro is a game played with a lay-out and a pack of cards and a little tin box that you ought to look at carefully before you put any money on the board, to see that it ain't arranged for dealing seconds; and there's a lookout and a case keeper and—well, I don't believe I could tell you just how it works, but some day I'll make a layout and we'll have some fun. It's a bully game, but I say, it's a great deal like life—the splits go to the dealer; that is to say, that if the king comes out to win and lose at the same time, you lose anyhow, see?"

"No," said Miss Mattie, truthfully.

Red thrust his fingers through his hair and sighed. "I'm afraid I know too much about it to explain it clearly," he replied. "But what I mean is this: some people try to play system at faro, and they last about as quick as those that don't. I always put the limit on the card that's handiest, and the game don't owe me a cent; as a matter of fact, some of the tin-horns used to wear a pained expression when they saw me coming across the room. I've split 'em from stem to keelson more than once, and never used a copper in my life—played 'em wide open, all the time. Now," and he brought his fist down on the table, "I'm going to play that young man wide open, and I'll bet you I don't lose by him neither. He looks as honest as a mastiff pup, for all he dresses kind of nice. I might just as well try him on the fly, as to go lunk-heading around and get stuck anyhow, with the unsatisfactory addition of feeling that I was a fool, as well as confiding."

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Most of the argument had been ancient Aryan to Miss Mattie, but the ring of the voice and the little she understood made the tenor plain. A sudden moisture gathered in her eyes as she said, "You're too good and honest and generous a man to distrust anybody: that's what I think, Will."

"Mattie, I wish you wouldn't talk like that," said he, in an injured voice. "It ain't hardly respectable."

After which there was a silence for a short time. Then said Miss Mattie, "Do you think you could content yourself here, Will, after all the things you've seen?"

Red brightened at the change of topic. "I'll tell you how that is: if I hadn't any capital, and had to work here as a poor man, I don't believe I'd take the trouble to try and live—I'd smother; but having that pleasant little crop of long greens securely planted in the bank where the wild time doesn't grow, and thusly being able to cavort around as it sweetly pleases me, why, I like the country. It's sport to take hold of a place like this, that's only held together by its suspenders, and try to make a real live man's town out of it."

Miss Mattie drew a deep breath of relief. "You came like the hero in a fairy story, Will, and I was afraid you'd go away like one," she said.

He reached across the table and patted her hand. "You'd have had to gone, too," said he. "The family'll stick together."

She thanked him in a soft little voice. "Dear me!" she murmured. "It does seem that you've been here a year, Will."

"Never was told that I was such slow company before."

"You know perfectly well that that isn't what I mean."

"Well, you'll have to put up with me for a while, whatever I am; insomuch as I'm to be a manufacturer and the Lord knows what. Then some day I'm going to have an awful hankering for the land where the breeze blows, and then we'll take a shute for open prairie. It's cruelty to animals for me to straddle a horse now, yet there's where I'm at home, and I'm going to buy me a cayuse of some kind—say, I ought to get at that; if I'm going around with Lettis I want to ride a horse—know anybody that's got a real live horse for sale, Mattie? No? Well, I'll stop in and see the lady that deals the mail—I'll bet you what that woman doesn't know about what's going on in this camp will never get into history—be back right away."

Said he to the post-mistress, "My name's Saunders, ma'am—cousin to Miss Mattie. I just stopped in to find out if you knew anyone that had a riding horse for sale; horse with four good legs that'll carry me all day, and about the rest I don't care a frolicsome cuss."

The post-mistress replied at such length, and with such velocity that Red was amazed. He gathered from her remarks that a certain Mr. Upton had an animal, purchased of a chance horse dealer, which it was altogether likely he would dispose of, as the first time he had tried the brute it went up into the air all sorts of ways, and caused the owner to perform such tricks before high Heaven as made the angels weep.

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"Where does this man live?" asked Red, with a kindling eye.

"He lives about three miles out on the Peterville road, but he's in town to-night visitin' Miss Alders—Johnny!" to a small boy who had been following the conversation, his wide-open eyes bent on Red, and his mouth and wiggling bare toes expressing their delight in vigorous contortions, "Johnny, you run tell Mr. Upton there's a gentleman in here wants to see him about buying a horse."

"Don't disturb him if he's visiting," remonstrated Red.

"He won't call that disturbing him," replied the post-mistress, with a shrill laugh. "He'll be here in no time."

She was a true prophet. It seemed as if the boy had barely left the store when he returned with a stoop-shouldered, solemn-faced man, who had a brush-heap of chin-whisker decorating the lower part of his face. After greetings and the explanation of the errand, Mr. Upton stroked his chin-whisker regretfully. "Young man," said he, "I'm in a pecooliar and onpleasant position; there's mighty feyew things I wouldn't do in a hawse trade, but I draw the line on murder. That there hawse'll kill you, just's sure as you're fool enough to put yerself on his back. I'll sell you a real hawse mighty reasonable—"

"I'll risk him," cut in Red. "Could you lead him down here in the morning?"

"Yes, indeedy—he's a perfect lady of a horse to lead—you can pick up airy foot—climb all over him in fac', s'long's you don't try to ride him or hitch him up. If you do that—well, young man, you'll get a pretty fair idee of what is meant by one of the demons of hell."

"What kind of saddle have you got?"

"One of them outlandish Western affairs that the scamp threw in with the animal—you see, I thought I'd take up horse-back riding for my health; I was in bed three weeks after my fust try."

"I'll go you seventy-five dollars for the outfit, just as you got it—chaps, taps, and latigo straps, if you'll have it in front of my house at nine o'clock to-morrow."

"All right, young man—all right sir—now don't blame me if you air took home shoes fust."

"Nary," said Red. "Come and see the fun."

"I shorely will," replied the old gentleman.

IV

At nine the next morning there was a crowd in front of the house.

“What have you been doing now, Will?” asked Miss Mattie with prescience.

“Only buying a horse, Mattie,” returned Red soberly. “Seems to be quite an event here.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all, so help me Bob!” Red had a suspicion that there would be objections if she knew what kind of a horse it was.

Lettis, who had roomed with Red overnight, was in the secret.

The horse arrived, leading very quietly, as Mr. Upton had said. It was a buckskin, fat and hearty from long resting. Nothing could be more docile than the pensive lower lip, and the meek curve of the neck; nothing could be more contradictory than the light of its eye; a brooding, baleful fire, quietly biding its time.

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"Scatter, friends!" cried Red, as he put his foot in the stirrup. "Don't be too proud to take to timber!"

He swung over as lightly as a trapeze performer, deftly catching his other stirrup. The horse groaned and shivered.

"Don't let him get his head down! Gol-ding it! Don't you!" screamed Mr. Upton in wild excitement.

Red threw the bridle over the horn of the saddle. "Go it, you devil!" cried he. And they went. Six feet straight in the air, first pass. The crowd scattered, as requested. They hurried at that. Red gave the brute the benefit of his two hundred and a half as they touched earth, and his opponent grunted when he felt the jar of it. They rocketted and ricocheted; they were here, they were there, they were everywhere, the buckskin squealing like a pig, and fighting with every ounce of the strength that lay in his steel strung legs; the dust rose in clouds; Red's hat flew in no time; he was yelling like a maniac, and the crowd was yelling like more maniacs. Now and then a glimpse of the rider's face could be caught, transported with joy of the struggle; then the dust would roll up and hide everything. No one was more pleased at the spectacle than the blacksmith. He was capering in the middle of the road, waving a hand-hammer and shouting "Hold him *down*! Hold him DOWN! Why do you let him jump up like that? If I was on that horse I'd show you! Aw, there it is again—Stop him! Stop him!"

At this point the buckskin made three enormous leaps for the blacksmith, as though he had understood. The smith cast dignity to the winds and went over the nearest fence in the style that little boys, when coasting, call "stomach-whopper"—or words to that effect—and took his next breath two minutes later. He might have saved the labour, as the horse wheeled on one foot, and pulled fairly for the picket fence opposite. Red regretted the absence of herders as the sharp pickets loomed near. It was no time for regrets. The horse was over with but little damage—a slight scratch, enough to rouse his temper, however, for he whaled away with both hind feet, and parts of the fence landed a hundred feet off. Then a dash through an ancient grape arbor, and they were lost to view of the road. Some reckless small boys scampered after, but the majority preferred to trace the progress of the conflict by the aboriginal "Yerwhoops" that came from somewhere in behind the old houses.

"There they go!" piped up a shrill voice of the small-boy brigade. "Right through Mis' Davisses hen coops!—you *ought* to see them hens FLY!" The triumphant glee is beyond the reach of words. Simultaneous squawking verified the remark, as well as a feminine voice, urging a violent protest, cut short by a scream of terror, and the slam of a door. The inhabitants of "Mis' Davisses" house instantly appeared through the front door, seeking the street.

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To show the erraticalness of fate, no sooner had they reached the road, than Red's mount cleared the parapet of the bridge in a single leap—a beautiful leap—and came down upon them in the road.

All got out of the way but a three-year-old, forgotten in the excitement. Upon this small lad, fallen flat in the road, bore the powerful man and horse. Then there were frantic cries of warning. Fifty feet between the youngster and those mangling hoofs—twenty—five! the crowd gasped—they were blotted together! Not so. A mighty hand had snatched the boy away in that instant of time. He was safe and very indignant in a howling, huddled heap in the ditch by the roadside, but alas, for horse and rider! The buckskin was not used to such feats, and when Red's weight was thrown to the side for the reach he missed his stride, struck his feet together, and down they went, while the foot-deep dust sprang into the air like an explosion.

Miss Mattie rushed to the scene of the accident, followed by everybody. Young Lettis, equally frightened, was close beside her.

“Oh, Will! Are you killed?” she cried.

And then a voice devoid of any signs of weakness, but loaded to the breaking point with wrath, told in such language as had never been heard in Fairfield that the owner was still much alive.

“Run away, Mattie! Run away and let me cuss!” shrieked Red. Miss Mattie collapsed into the arms of Lettis.

The dust settled enough so that the anxious villagers could see horse and man; the former resting easily, as if he had had enough athletics for one day, and the latter sitting in the road. Neither showed any intention of rising.

“What's the matter, Mr. Saunders, are you hurt?” inquired the fussy post-mistress.

“Please go 'way, ma'am,” said Red, waving his arm.

“I'm sure you're hurt—I'm perfectly sure you're hurt,” she persisted, holding her ground. “Now, do tell us what can possibly be the matter with you?”

“Very well,” returned the exasperated cow-puncher, “I will. My pants, ma'am, have suffered in this turn-up, and they're now in a condition to make my appearance in polite society difficult, if not impossible; now please go 'way and somebody fetch me a horse blanket.”

It is regrettable that the discomfiture of the post-mistress was received with undisguised hilarity. The blanket was produced, and Red stalked off in Indian dignity, marred by a

limp in his left leg, for he had come upon Mother Earth with a force which made itself felt through all that foot of soft dust.

“Bring that durn-fool horse along,” he called over his shoulder. Buckskin rose and followed his owner. There was no light in his eye now; he looked thoughtful. He, too, limped, and there was a trickle of blood down his nose. Verily it had been a hard fought field.

* * * * *

As both men were anxious to see the lay of the land as soon as possible. Red took his place in the waggon that day, after the damages were repaired, content to wait until his leg was less sore for horseback riding.

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There followed a busy two weeks for them. Mr. Demilt had some money he wished to put into the enterprise, but his most valuable assistance was, of course, his thorough knowledge of the resources of the country.

They found an admirable site for the mill, in an old stone barn, which had stood the ravages of desolation almost unimpaired. Red's mining experience told him that the creek could easily be flumed to the barn, and as that was the only objection of the others to this location, they wrote the owner of the property for a price. They were astonished when they received the figures. It had come by inheritance to a man to whom it was a white elephant of the most exasperating sort, and he was glad to get rid of it for almost a song. They were a jubilant three at the news. It saved the cost of building a mill, and including that, the price was as low per acre as any land they could have obtained. Red closed the bargain instantly.

Lettis' part of the business was chiefly to arrange for the disposal of their product, and when he explained to his partners what he could reasonably hope to do in that line, the affair lost its last tint of unreality, and became a good proposition, for Lettis had an excellent business acquaintance, who would be glad to deal with the straightforward young fellow.

The night after the signing of the deeds, Red said to Miss Mattie, "We ought to have a stockholders' dinner to-morrow night, Mattie. If you could hire that scow-built girl, who wears her hair scrambled, to come in and give you a lift, would you feel equal to it?"

"You always put it that I'm doing you a great favour in such things, Will, but you know perfectly well there's nothing I'd rather do," replied Miss Mattie, with a dimpling smile. "However, it adds to the pleasure of it to have it put in that way, so I won't complain. I'll just have my supper first, and then you men can talk over your business undisturbed."

"You *will* not—you'll eat with the rest of us."

"Yes, but you stockholders—" The word had an import to Miss Mattie; a something, if not regal, at least a kinship to the king. Under her democracy lay a respect for the founded institution; impersonal; an integral part of the law of the State; in fact, a minor sovereignty within an empire.

"Stockholder yourself!" retorted Red. "Don't you call me names."

"What do you mean, Will?" asked Miss Mattie, with wide-opened eyes.

"I mean you're a stockholder as good as anybody—you've got half my stack. Now, hold on! Just listen! This is a queer run, Mattie, from the regulation point of view, this company of ours; I know enough about fillin' and backin' to know that—you ought to have seen the pryin', and pokin', and nosin' around them Boston men did before they

took holt of the Chantay Seeche and made it a stock company! One feller was the ablest durn fool I ever come acrosst. I used to let on I didn't

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savvey anything about it. 'Now, explain to me,' says I to him. 'You say you have so many shares of them stock,' waving my hand to a bunch of critters in the distance. 'What part do you take? I mean, what's your share of each animal, and does the last man get the hoofs and the tail?' 'Oh! you don't understand,' says he. 'I'll explain it to you.' So he starts in to tell me that 'stock didn't necessarily mean beef critters,' and a lot more things, whilst old man Ferguson, who was putting the deal through, stood listening and chewing his teeth, thinking I was going to give our friend the frolicsome hee-hee at the wind-up. But I stood solemn, and never even drew a smile, for fear of queering Ferguson. Well. That's the proper way to start a company; make it as dreary and long-winded as possible. We ain't done that, and perhaps we'll go broke for breaking the rules, and then your stock won't be worth a cuss; so don't you get excited about it. I wanted the Saunders family to be represented. Pretty soon the old lad with the nose will be around, and you'll have a chance to read about the 'parties of the first part,' and 'second parts of the party' and 'aforesaid's' and 'behindsaid's' and the rest of the yappi them lawyers swing so that honest men won't know what the devil they're up to."

"Oh, Will! How can I ever thank you!" cried Miss Mattie, her eyes filling. It seemed a great and responsible position to the gentle lady to be a stockholder in the corporation. It wasn't the monetary value of the thing; it was the pride of place.

"If you don't know how, don't try," returned Red. "You give the other three stockholders a good feed to-morrow and the thanks will be up to you. Hello! There's the old lad now!" as a trumpet blast rang out from the front porch. "It must take some practise to blow your nose like that. I've heard Jackasses that could not bray in the same class with that little old gent—come in. Come in! You needn't sound the rally again."

Thus adjured the lawyer made his entrance, and Miss Mattie became in due and involved course of law a stockholder in the Fairfield Strawboard Mfg. Co.

Fairfield rose to activity like a very small giant refreshed. Teams and their heavy loads kept the respectable dust in constant commotion. A grist mill was added to the intended plant, thus offering an inducement to the farmer to raise grain, and incidentally straw, "So we can ketch 'em on both ends, too," as Red put it.

The time seemed like enchantment to Miss Mattie. As a bringer of the tidings, and a stockholder in the company, she had risen to be a person of importance, with the result that she was even more modestly shy than before, although in her heart she liked it; but more delightful yet was the spirit of holiday activity which inspired and pervaded the place.

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Red had insisted on operating on the lines that are laid down with railroad spikes in the Western communities; to patronise home industries as much as possible. Therefore the machinery orders went through Mr. Farrel, the blacksmith, initiating that worthy man into the mysteries of making money without doing anything for it, which seemed little less than a miracle to him. Everything that could be bought through local people was obtained in that way. It cost a trifle more, but it brought more money into the place, and enabled the villagers to partake of the enlivenment, without the feeling that it was a Barmecide feast. The post-mistress furnished the paint, and it is painful to add that she tried to furnish a number three paint for a number one price, arguing that she was a poor, lone woman, struggling through an uncharitable world and that the increased profit would do her considerable good—a view which Red did not share. He would willingly have made her a present of the difference, but he did not in the least intend to be choused out of it by man nor woman. They had a very funny debate in private, wherein the feminine tried to dominate the masculine principle by sheer volubility and found to its disgust that the method didn't work. Red listened most respectfully and always replied, "Yes ma'am, but we don't want that paint. Get us some good paint—bully old paint with stick'um in it—this stuff is like whitewash, only feebler. We're going to put on a swell front up at the mill, and we've got to have the right thing." And at last the post-mistress said that she would, her respect for the ex-cowpuncher having risen noticeably in the meantime.

V

The work on the mill was pushed, and in spite of the usual amount of unforeseen delays, it was ready for work by the latter part of September. The official opening was set for the twenty-seventh—Miss Mattie's birthday—and the village of Fairfield was invited to a picnic to be held at the mill in honor of the occasion. It is needless to say that the Fairfield Strawboard Mfg. Co. did the thing up in shape. Waggon's loaded with straw, and drawn by four-horse teams, went the rounds of the village, collecting the guests. It is doubtful if Fairfield was ever more surprised than at the realisation of how much there was of her—using the pronoun out of respect to the majority—"when she was bunched," as Red said. You would not have believed that straggling, lonesome-looking place held so many people. As Red could discover no means in the town's resources to provide a meal for three hundred people it was necessarily a basket party, which struck Mr. Saunders as being grievously like a Swede treat. He made up for it in a measure by having barrels of lemonade and cider on tap at the grounds—stronger beverages being barred—and by hiring a quartette of strings "clear from town."

At half-past two on a resplendent but hot September afternoon the caravan started for the mill grounds, the women dressed in the most un-picnicky costumes imaginable, and the men ostentatiously at ease in their store clothes. Everyone was in the best of spirits, keen for the excitement and pleasure that was sure to mark the occasion.

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Red rode old Buckskin, who had succumbed to the inevitable, and only “jumped around a little,” as Red put it, on being mounted. It was pretty lively “jumping around,” but perhaps Mr. Saunders found some satisfaction in sitting perfectly at his ease, smoking his cigarette, while Buck jumped and Fairfield admired. And, at any rate, Buck had legs of iron, and the wind of a locomotive, carrying Red all day, and willing to kick at anything which bothered him when night came. He was a splendid beast through and through, from forelock to tail-tip, but he had learned who was his master and obeyed him accordingly.

It was a five mile ride, mostly under the shade of fine old trees. The road wound around the hills; here and there a break in the arboreal border showed views of rolling country, well-shaped and pleasing, winding up grassy slopes in groves of verdure. Of course most of the freshness of leaf was past, yet the modest gray-green gave a silvery sheen to the landscape that brought it into unity.

One member of the party felt that his heart was very full as he looked at it. That was Lettis. “Blast the old office!” he kept saying to himself. “Blast its six dingy windows, and the clock at the end! Doesn’t this look good, and doesn’t it smell good, dust and all?” and then he’d howl at the horses in sheer exuberance of good feeling, making the mild old brutes put a better foot of it to the front.

Red cantered up beside his waggon. “Well, Lettis,” he said, “here we go for the opening overture, with the full strength of the company—we’re great people this day, ain’t we?” And the big man smiled like a pleased big boy.

“Oh, what a bully old fellow you are!” thought Lettis as he looked at him. Lettis was thinking of other qualities than flesh, but the physical Red Saunders on horseback was deserving of a glance from anybody; the massive figure so well poised; the clear cut, proud profile; the shapely head with its crown of red-gold hair; the easy grace of him by virtue of his strength—it would be a remarkable crowd in which Chanta Seechee Red couldn’t pass for a man. He was every inch of that from the ground up.

Lettis had come to bow down to him in adoration, with all an affectionate boy’s worship. To those eyes Red was just right, in every particular. Likewise to Miss Mattie, who even now was filling her eyes with him, from behind the vantage of a broad-brimmed straw hat.

At last the whole party disembarked at the flat before the mill, and made ready for the official starting of the machinery. The big doors were thrown open, so that the company could see within while resting outside in the shade, and under the cooling influence of what breeze there was. The mill was officially started. Red climbed the bank to the flume, and raised the gate. The crowd cheered as the imprisoned waters leapt to freedom with a hollow roar, raising in pitch as the penstock filled and the wheels began to go round. Speech was called for, and the vigorously protesting Red forced to the

front by his former friends, Demilt and Lettis. Thus betrayed by those he trusted, Red made the best of it.

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"Ladies and gentlemen, fellow citizens!" said he. "The mill is now open to all comers. We hope to make this thing a success; we hope to see every horny-handed, hump-backed farmer in the country rosin the soles of his moccasins, and shove his plough through twice as much ground as he ever did before, and if he comes here with his plunder, we'll give him a square shake. We'll pay him as much as we dast, and not let him in on the ground floor, so he can crawl out through the coal-hole, as is sometimes done. Now, everybody run away and have a good time, for I don't like to talk this yappi any more than you like to hear it. Kola geus! By-bye!"

It was a very successful picnic. They spent the afternoon in wandering around in the usual picnic fashion, developing appetites, until it occurred to Red to liven the performance by showing them the art of roping, as practiced upon an old cow found in the woods. As a spectacle it was a failure. The combined efforts of all the hooting small boys could not make that cow run; she even stretched her neck toward Red, as though saying, "Hurry up with your foolishness. I have a cud to chew and can't stand here idle all day." So Red galloped by and threw the noose over her head as an exhibition of how the thing was done, rather than how it ought to be done. Nevertheless, picnic parties are not hypercritical in the matter of amusement, and the feat received three encores. The last time he missed his cast through overconfidence. Whereat the old cow tossed her head and tail in the air, and tore off at an elephantine gallop, with a bawl that sounded to Red mightily like derision.

"Durned if she ain't laughing at me!" he cried. But as a matter of fact, it was a hornet and its unmistakable sting that injected this activity into her system.

It was all very pleasant to Miss Mattie, as one's first picnic in many years should be. She enjoyed the crisp green sod, the great trees standing around, park-like, with the sunlight falling between their shade like brilliant tatters of cloth-of-gold; while from the near distance came the tiny shouting of cool waters. They had a camp-fire at night, making the moonlight still more mysterious and remote by contrast. The quartette of strings played for the ears of those who cared to listen and for the legs of those who chose to take chances on tripping their light fantastic toes over tree roots in the grass.

Red loved music, and he loved the night. The poetic side of his memories of watching the Dipper swing around Polaris, while he sung the cows to sleep, came back to him. In his mind he saw the vast prairie roll on to infinity; saw the mountains stand out, a world of white peaks, rising from a sea of darkness. Again he heard the plaintive shrilling of an Indian whistle, or the song of the lad down creek made tuneful and airy by the charm of distance.

"Having a good time, Mattie?" he asked, with a smile.

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"The best I ever had, Will," she answered, smiling back unsteadily. Poor lady! The size of an occasion is so many standards, whether the standard be inches or feet, or miles. Miss Mattie's events had been measured in hundredths of an inch, and it took a good many of them to cover so small an action as a successful picnic on a beautiful night. Her eyes were humid; her mouth smiled and drooped at the corners alternately. Red felt her happiness with a keen sympathy, and as he looked at her, suddenly she changed in his eyes. Just what the difference was he could not have told; nor whether it was in her or in him. A sudden access of feeling, undefinable, unplaceable, but strong, possessed him. There is a critical temperature in the life of a man, when no amount of pressure can ever make the more expansive emotions assume the calmer form of friendship. There was something in Miss Mattie's eye which had warmed Red to that degree, but he didn't know it. He only knew that he wanted to sit rather unnecessarily close beside her, and that he would be sorry when it came time to go home. And he was very silent.

During the drive back to the house he spoke in monosyllables; he went straight to the barn with Lettis afterward, and made no attempt to take the usual frank and hearty good-night kiss.

"You're as glum as an oyster!" said Lettis, when they reached their quarters. "What's the matter, old man?"

"I don't know, Let; I feel kind of quiet, somehow."

"Sick? Or something go wrong?"

"No; nothing of the kind; it's just sort of an attack of stillness, but I feel durn good."

Lettis laughed. "If it wasn't you, Red, I'd say you were in love," he said.

It was well the barn was dark; or he would have seen a change wonderful to behold come over the ex-puncher's face. "The lad has hit it," he said to himself in astonishment; aloud he grunted "hunh" scornfully, and aroused himself for an unnecessary joke or two.

Miss Mattie had noticed the "attack of stillness" and immediately tried to fasten the blame upon herself. What had she done? She couldn't recall anything. She remembered she had said something about the way his hair looked with the moon shining on it; perhaps he had taken offence at that; the remark was entirely complimentary, but sometimes people are touchy about such things; still that was not the least like Cousin Will. She must have said or done something though—what could it be? Oh what a pitiful memory that could not recollect an injury done to one's best friend! She tossed and wondered over it for a long time before at length she fell asleep.



Red also looked up at the roof, and took account of stock. His face was radiant in the dark. "If I could only pull that off!" he thought. "I must seem an awful rough cuss to her, though; all right for a cousin, but it's different when you come to the other proposition. My Jiminy! I'll take a chance in the morning and find out anyhow!" said he, and, eased in mind by the decision of action, he too shook hands with Morpheus and was presently dreaming.

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It had never occurred to Red Saunders that he was afraid of anybody. He even chuckled, when he got Lettis out of the way with a plausible excuse the next morning. Then he strode briskly into the house, his question on his lips in a plump out-and-out form.

Miss Mattie looked at him with her slow smile. "What is it?" she asked.

Red swallowed his question whole. "I—I wanted a little hot water to shave with," said he. Then a fury took hold of him. "What the devil am I lying like this for?" he thought. He exhorted himself to go on and say what he had to say like a man; but the other Red Saunders refused to do anything of the sort. He took the cup of hot water most abjectly and fled from the house. He had to shave then, and in his hurry and indignation he turned the operation into a clinic. "Oh Jiminy! Look at that!" he cried, as the razor opened up another part of the subject. "There's a slit an inch long! If I keep on at this gait, I won't have face enough to say good morning, let alone what I want to do. What ails me? What ails me? Why should I be scart of the nicest woman God ever built? Now by all the Mormon Gods! I'll post right into the house and say my little say as soon as these cuts stop bleeding!"

Cob-webs stopped the cuts, and other cob-webs stopped Red Saunders, late of the Chanta Seechee ranch; two hundred and fifty pounds of the very finest bone and muscle. And the cob-webs held him, foaming and boiling with rage and disgust, calling himself all the yaller pups he could think of, but staying strictly within the safe limits of the barn. It was a revelation to the big man, and not a pleasant one. How was he to know that the most salient point of his apparent cowardice was nothing less worthy than respect for the woman's purity? That if he would stop swearing long enough to get at the springs of his action, he would find that he hesitated because the new light on the matter made huge shadows of the slips in the career of a strong, lawless, untrained but sorely tempted man? He knew nothing of the sort, and the funniest of comedies took place in the barn. He would reach the sensible stage. "Pah! All foolishness. Go? Of course he'd go, and this very minute, and have the thing done with, good or bad"; he was quite amused at his former conduct—until he reached the door. Then he'd skip nimbly back again, with a hot feeling that somebody was watching him, although a careful inspection through the crack of the door revealed no one.

Red discovered another thing that afternoon, which was that the more nervous you are the more nervous you get. He groaned in perfect misery: "Ohoho! That I should have seen the day when I was afraid to ask anybody anything. What's come over me anyhow? It's this darn country, I believe—'tain't me," then he stopped short. "What you saying, Red?" he queried. "Why don't you own up like a man!" The fact that it had

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a funny side struck him, and he laughed, half forlornly, and half in thorough enjoyment. He suddenly sobered down. "She's worth it, anyway," said he. "She's the best there is, and I ought to feel kind of leery of the outcome—Well—Now, I guess I won't say anything till there's a downright good chance. I see I didn't savvy this kind of business like I thought I did. 'Twouldn't be no kind of manners to step up to a lady and shout, 'I'd like to have you marry me, if you feel you've got the time!' That don't go no more than a Chinaman on roller-skates. Your work is good, Red, but it's a little lumpy in spots; them two left feet bother you; you're good in your place, but you'd better build a fence around the place—damn the luck! Smotheration! I think she likes me, all right, but when it comes to more'n that—oh, blast it, I'll just have to wait for a real good chance; now come, old man, get four feet on the ground and don't roll your eyes, take it easy till the chance comes."

Little he knew the chance was coming up the street at that moment. He only saw Miss Mattie step out into the bed of flowers, her face looking unusually pretty and youthful under the big straw hat, and start to reduce the weeds to order. She glanced around as though in search of some one, and Red felt intuitively that the one was himself.

"Here's where I ought to act as if I wore long pants," said he; "now, what's to hinder me from going out there and get a-talking?" And then he sat down hastily, more disgusted than ever, and smote the air with his fist. "You'd think the nicest, quietest woman that ever lived was a wild beast, the way I act; yes sir, you would!"

Meantime the chance drew nearer. It was not a pleasant looking opportunity. Its eyes, full of dread and dreadful, peeped out from beneath a brush of matted hair; a tough, ropy foam hung from its mouth. If you put as much of that foam as would go on the point of a pin in an open cut, you would have an end that your worst enemy would shudder at. For this was the most horrifying of dangerous animals—a mad dog. Poor brute! As he came shambling down the road, he was the grisly mask of tragedy.

It was near noon, intensely hot, and the street of Fairfield was deserted. No one saw the dog, and if his occasional rattling, strangling howl reached any ears, they were dead to its meaning. He was unheeded until he lurched through the gate which Lettis had left open, as usual, and spinning around in a circle gave voice to his cry.

It brought Miss Mattie to her feet in an unknown terror; it brought Red from the barn in a full cognizance—he had heard that sound before, when a mad coyote landed in a cabin-full of fairly strong nerved cowmen, and set them screeching like hysterical women before a chance shot ended him.

Red saw the brute jump toward Miss Mattie. Instantly his hand flew to his hip, and as instantly he remembered there was nothing there. Then with great, uneven leaps he

sprang forward. “Keep your hands up, Mattie, and don’t move!” he screamed. “Let him chew the dress! For God’s sake, don’t move!”

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She turned her white face toward his, and through the dimness of sight from his straining efforts, he saw her try to smile, as she obeyed him to the letter, and without a sound. "O, brave girl!" he thought, and threw the ground behind him desperately.

At twenty feet distance he dove like a base-runner, and his hands closed around the dog's neck. Over they went with the shock of the onset, and before they were still, the hands had finished their work. A clutch, and a snap, and it was done.

The dog lay quivering. Red rose to his knees wondering at the humming in his head. His wits came back to him sharply.

"Did he bite you, Mattie?" he cried. But she had already caught his hands and was looking at them, with a savage eagerness one would not have believed to be in her.

"There is no mark," she said, suddenly weak, "he didn't touch you?"

"Answer me when I speak to you!" shouted Red, beside himself. "Did he bite you?"

She answered him with a sob "No." And then his question asked itself, and answered itself, although, again, he did not know it. He gathered her up in his arms, kissed her like one raised from the dead, and swore and prayed and thanked God all in the same breath.

His old imperious nature came back with the relief. "Here!" said he, putting her away for a moment. "Take off that dress—that slime on there's enough to kill a hundred men—take it right off."

Miss Mattie started blindly to obey, then stopped. "Not here, Will—I'll go in the house," she said.

"You'll take it off right here and now," said Red, "and I'll burn it up on the spot. I'd rather have forty rattlesnakes around than that stuff—off with it. This is no child's play, and I don't care a damn what the old lady next door thinks."

Miss Mattie slipped off her outer skirt, and stood a second, confused and dainty. She took flight to the house, running as lithely as a greyhound.

"By Jingo!" said Red in admiration.

"Let's see you bring another woman that can run like that!"

He gathered some hay and piled it on the dress, firing the heap.

Then he turned to his antagonist. “Poor old boy! Hard luck, eh? But I had to do it,” he said, and gave him decent interment at the end of the garden; washed his hands carefully and went into the house on pleasanter duties.

“I’ll ask her now, by the great horn spoon!” said he, valiantly.

Miss Mattie was in a curious state of mind. There was an after effect from the fright, which made her tremble, and a remembrance of Cousin Will’s actions which made her tremble more yet. When she heard him coming she started to fly, although now clothed beyond reproach, but her knees deserted her, and she was forced to sink back in her chair. Red came in whistling blithely—vainglorious man!

He had *his* suspicions, generated by the peculiar fervour Miss Mattie had shown in regard to his hands.

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"Mattie," quoth he, "I'm tired of living out there in the barn—I want a respectable house of my own."

"Yes, Will," replied Miss Mattie, astonished that he should choose such a subject at such a time.

"Yes," he continued, "and I want a wife, too. You often said you'd like to do something for me, Mattie; suppose you take the job?"

How much of glancing at a thing in one's mind as a beautiful improbability will ever make such a cold fact less astonishing? Miss Mattie eyed him with eyes that saw not; speech was stricken from her.

Red caught fright. He sprang forward and took her hand. "Couldn't you do it, Mattie?" said he. There was a world of pleading in the tone. Miss Mattie looked up, her own honest self; all the little feminine shrinkings left her immediately.

"Ah, but I *could*, Will!" she said. Lettis came up on the stoop unheard. He stopped, then gingerly turned and made his way back on tip-toe, holding his arms like wings.

"Well, by George!" he murmured, "I'll come back in a little while, when I'll be more welcome."

He spoke to Red in strong reproach that night, in the barn. "You never told me a word, you old sinner!" said he.

"Tell you the honest truth, Let," replied Red earnestly, looking up from drawing off a boot, "I didn't know it myself till you told me about it."

They talked it all over a long time before blowing out the light, but then the little window shut its bright eye, and the only life the mid-night stars saw in Fairfield was Miss Mattie, her elbow on the casement, looking far, far out into the tranquil night, and thinking mistily.

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