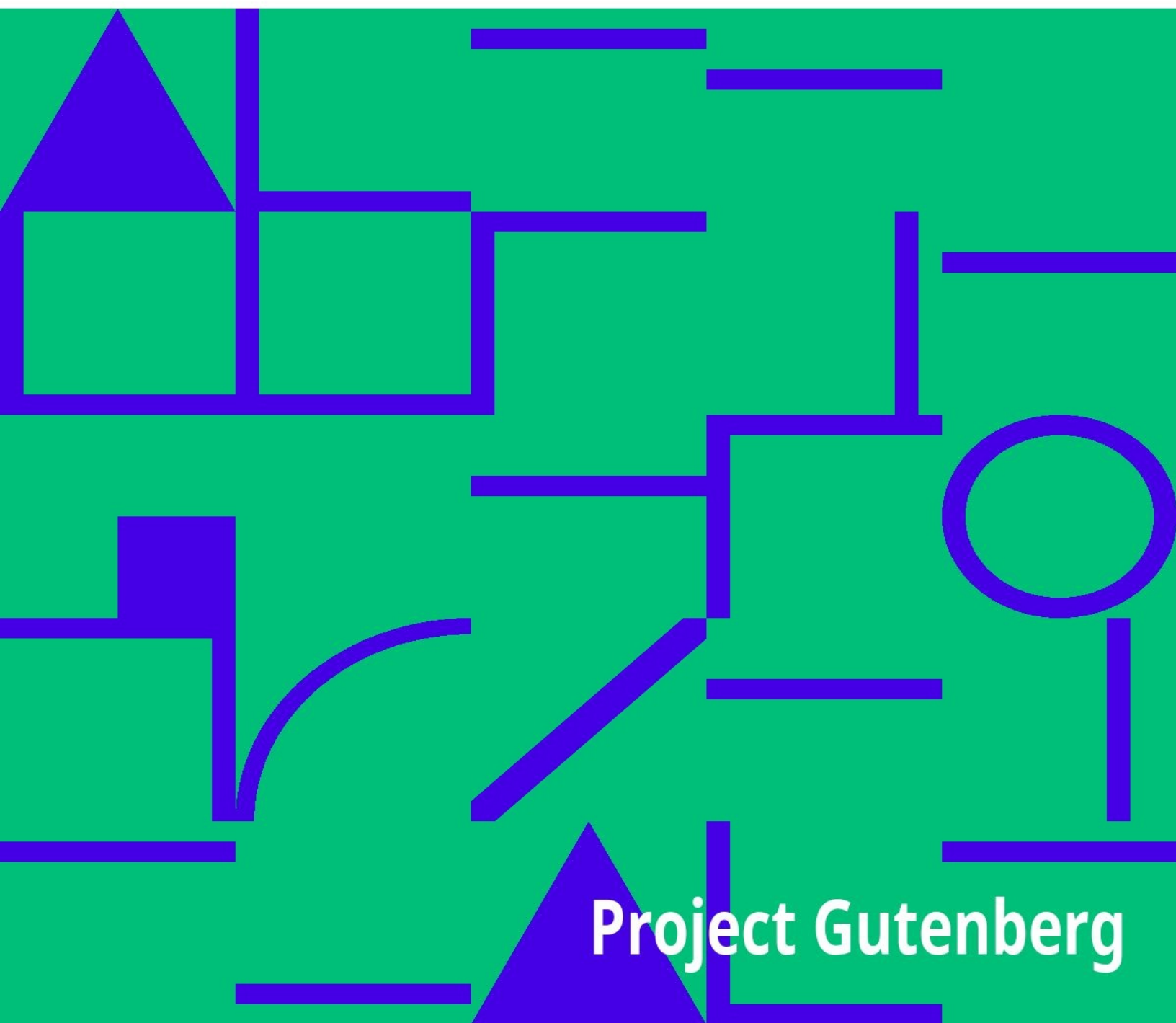


Alec Lloyd, Cowpuncher

Eleanor Gates



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cover

“And you can chalk down forty votes for Miss Macie Sewell” (See p. 64)

ALEC LLOYD COWPUNCHER

Originally published under the title of
CUPID: THE COWPUNCH

BY
ELEANOR GATES
AUTHOR OF
THE POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL,

THE PLOW WOMAN, ETC.
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ALLEN TRUE

emblem

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CHAPTER ONE

ROSE ANDREWS'S HAND AND DOCTOR BUGS'S GASOLINE BRONC

*“Sweet is the vale where the Mohawk gently glides
On its fair, windin’ way to the sea;
And dearer by f-a-a-ar—”*

“Now, look a-here, Alec Lloyd,” broke in Hairoil Johnson, throwin’ up one hand like as if to defend hisself, and givin’ me a kinda scairt look, “you shut you’ bazon right this minute—and git! Whenever you begin singin’ that song, I know you’re a-figgerin’ on how to marry somebody off to somebody else. And I just won’t have you *around!*”

We was a-settin’ t’gether on the track side of the deepot platform at Briggs City, him a-holdin’ down one end of a truck, and me the other. The mesquite lay in front of us, and it was all a sorta greenish brown account of the pretty fair rain we’d been havin’. They’s miles of it, y’ savvy, runnin’ so far out towards the west line of Oklahomaw that it plumb slices the sky. Through it, north and south, the telegraph poles go straddlin’—in the *direction* of Kansas City on the right hand, and off past Rogers’s Butte to Albuquerque on the left. Behind us was little ole Briggs, with its one street of square-front buildin’s facin’ the railroad, and a scatterin’ of shacks and dugouts and corrals and tin-can piles in behind.

Little ole Briggs! Sometimes, you bet you’ life, I been pretty down on my luck in Briggs, and sometimes I been turrible happy; also, I been just so-so. But, no matter how things pan out, darned if I cain’t allus say truthful that she just about suits me—that ornery, little, jerkwater town!

The particular day I’m a-speakin’ of was a jo-dandy—just cool enough to make you want t’ keep you’ back aimed right up at the sun, and without no more breeze than ’d help along a butterfly. Then, the air was all nice and perfumey, like them advertisin’ picture cards you git at a drugstore. So, bein’ as I was enjoyin’ myself, and a-studyin’ out somethin’ as I hummed that was *mighty* important, why, I didn’t want t’ mosey, no, ma’am.

But Hairoil was mad. I knowed it fer the reason that he’d called me Alec ’stead

of Cupid. Y' see, all the boys call me Cupid. And I ain't ashamed of it, neither. *Somebody's* got t' help out when it's a case of two lovin' souls that's bein' kept apart.

"Now, pardner," I answers him, as coaxin' as I could, "don't you go holler 'fore you're hit. It happens that I ain't a-figgerin' on no hitch-up plans fer *you*."

Hairoil, he stood up—quick, so that I come nigh fallin' offen my end of the truck. "But you are fer some *other* pore cuss," he says. "You as good as owned up."

"Yas," I answers, "I are. But the gent in question wouldn't want you should worry about *him*. All that's a-keepin' *him* anxious is that mebbe he won't git his gal."

"Alec," Hairoil goes on,—turrible solemn, he was—"I have *decided* that this town has had just about it's fill of this Cupid business of yourn—and I'm a-goin' t' stop it."

I snickered. "Y' are?" I ast. "Wal, how?"

"By marryin' you off. When you're hitched up you'self, you won't be so all-fired anxious t' git other pore fellers into the traces."

"That good news," I says. "Who's the for-tunate gal you've picked fer me?"

"Never you mind," answers Hairoil. "She's a new gal, and she'll be along next week."

"Is she pretty?"

"Is she pretty! Say! Pretty ain't no name fer it! She's got big grey eyes, with long, black, sassy winkers, and brown hair that's all kinda curly over the ears. Then her cheeks is pink, and she's got the cutest mouth a man 'most ever seen."

Wal, a-course, I thought he was foolin'. (And mebbe he was—*then*.) A gal like that fer me!—a fine, pretty gal fer such a knock-kneed, slab-sided son-of-a-gun as me? I just couldn't swaller *that*.

But, aw! if I only had 'a' knowed how that idear of hisn was a-goin' t' grow!—that idear of him turnin' Cupid fer *me*, y' savvy. And if only I'd 'a' knowed what a turrible bust-up he'd fin'lly be *responsible* fer 'twixt me and the same grey-eyed, sassy-winkered gal! If I had, it's a cinch I'd 'a' sit on him *hard*—right then and there.

I didn't, though. I switched back on to what was a-puzzlin' and a-worryin' me. "Billy Trowbridge," I begun, "has waited too long a'ready fer Rose Andrews.

And if things don't come to a haid right soon, he'll lose her."

Hairoil give a kinda jump. "The Widda Andrews," he says, "–Zach Sewell's gal? So you're a-plannin' t' interfere in the doin's of ole man Sewell's fambly."

"Yas."

He reached fer my hand and squz it, and pretended t' git mournful, like as if he wasn't never goin' t' see me again. "My *pore* friend!" he says.

"Wal, what's eatin' you now?" I ast.

"Nothin'—only that pretty gal I tole you about, she's—"

Then he stopped short.

"She's what?"

He let go of my hand, shrug his shoulders, and started off. "Never mind," he called back. "Let it drop. We'll just see. Mebbe, after all, you'll git the very lesson you oughta have. Ole man Sewell!" And, shakin' his haid, he turned the corner of the deepot.

Wal, who was Sewell anyhow?—no better'n any other man. I'd knowed him since 'fore the Oklahomaw Rushes, and long 'fore he's wired-up half this end of the Terrytory. And I'd knowed his oldest gal, Rose, since she was knee-high to a hop-toad. Daisy gal, she allus was, by thunder! And mighty sweet. Wal, when, after tyin' up t' that blamed fool Andrews, she'd got her matreemonal hobbles off in less'n six months—owin' t' Monkey Mike bein' a little sooner in the trigger finger—why, d'you think I was a-goin' to stand by and see a tin-horn proposition like that Noo York Simpson put a vent brand on her? *Nixey!*

It was ole man Sewell that bossed the first job and cut out Andrews fer Rose's pardner. Sewell's that breed, y' know, hard-mouthed as a mule, and if he cain't run things, why, he'll take a duck-fit. But he shore put his foot in it *that* time. Andrews was as low-down and sneakin' as a coyote, allus gittin' other folks into a fuss if he could, but stayin' outen range hissself. The little gal didn't have no easy go with him—we all knowed *that*, and she wasn't happy. Wal, Mike eased the sittywaytion. He took a gun with a' extra long carry and put a lead pill where it'd do the most good; and the hull passel of us was plumb tickled, that's all, just plumb tickled—even t' the sheriff.

I said pill just now. Funny how I just fall into the habit of usin' doctor words when I come to talk of this particular mix-up. That's 'cause Simpson, the tin-horn gent I mentioned, is a doc. And so's Billy Trowbridge—Billy Trowbridge is

the best medicine-man we ever had in these parts, if he *did* git all his learnin' right here from his paw. He ain't got the spondulix, and so he ain't what you'd call tony. But he's got his doctor certificate, O. K., and when it comes t' curin', he can give cards and spades to *any* of you' highfalutin' college gezabas, and *then* beat 'em out by a mile. That's *straight!*

Billy, he'd allus liked Rose. And Rose'd allus liked Billy. Wal, after Andrews's s-a-d endin', you bet I made up my mind that Billy'd be ole man Sewell's next son-in-law. Billy was smart as the dickens, and young, and no drunk. He hadn't never wore no hard hat, neither, 'r roached his mane pompydory, and he was one of the kind that takes a run at they fingernails oncet in a while. Now, mebbe a puncher 'r a red ain't par-ticular about his hands; but a *profeshnal* gent's *got* to be. And with a nice gal like Rose, it shore do stack up.

But it didn't stand the chanst of a snow-man in Yuma when it come to ole man Sewell. Doc Simpson was new in town, and Sewell'd ast him out to supper at the Bar Y ranch-house two 'r three times. And he was clean stuck on him. To hear the ole man talk, Simpson was the cutest thing that'd ever come into the mesquite. And Billy? Wal, he was the bad man from Bodie.

Say! but all of us punchers was sore when we seen how Sewell was haided!—not just the ole man's outfit at the Bar Y, y' savvy, but the bunch of us at the Diamond O. None of us liked Simpson a *little* bit. He wore fine clothes, and a dicer, and when it come to soothin' the ladies and holdin' paws, he was there with both hoofs. Then, he had all kinds of fool jiggers fer his business, and one of them toot surreys that's got ingine haidlights and two seats all stuffed with goose feathers and covered with leather—reg'lar Standard Sleeper.

It was that gasoline rig that done Billy damage, speakin' financial. The minute folks knowed it was in Briggs City, why they got a misery somewheres about 'em quick—just to have it come and stand out in front, smellin' as all-fired nasty as a' Injun, but lookin' turrible stylish. The men was bad enough about it, and when they had one of Doc Simpson's drenches they haid was as big as Bill Williams's Mountain. But the women! The *hull* cavviyard of 'em, exceptin' Rose, stampeded over to him. And Billy got such a snow-under that they had him a-diggin' fer his grass.

I was plumb crazy about it. "Billy," I says one day, when I met him a-comin' from 'Pache Sam's hogan on his bicycle; "Billy, you got to do somethin'." (Course, I didn't mention Rose.) "You goin' to let any sawed-off, hammered-down runt like that Simpson drive you out? Why, it's free grazin' here!"

Billy, he smiled kinda wistful and begun to brush the alkali offen that ole Stetson of hisn, turnin' it 'round and 'round like he was worried. "Aw, never mind, Cupid," he says; "–just keep on you' shirt."

But pretty soon things got a darned sight worse, and I couldn't hardly hole in. Not satisfied with havin' the hull country on his trail account of that surrey, Simpson tried a *new* deal: He got to discoverin' bugs!

He found out that Bill Rawson had malaria bugs, and the Kelly kid had diphtheria bugs, and Dutchy had typhoid bugs that didn't do business owin' to the alcohol in his system. (*Too bad!*) Why, it was astonishin' how many kinds of newfangled critters we'd never heard of was a-livin' in this Terrytory!

But all his bugs didn't split no shakes with *Rose*. She was *polite* to Simpson, and friendly, but nothin' worse. And it was plainer 'n the nose on you' face that Billy was solid with her. But the ole man is the hull show in that fambly, y' savvy; and all us fellers could do was to hope like sixty that nothin' 'd happen to give Simpson a' extra chanst. But, crimini! Somethin' *did* happen: Rose's baby got sick. Wouldn't eat, wouldn't sleep, kinda whined all the time, like a sick purp, and begun to look peaked–pore little kid!

I was out at the Bar Y that same day, and when the news got over to the bunk-house, we was all turrible excited. "Which'll the ole man send after," we says, "–Simpson 'r Billy?"

It was that bug-doctor!

He come down the road two-forty, settin' up as stiff as if he had a ramrod in his backbone. I just happened over towards the house as he turned in at the gate. He staked out his surrey clost to the porch and stepped down. My! such nice little button shoes!

"Aw, maw!" says Monkey Mike; "he's too rich fer *my* blood!"

The ole man come out to say howdy. When Simpson seen him, he says, "Mister Sewell, they's some hens 'round here, and I don't want 'em to hop into my machine whilst I'm in the house." Then, he looks at me. "Can you' hired man keep 'em shooed?" he says.

Hired man! I took a jump his *direction* that come nigh to splittin' my boots. "Back up, m' son," I says, reachin' to my britches pocket. "*I ain't* no hired man."

Sewell, he puts in quick. "No, no, Doc," he says; "this man's one of the Diamond O cow-boys. Fer heaven's sake, Cupid! You're gittin' to be as touchy as a cook!"

Simpson, he apologised, and I let her pass f er *that* time. But, a-course, far's him and *me* was concerned—wal, just wait. As I say, he goes in,—the ole man follerin'—leavin' that gasoline rig snortin' and sullin' and lookin' as if it was just achin' t' take a run at the bunk-house and bust it wide open. I goes in, too,—just t' see the fun.

There was that Simpson examinin' the baby, and Rose standin' by, lookin' awful scairt. He had a rain-gauge in his hand, and was a-squintin' at it important. “High temper'ature,” he says; “way up to hunderd and four.” Then he jabbed a spoon jigger into her pore little mouth. Then he made X brands acrosst her soft little back with his fingers. Then he turned her plumb over and begun to tunk her like she was a melon. And when he'd knocked the wind outen her, he *pro*-duced a bicycle pump, stuck it agin her chest, and put his ear to the other end. “Lungs all right,” he says; “heart all right. Must be—” Course, *you* know—bugs!

“But—but, couldn't it be teeth?” ast Rose.

Simpson grinned like she was a' idjit, and he was sorry as the dickens fer her. “Aw, a baby ain't *all* teeth,” he says.

Wal, he left some truck 'r other. Then he goes out, gits into his Pullman section, blows his punkin whistle and *departs*.

Next day, same thing. Temper'ature's still up. Medicine cain't be kept down. Case turrible puzzlin'. Makes all kinds of guesses. Leaves some hoss liniment. Toot! toot!

Day after, changes the *program*. Sticks a needle into the kid and gits first blood. Says somethin' about “Modern scientific idears,” and tracks back t' town.

Things run along that-a-way fer a week. Baby got sicker and sicker. Rose got whiter and whiter, and thinned till she was about as hefty as a shadda. Even the ole man begun t' look kinda pale 'round the gills. But Simpson didn't miss a trick. And he come t' the ranch-house so darned many times that his buckboard plumb oiled down the pike.

“Rose,” I says oncet to her, when I stopped by, “cain't we give Billy Trowbridge a chanst? That Simpson doc ain't worth a hill of beans.”

Rose didn't say nothin'. She just turned and lent over the kid. Gee whiz! I hate t' see a woman cry!

'Way early, next day, the kid had a *convul*-sion, and ev'rybody was shore she was goin' to kick the bucket. And whilst a bunch of us was a-hangin' 'round the porch, pretty nigh lunny about the pore little son-of-a-gun, Bill Rawson come—and

he had a story that plumb took the last kink outen us.

I hunts up the boss. “Mister Sewell,” I says, by way of beginnin’, “I’m feard we’re goin’ to lose the baby. Simpson ain’t doin’ much, seems like. What y’ say if I ride in fer Doc Trowbridge?”

“Trowbridge?” he says disgusted. “No, ma’am! Simpson’ll be here in a jiffy!”

“I reckon Simpson’ll be late,” I says. “Bill Rawson seen him goin’ towards Goldstone just now in his thrashin’-machine with a feemale settin’ byside him. Bill says she was wearin’ one of them fancy collar-box hats, with a duck-wing hitched on to it, and her hair was all mussy over her eyes—like a cow with a board on its horns—and she had enough powder on her face t’ make a biscuit.”

The ole man begun t’ chaw and spit like a bob-cat. “I ain’t astin’ Bill’s *advice*,” he says. “When I want it, I’ll let him know. If Simpson’s busy over t’ Goldstone, we got to wait on him, that’s all. But Trowbridge? Not *no*-ways!”

I seen then that it was time somebody mixed in. I got onto my pinto bronc and loped fer town. But all the way I couldn’t think what t’ do. So I left Maud standin’ outside of Dutchy’s, and went over and sit down next Hairoil on the truck. And that’s where I was—a-hummin’ to myself and a-workin’ my haid—when he give me that rakin’ over about playin’ Cupid, and warned me agin monkeyin’ with ole man Sewell.

Wal, when Hairoil up and left me, I kept right on a-studyin’. I knowed, a-course, that I could go kick up a fuss when Simpson stopped by his office on his trip back from Goldstone. But that didn’t seem such a’ awful good plan. Also, I could—

Just then, I heerd my cow-pony kinda whinny. I glanced over towards her. She was standin’ right where I’d left her, lines on the ground, eyes peeled my way. And *such* a look as she was a-givin’ me!—like she knowed what I was a-worryin’ about and was surprised I was so blamed thick.

I jumped up and run over to her. “Maud,” I says, “you got more savvy ’n any horse I know, bar *none*. *Danged if we don’t do it!*”

First off, I sent word t’ Billy that he was to show up at the Sewell ranch-house about four o’clock. And when three come, me and Maud was on the Bar Y road where it goes acrosst that crick-bottom. She was moseyin’ along, savin’ herself, and I was settin’ sideways like a real lady so’s I could keep a’ eye towards town. Pretty soon, ’way back down the road, ’twixt the barb-wire fences, I seen a cloud of dust a-travellin’—a-travellin’ so fast they couldn’t be no mistake. And in about

a minute, the signs was complete—I heerd a toot. I put my laig over then.

Here he come, that Simpson in his smelly Pullman, takin’ the grade like greased lightin’. “Now, Maud!” I whispers to the bronc. And, puttin’ my spurs into her, I begun t’ whip-saw from one fence to the other.

He slowed up and blowed his whistle.

I hoed her down harder’n ever.

“You’re a-skeerin’ my hoss,” I yells back.

“Pull t’ one side,” he answers. “I want to git by.”

But Maud wouldn’t pull. And everywheres Simpson was, she was just in front, actin’ as if she was scairt plumb outen her seven senses. The worse she acted, a-course, the madder *I* got! Fin’lly, just as Mister Doc was managin’ to pass, I got *terrible* mad, and, cussin’ blue blazes, I took out my forty-five and let her fly.

One of them hind tires popped like the evenin’ gun at Fort Wingate. Same minute, that hidebound rig-a-ma-jig took a shy and come nigh buttin’ her fool nose agin a fence-post. But Simpson, he geed her quick and started on. I put a hole in the other hind tire. She shied again—opp’*site* *direction*—snortin’ like she was wind-broke. He hawed her back. Then he went a-kitin’ on, leavin’ me a-eatin’ his dust.

But I wasn’t *done* with him, no, ma’am.

Right there the road make a kinda horse-shoe turn—like this, y’ savvy—to git ’round a fence corner. I’d cal’lated on that. I just give Maud a lick ’longside the haid, jumped her over the fence, quirted her a-flyin’ acrosst that bend, took the other fence, and landed about a hunderd feet in front of him.

When he seen me through his goggles, he come on full-steam. I set Maud a-runnin’ the same *direction*—and took up my little rope.

About two shakes of a lamb’s tail, and it happened. He got nose and nose with me. I throwed, ketchin’ him low—’round his chest and arms. Maud come short.

Say! talk about you’ *flyin*’-machines! Simpson let go his holt and took to the air, sailin’ up right easy fer a spell, flappin’ his wings all the time; then, doublin’ back somethin’ amazin’, and fin’lly comin’ down t’ light.

And that gasoline bronc of hisn—minute she got the bit, she acted plumb loco. She shassayed sideways fer a rod, buckin’ at ev’ry jump. Pretty soon, they was a turn, but she didn’t see it. She left the road and run agin the fence, cuttin’ the

wires as clean in two as a pliers-man. Then, outen pure cussedness, seems like, she made towards a cottonwood, riz up on her hind laigs, clumb it a ways, knocked her wind out, pitched oncet 'r twicet, tumbled over on to her quarters, and begun t' kick up her heels.

"He lay the kid lookin' up and put his finger into her mouth"

I looked at Simpson. He'd been settin' on the ground; but now he gits up, pullin' at the rope gentle, like a lazy sucker. Say! but his face was ornamented!

I give him a nod. "Wal, Young-Man-That-Flies-Like-A-Bird?" I says, inquiren'.

He began to paw up the road like a mad bull. "I'll make you pay fer this!" he bellered.

"You cain't git blood outen a turnip," I answers, sweet as sugar; and Maud backed a step 'r two, so's the rope wouldn't slack.

"How *dast* you do such a' *infameous* thing!" he goes on.

"You gasoline gents got t' have a lesson," I answers; "you let the stuff go t' you' haid. Why, a *hired man* ain't got a chanst fer his life when you happen t' be travellin'."

He begun t' wiggle his arms. "You lemme go," he says.

"Go where?" I ast.

"T' my machine."

I looked over at her. She was quiet now, but sweatin' oil somethin' awful. "How long'll it take you t' git her on to her laigs?" I ast.

"She's ruined!" he says, like he was goin' to bawl. "And I meant t' go down to Goldstone t'night."

"That duck-wing lady'll have t' wait fer the train," I says. "But never mind. I'll tell Rose Andrews you got the *engagement*." Then Maud slacked the rope and I rode up t' him, so's to let him loose. "So long," I says.

"I ain't done with you!" he answers, gittin' purple; "I ain't done with you!"

"Wal, you know where I live," I says, and loped off, hummin' the tune the ole cow died on.

When I rid up to the Bar Y ranch-house, here was Billy, gittin' offen that little bicycle of hisn.

“Cupid,” he says, and he was whiter’n chalk-rock, “is the baby worse? And Rose—”

I pulled him up on to the porch. “Now’s you’ chanst, Billy,” I answers. “*Do you’ darnedest!*”

Rose opened the door, and her face was as white as hisn. “Aw, Billy!” was all she says.

Then up come that ole fool paw of hern, totin’ the kid. “What’s this?” he ast, mad as a hornet. “And where’s Doc Simpson?”

It was me that spoke. “Doc Simpson’s had a turrible accident,” I answers. “His gasoline plug got to misbehavin’ down the road a piece, and plumb tore her insides out. He got awful shook up, and couldn’t come no further, so—knowin’ the baby was so sick—I went fer Bill.”

“Bill!” says the ole man, disgusted. “*Thun-deration!*”

But Billy had his tools out a’ready and was a-reachin’ fer the kid. Sewell let him have her—cussin’ like a mule-skinner.

“That’s right,” he says to Rose; “that’s right,—let him massacre her!”

Rose didn’t take no notice. “Aw, Billy!” she kept sayin’, and “Aw, baby!”

Billy got to doin’ things. He picked somethin’ shiny outen his kit and slipped it into a pocket. Next, he lay the kid lookin’ up and put his finger into her mouth.

“See here,” he says to me.

I peeked in where he pointed and seen a reg’lar little hawg-back of gum, red on the two slopes, but whitish in four spots along the ridge, like they’d been a snowfall. Billy grinned, took out that shiny instrument, and give each of them pore little gum buttes the double cross—*zip-zip, zip-zip, zip-zip, zip-zip*. And, jumpin’ buffaloes! *out pops four of the prettiest teeth a man ever seen!*

Bugs?—rats!

“Now, a little Bella Donnie,” says Bill, “and the baby’ll be O. K.”

“O. K.!” says Rose. “Aw, Billy!” And *such* a kissin’!—the baby, a-course.

Ole man Sewell stopped swearin’ a minute. “What’s the matter?” he ast.

“Teeth,” says Billy.

Think of that! Why, the trouble was so clost to Simpson that if it’d been a rattler, it’d ’a’ bit him!

“*Teeth!*” says the ole man, like he didn’t believe it.

“Come look,” says Billy.

Sewell, he walked over to the baby and stooped down. Then all of a sudden, I seen his jaw go open, and his eyes stick out so far you could ’a’ knocked ’em off with a stick. Then, he got red as a turkey gobbler—and let out a reg’lar war-whoop.

“*Look at ’em!*” he yelped. “Rose! Rose!—*look at ’em!* Four all to oncet!” And he give the doc such a wallop on the back that it come nigh to knockin’ him down.

“I know,” I says sarcastic, “but, shucks! a baby ain’t *all* teeth. This is a mighty puzzlin’ case, and Simpson—”

“Close you’ fly-trap,” says the ole man, “and look at them teeth! Four of a kind—can y’ beat it?”

“Wa-a-al,” I says, sniffin’, “they’s so, so, I reckon, but any kid—”

“*Any kid!*” yells the ole man, plumb aggervated. And he was just turnin’ round to give *me* one when—in limps Simpson!

“Mister Sewell,” he says, “I come to make a complaint”—he shook his fist at me—“agin this here ruffian. He—”

“Wow!” roars Sewell. “Don’t you trouble to make no complaints in *this* house. Here you been a-treatin’ this baby fer bugs when it was just teeth. Say! you ain’t got sense enough to come in when it rains!”

That plumb rattled Simpson. He was gittin’ a *reception* he didn’t reckon on. But he tried t’ keep up his game.

“This cow-boy here is *responsible* fer damages to my auto,” he says. “The dashboard’s smashed into matches, the tumblin’-rods is broke, the spark-condenser’s kaflummuxed, and the hull blamed business is skew-gee. This man was actin’ in you’ behalf, and if he don’t pay, I’ll sue *you*.”

“Sue?” says Sewell; “*sue?* You go guess again! You send in you’ bill, that’s what *you* do. You ain’t earned nothin’—but, by jingo, it’s worth money just to git shet of such a dog-goned shyster as you. *Git.*”

And with that, out goes Mister Bugs.

Then, grandpaw, he turns round to the baby again, plumb took up with them four new nippers. “Cluck, cluck,” he says like a chicken, and pokes the kid under the chin. Over one shoulder, he says to Billy, “And, Trowbridge, you can make out

you' bill, too."

Billy didn't answer nothin'. Just went over to a table, pulled out a piece of paper and a pencil, and begun t' write. Pretty soon, he got up and come back.

"Here, Mister Sewell," he says.

I was right byside the ole man, and—couldn't help it—I stretched to read what Billy'd writ. And this was what it was:

"Mister Zach Sewell, debtor to W. A. Trowbridge, fer medical services—the hand of one Rose Andrews in marriage."

Sewell, he read the paper over and over, turnin' all kinds of colours. And Silly and me come blamed nigh chokin' from holdin' our breaths. Rose was lookin' up at us, and at her paw, too, turrible anxious. As fer that kid, it was a-kickin' its laigs into the air and gurglin' like a bottle.

Fin'lly, the ole man handed the paper back. "Doc," he says, "Rose is past twenty-one, and not a' idjit. Also, the kid is hern. So, bein' this bill reads the way it does, mebbe you'd better hand it t' her. If she don't think it's too steep a figger—"

Billy took the paper and give it over to Rose. When she read it, her face got all blushy; and happy, too, I could see *that*.

"Rose!" says Billy, holdin' out his two arms to her.

I took a squint through the winda at the scenery—and heerd a sound like a cow pullin' its foot outen the mud.

"Rose," goes on Billy, "I'll be as good as I know how to you."

When I turned round again, here was ole man Sewell standin' in the middle of the floor, lookin' back and forth from Rose and Billy to the kid—like it'd just struck him that he was goin' t' lose his gal and the baby and all them teeth. And if ever a man showed that he was helpless and jealous and plumb hurt, why, that was him. Next, here he was a-gazin' at me with a queer shine in his eyes—almost savage. And say! it got me some nervous.

"Seems Mister Cupid Lloyd is a-runnin' things 'round this here ranch-house," he begun slow, like he was holdin' in his mad.

I—wal, I just kinda stood there, and swallered oncet 'r twicet, and tried t' grin. (Didn't know nothin' t' say, y' savvy, that'd be likely t' hit him just right.)

"So Cupid's gone and done it again!" he goes on. "How accommodatin'! Haw!"

And he give one of them short, sarcastic laughs.

“Wal, just let me tell you,” he *continues*, steppin’ closter, “that I, fer one, ain’t got *no* use fer a feller that’s allus a-stickin’ in his lip.”

“Sewell,” I says, “no feller *likes* to—that’s a cinch. But oncet in a while it’s plumb needful.”

“It is, is it? And I s’pose *this* is one of them cases. Wal, Mister Cupid, all I can say is this: The feller that sticks in his lip *allus gits into trouble*.”

Sometimes, them words of hisn come back to me. Mebbe I’ll be feelin’ awful good-natured, and be a-laughin’ and talkin’. Of a suddent, up them words’ll pop, and the way he said ’em, and all. And even if it’s right warm weather, why, I *shiver*, yas, ma’am. *The fetter that sticks in his lip allus gits into trouble*—nothin’ was ever said truer’n that!

“And,” the ole man goes on again, a little bit hoarse by now, “I can feel you’ trouble a-comin’. So far, you been lucky. But it cain’t last—it cain’t last. You know what it says in the Bible? (Mebbe it ain’t in the Bible, but that don’t matter.) It says, ‘Give a fool a rope and he’ll hang hisself.’ And one of these times you’ll play Cupid just oncet too many. What’s more, the smarty that can allus bring other folks t’gether cain’t never manage t’ hitch hisself.”

I’d been keepin’ still ’cause I didn’t want they should be no hard feelin’s ’twixt us. But that last *remark* of hisn kinda got my dander up.

“Aw, I don’t know,” I answers; “when it comes my own time, I don’t figger t’ have much trouble.”

Wal, sir, the old man flew right up. His face got the colour of sand-paper, and he brung his two hands t’gether clinched, so’s I thought he’d plumb crack the bones. “Haw!” (That laugh again—bitter’n gall.) “Mister Cupid Lloyd, *you just wait*.” And out he goes.

“Cupid,” says Billy, “I’m *turrible* sorry. Seems, somehow, that you’ve got Sewell down on y’ account of me—”

“That’s all right, Doc,” I answers; “I don’t keer. It mocks nix oudt, as Dutchy ’d say.” And I shook hands with him and Rose, and kissed the baby.

It mocks nix oudt—that’s what I said. Wal, how was I t’ know then, that I’d made a’ enemy of the *one* man that, later on, I’d be willin’ t’ give my *life* t’ please, almost?—*how* was I t’ know?

CHAPTER TWO

A THIRST-PARLOUR MIX-UP GIVES ME A NEW DEAL

AIN'T it funny what little bits of things can sorta change a feller's life all 'round ev'ry which *direction*—shuffle it up, you might say, and throw him out a brand new deal? Now, take my case: If a sassy greaser from the Lazy X ranch hadn't 'a' plugged Bud Hickok, Briggs City 'd never 'a' got the parson; if the parson hadn't 'a' came, I'd never 'a' gone to church; and mebbe if I hadn't never 'a' gone to church, it wouldn't 'a' made two cents diff'rence whether ole man Sewell was down on me 'r not—fer the reason that, likely, I'd never 'a' met up with Her.

Now, I ain't a-sayin' I'm a' almanac, ner one of them crazies that can study the trails in the middle of you' hand and tell you that you're a-goin' to have ham and aigs fer breakfast. No, ma'am, I ain't neither one. But, just the same, the very first time I clapped my lookers on the new parson, I knowed they was shore goin' to be sev'ral things a-happenin' 'fore long in that particular section of Oklahomaw.

As I said, Bud was *responsible* fer the parson comin'. Bud tied down his holster just oncet too many. The greaser called his bluff, and pumped lead into his system some. That called fer a funeral. Now, Mrs. Bud, she's Kansas City when it comes to bein' high-toned. And nothin' would do but she must have a preacher. So the railroad agent got Williams, Arizonaw, on his click-machine, and we got the parson.

He was a new breed, that parson, a genuwine no-two-alike, come-one-in-a-box kind. He was big and young, with no hair on his face, and brownish eyes that 'peared to look plumb through y' and out on the other side. Good-natured, y' know, but actin' as if he meant ev'ry word he said; foolin' a little with y', too, and friendly as the devil. And he didn't wear parson duds—just a grey suit; not like us, y' savvy—more like what the hotel clerk down to Albuquerque wears, 'r one of them city fellers that comes here to run a game.

Wal, the way he talked over pore Bud was a caution. Say! they was no “Yas, my brother,” 'r “No, my brother,” and no “Heaven's will be done” outen *him*—nothin' like it! And you'd never 'a' smelt gun-play. Mrs. Bud ner the greaser that done

the shootin'-up (he was at the buryin') didn't hear no word *they* could kick at, *no*, ma'am. The parson read somethin' about the day you die bein' a darned sight better 'n the day you was born. And his hull razoo was so plumb sensible that, 'fore he got done, the passel of us was all a-feelin', somehow 'r other, that Bud Hickok had the drinks on us!

We planted Bud in city style. But the parson didn't shassay back to Williams afterwards. We'd no more'n got our shaps on again, when Hairoil blowed in from the post-office up the street and let it out at the "Life Savin' Station," as Dutchy calls his thirst-parlour, that the parson was goin' to squat in Briggs City fer a spell.

"Wal, of all the dog-goned propositions!" says Bill Rawson, mule-skinner over to the Little Rattlesnake Mine. "What's he goin' to do that fer, Hairoil?"

"Heerd we was goin' to have a polo team," answers Hairoil. "Reckon he's kinda loco on polo. Anyhow, he's took my shack."

"Boys," I tole the crowd that was wettin' they whistles, "this preachin' gent ain't none of you' ev'ry day, tenderfoot, hell-tooters. Polo, hey? He's got *savvy*. Look a leedle oudt, as Dutchy, here, 'd put it. Strikes me this feller'll hang on longer 'n any other parson that was ever in these parts ropin' souls."

Ole Dutch lay back his ears. "Better he do'n make no trubbles mit me," he says.

Say! that was like tellin' you' fortune. The next day but one, right in front of the "Station," trouble popped. This is how:

The parson 'd had all his truck sent over from Williams. In the pile they was one of them big, spotted dawgs—keerige dawgs, I think they call 'em. This particular dawg was so spotted you could 'a' come blamed nigh playin' checkers on him. Wal, Dutchy had a dawg, too. It wasn't much of anythin' fer fambly, I reckon,—just plain purp—but it shore had a fine set of nippers, and could jerk off the stearin' gear of a cow quicker 'n greazed lightnin'. Wal, the parson come down to the post-office, drivin' a two-wheel thing-um-a-jig, all yalla and black. 'Twixt the wheels was trottin' his spotted dawg. A-course, the parson 'd no more'n stopped, when out comes that ornery purp of Dutchy's. And such a set-to you never seen!

But it was all on one side, like a jug handle, and the keerige dawg got the heavy end. He yelped bloody murder and tried to skedaddle. The other just hung on, and bit sev'ral of them stylish spots clean offen him.

"Sir," says the parson to Dutchy, when he seen the damage, "call off you' beast."

Dutchy, he just grinned. “Ock,” he says, “it mocks nix oudt if dey do sometinks. Here de street iss not brivate broperty.”

At that, the parson clumb down and drug his dawg loose. Then he looked up at the thirst-parlour. “What a name fer a *saloon*,” he says, “in a civilised country!”

A-course, us fellers enjoyed the fun, all right. And we fixed it up t’gether to kinda sic the Dutchman on. We seen that “Life Savin’ Station” stuck in the parson’s craw, and we made out to Dutch that like as not he ’d have to change his sign.

Dutch done a jig he was so mad. “Fer *dat*?” he ast, meanin’ the parson. “Nein! He iss not cross mit my sign. He vut like it, maybe, if I gif him some viskey on tick. I bet you he trinks, I bet. Maybe he trinks ret ink gocktails, like de Injuns; maybe he trinks Florita Vater, oder golone. Ya! Ya! Vunce I seen a feller—I hat some snakes here in alghol—unt dat feller he trunk de alghol. Ya. Unt de minister iss just so bat as dat.”

Then, to show how he liked *us*, Dutchy set up the red-eye. And the *next* time the parson come along in his cart, they was a dawg fight in front of that saloon that was worth two-bits fer admission.

Don’t think the rest of us was agin the parson, though. We wasn’t. Fact it, we kinda liked him from the jump. We liked his riggin’, we liked the way he grabbed you’ paw, and he was no quitter when it come to a hoss. *Say!* but he could ride! One day when he racked into the post-office, his spur-chains a-rattlin’ like a puncher’s, and a quirt in his fist, one of the Bar Y boys rounded him up agin the *meanest*, low-down buckin’ proposition that ever wore the hide of a bronc. But the parson was game from his hay to his hoofs. He clumb into the saddle and stayed there, and went a-hikin’ off acrosst the prairie, independent as a pig on ice, just like he was a-straddlin’ some ole crow-bait!

So, when Sunday night come, and he preached in the school-house, he had quite a bunch of punchers corralled there to hear him. And I was one of ’em. (But, a-course, that first time, I didn’t have no idear it was a-goin’ to mean a turrible lot to me, that goin’ to church.) Wal, I’m blamed if the parson wasn’t wearin’ the same outfit as he did week days. We liked that. And he didn’t open up by tellin’ us that we was all branded and ear-marked a’ ready by the Ole Long-horn Gent. No, ma’am. He didn’t *mention* everlastin’ fire. And he didn’t ramp and pitch and claw his hair. Fact is, he didn’t hell-toot!

A-course, that spoiled the fun fer us. But he talked so straight, and kinda easy and honest, that he got us a-listenin’ to what he *said*.

Cain't say we was stuck on his text, though. It run like this, that a smart man sees when a row's a-comin' and makes fer the tall cat-tails till the wind dies down. And he went on to say that a man oughta be humble, and that if a feller gives you a lick on the jaw, why, you oughta let him give you another to grow on. Think o' that! It may be O. K. fer preachers, and fer women that ain't strong enough t' lam back. But fer me, *nixey*.

But that hand-out didn't give the parson no black eye with *us*. *We* knowed it was his duty t' talk that-a-way. And two 'r three of the boys got t' proposin' him fer the polo team real serious—pervided, a-course, that he'd stand fer a little cussin' when the 'casion *required*. It was a cinch that he'd draw like wet rawhide.

Wal, the long and short of it is, he did. And Sunday nights, the Dutchman lost money. He begun t' josh the boys about gittin' churchy. It didn't do no good,—the boys didn't give a whoop fer his gass, and they liked the parson. All Dutchy could do was to sic his purp on to chawin' spots offen that keerige dawg.

But pretty soon he got plumb tired of just dawg-fightin'. He *prepared* to turn hisself loose. And he advertised a free supper fer the very next Sunday night. When Sunday night come, they say he had a reg'lar Harvey layout. You buy a drink, and you git a stuffed pickle, 'r a patty de grass, 'r a wedge of pie druv into you' face.

No go. The boys was on to Dutchy. They knowed he was the stingiest gezaba in these parts, and wouldn't give away a nickel if he didn't reckon on gittin' six-bits back. So, more fer devilment 'n anythin' else, the most of 'em fooled him some—just loped to the school-house.

The parson was plumb tickled.

But it didn't last. The next Sunday, the "Life Savin' Station" had Pete Gans up from Apache to deal a little faro. And as it rained hard enough t' keep the women folks away, why, the parson preached to ole man Baker (he's deaf), the globe and the chart and the map of South Amuricaw. And almost ev'ry day of the next week, seems like, that purp of Dutchy's everlastin'ly chawed the parson's. The spotted dawg couldn't go past the thirst-parlour, 'r anywheres else. The parson took to fastenin' him up. Then Dutchy'd mosey over towards Hairoil's shack. Out'd come Mister Spots. And one, two, three, the saloon dawg 'd sail into him.

Then a piece of news got 'round that must 'a' made the parson madder 'n a wet hen. Dutchy cleaned the barrels outen his hind room and put up a notice that the next Sunday night he'd give a dance. To finish things, the dawgs had a worse fight'n ever Friday mornin', and the parson's lost two spots and a' ear.

I seen a change in the parson that evenin'. When he come down to the post-office, them brown eyes of his'n was plumb black, and his face was redder'n Sam Barnes's. "Things is goin' to happen," I says to myself, "'r I ain't no judge of beef."

Sunday night, you know, a-course, where the *boys* went. But I drewed lots with myself and moseyed over to the school-house to keep a bench warm. And here is when that new deal was laid out on the table fer you' little friend Cupid!

I slid in and sit down clost to the door. Church wasn't begun yet, and the dozen 'r so of women was a-waitin' quieter'n mice, some of 'em readin' a little, some of 'em leanin' they haid on the desks, and some of 'em kinda peekin' through they fingers t' git the lay of the land. Wal, I stretched my neck,—and made out t' count more'n fifty spit-balls on a life-size chalk drawin' of the school-ma'am.

Next thing, the parson was in and a-pumpin' away—all fours—at the organ, and the bunch of us was on our feet a-singin'—

*"Yield not to tempta-a-ation,
'Cause yieldin' is sin.
Each vic'try—"*

We'd got about that far when I shut off, all of a suddent, and cocked my haid t' listen. Whose voice was that?—as clear, by thunder! as the bugle up at the Reservation. Wal, sir, I just stood there, mouth wide open.

*"Some other to win.
Strive manfully onwards—"*

Then, I begun t' look 'round. *Couldn't* be the Kelly kid's maw (I'd heerd her call the hawks), ner the teacher, ner that tall lady next her, ner—

Spotted the right one! Up clost to the organ was a gal I'd never saw afore. So many was in the way that I wasn't able t' git more'n a squint at her back hair. But, say! it was *mighty* pretty hair—brown, and all sorta curly over the ears.

When the song was over, ole lady Baker sit down just in front of me; and as she's some chunky, she cut off nearly the hull of my view. "But, Cupid," I says to myself, "I'll bet that wavy hair goes with a sweet face."

Minute after, the parson begun t' speak. Wal, soon as ever he got his first words out, I seen that the air was kinda blue and liftin', like it is 'fore a thunder-shower. And his text? It was, "Lo, I am full of fury, I am weary with holdin' it in."

Say! *that's* the kind of preachin' a *puncher* likes!

After he was done, and we was all ready t' go, I tried to get a better look at that gal. But the women folks was movin' my *direction*, shakin' hands and gabblin' fast to make up fer lost time. Half a dozen of 'em got 'round me. And when I got shet of the bunch, she was just a-passin' out at the far door. My! such a slim, little figger and such a pert, little haid!

I made fer the parson. "*Excuse me,*" I says to him, "but wasn't you talkin' to a young lady just now? and if it ain't too gally, can I *in-quire* who she is?"

"Why, yas," answers the parson, smilin' and puttin' one hand on my shoulder. (You know that cuss never oncet ast me if I was a Christian? Aw! I tell y', he was a *gent.*) "That young lady is Billy Trowbridge's sister-in-law."

"Sister-in-law!" I repeats. (She was married, then. Gee! I hated t' hear that! 'Cause, just havin' helped Billy t' git his wife, y' savvy, why—) "But, parson, I didn't know the Doc *had* a brother." (I felt kinda down on Billy all to oncet.)

"He ain't," says the parson. "(*Good-night, Mrs. Baker.*) This young lady is Mrs. Trowbridge's sister."

"Mrs. *Trowbridge's* sister?"

"Yas,—ole man Sewell's youngest gal. She's been up to St. Louis goin' t' school." He turned out the bracket lamp.

Ole man Sewell's youngest gal! Shore enough, they *was* another gal in that fambly. But she was just a kid when she was in Briggs the last time,—not more'n fourteen 'r fifteen, anyhow,—and I'd clean fergot about her.

"Her name's Macie," goes on the parson.

"Macie—Macie Sewell—Macie." I said it over to myself two 'r three times. I'd never liked the name Sewell afore. But now, somehow, along with *Her* name, it sounded awful fine. "Macie—Macie Sewell."

"Cupid, I wisht you'd walk home with me," says the parson. "I want t' ast you about somethin'."

"Tickled t' death."

Whilst he locked up, I waited outside. "M' son," I says to myself, "nothin' could be foolisher than fer you to git you' eye fixed on a belongin' of ole man Sewell's. Just paste *that* in you' sunbonnet."

Wal, I rid Shank's mare over t' Hairoil's. Whilst we was goin', the parson

opened up on the subject of Dutchy and that nasty, mean purp of hisn. And I ketched on, pretty soon, to just what he was a-drivin' at. I fell right in with him. I'd never liked Dutchy such a turrible lot anyhow,—and I did want t' be a friend to the parson. So fer a hour after we hit the shack, you might 'a' heerd me a-talkin' (if you'd been outside) and him a-laughin' ev'ry minute 'r so like he'd split his sides.

Monday was quiet. I spent the day at Silverstein's Gen'ral Merchandise Store, which is next the post-office. (Y' see, She might come in fer the Bar Y mail.) The parson got off a long letter to a feller at Williams. And Dutchy was awful busy—fixin' up a fine shootin'-gallery at the back of his "Life Savin' Station."

Tuesday, somethin' happened at the parson's. Right off after the five-eight train come in from the south, Hairoil druv down to the deepot and got a big, square box and rushed home with it. When he come into the thirst-parlour about sunset, the boys ast him what the parson was gittin'. He just wunk.

"I bet *I* knows," says Dutchy. "De preacher mans buys some viskey, alretty."

Hairoil snickered. "Wal," he says, "what I carried over was nailed up good and tight, all right, all right."

Wal, say! that made the boys suspicious, and made 'em wonder if they wasn't a darned good *reason* fer the parson not wearin' duds like other religious gents, and fer his knowin' how to ride so good. And they was *sore-bein'* that they'd stood up so strong fer him, y' savvy.

"A cow-punch," says Monkey Mike, "ll swaller almost *any* ole thing, long 's it's right out on the table. But he shore cain't go a *hippy-crit*."

"You blamed idjits!" chips in Buckshot Millikin, him that owns such a turrible big bunch of white-faces, and was run outen Arizonaw fer rustlin' sheep, "what can y' expect of a preacher, that comes from *Williams*?"

Dutchy seen how they all felt, and he was plumb happy. "Vot I tole y'?" he ast. But pretty soon he begun to laugh on the other side of his face. "If dat preacher goes to run a bar agin me," he says, "py golly, I makes no more moneys!"

Fer a minute, he looked plumb scairt.

But the boys was plumb *disgusted*. "The parson's been playin' us fer suckers," they says to each other; "he's been a-soft-soapin' us, a-flimflammin' us. He thinks we's as blind as day-ole kittens." And the way that Tom-fool of a Hairoil hung 'round, lookin' wise, got under they collar. After they'd booted him outen the shebang, they all sit down on the edge of the stoop, just sayin' nothin'—but

sawin' wood.

I sit down, too.

We wasn't there more'n ten minutes when one of the fellers jumped up. "There comes the parson now," he says.

Shore enough. There come the parson in his fancy two-wheel Studebaker, lookin' as perky as thunder. "Gall?" says Buckshot. "Wal, I should smile!" Under his cart, runnin' 'twixt them yalla wheels, was his spotted dawg.

I hollered in to Dutchy. "Where's you' purp, Dutch?" I ast. "The parson's haided this way."

Dutchy was as tickled as a kid with a lookin'-glass and a hammer. He dropped his bar-towel and hawled out his purp.

"Vatch me!" he says.

The parson was a good bit closter by now, settin' up straight as a telegraph pole, and a-hummin' to hisself. He was wearin' one of them caps with a cow-catcher 'hind and 'fore, knee britches, boots and a sweater.

"A svetter, mind y'!" says Dutchy.

"Be a Mother Hubbard *next*," says Bill Rawson.

Somehow, though, as the parson come 'longside the post-office, most anybody wouldn't 'a' liked the way thinks looked. You could sorta smell somethin' explodey. He was too all-fired songful to be natu'al. And his dawg! That speckled critter was as diff'rent from usual as the parson. His good ear was curled up way in, and he was kinda layin' clost to the ground as he trotted along—layin' so clost he was plumb *bow-legged*.

Wal, the parson pulled up. And he'd no more'n got offen his seat when, first rattle outen the box, them dawgs mixed.

Gee whillikens! *such* a mix! They wasn't much of the reg'lar ki-yin'. Dutchy's purp yelped some; but the parson's? Not fer *him*! He just got a good holt—a shore enough diamond hitch—on that thirst-parlour dawg, and chawed. *Say!* And whilst he chawed, the dust riz up like they was one of them big sand-twisters goin' through Briggs City. All of a suddent, *how that spotted dawg could fight!*

Dutchy didn't know what 'd struck him. He runs out. "Come, hellup," he yells to the parson.

The parson shook his head. "This street is not my private property," he says.

Then Dutchy jumped in and begun t' kick the parson's dawg in the snoot. The parson walks up and stops Dutchy.

That made the Dutchman turrible mad. He didn't have no gun on him, so out he jerks his pig-sticker.

What happened next made our eyes plumb stick out. That parson side-stepped, put out a hand and a foot, and with that highfalutin' Jewie Jitsie you read about, tumbled corn-beef-and-cabbage on to his back. Then he straddled him and slapped his face.

"Lieber!" screeched Dutchy.

"Goin' t' have any more Sunday night dances?" ast the parson. (*Bing, bang.*)

"Nein! Nein!"

"Any more" (*bing, bang*) "free Sunday suppers?"

"Nein! Nein! Hellup!"

"Goin' to change this" (*biff, biff*) "saloon's name!"

"Ya! Ya! *Gott!*"

The parson got up. "*Amen!*" he says.

Then he runs into Silverstein's, grabs a pail of water, comes out again, and throws it on to the dawgs.

The Dutchman's purp was done fer a'ready. And the other one was tired enough to quit. So when the water splashed, Dutchy got his dawg by the tail and drug him into the thirst-parlour.

But that critter of the parson's. Soon as the water touched him, them spots of hisn *begun to run*. Y' see, he wasn't the stylish keerige dawg at all! *He was a jimber-jawed bull!*

Wal, the next Sunday night, the school-house was chuck full. She wasn't there—no, Monkey Mike tole me she was visitin' down to Goldstone; but, a-course, all the *rest* of the women folks was. And about forty-'leven cow-punchers was on hand, and Buckshot, and Rawson and Dutchy,—yas, ma'am, *Dutchy*, we rounded *him* up. Do y' think after such a come-off we was goin' to let that limburger run any compytition place agin our parson?

And that night the parson stands up on the platform, his face as shiny as a milk-pan, and all smiles, and he looked over that cattle-town bunch and says, "I take

fer my text this evenin', 'And the calf, and the young lion and the fatlin' shall lie down in peace t'gether.'"

CHAPTER THREE

THE PRETTIEST GAL AND THE HOMELIEST MAN

I'M just square enough to own *up* it was one on me. But far's that particular mix-up goes, I can *afford* to be honest, and let anybody snicker that wants to-seein' the way the hull thing turned out. 'Cause how about Doc Simpson? Didn't I git bulge Number Two on him? And how about the little gal? Didn't it give me my first chanst? *Course*, it did! And now, sometimes, when I want to feel happier'n a frog in a puddle, just a-thinkin' it all over, I lean back, shut my two eyes, and say, "Ladies and gents, this is where you git the Blackfoot Injun Root-ee, the Pain Balm, the Cough Balsam, the Magic Salve and the Worm Destroyer—the fi-i-ive remedies fer two dollars!"

That medicine show follered the dawg fight. It hit Briggs City towards sundown one day, in a prairie-schooner drawed by two big, white mules, and druv up to the eatin'-house. Out got a smooth-faced, middle-aged feller in a linen duster and half a' acre of hat—kinda part judge, part scout, y' savvy; out got two youngish fellers in fancy vests and grey dicers; next, a' Injun in a blanket, and a lady in a yalla-striped shirtwaist. Wal, sir, it was just like they'd struck that town to start things a-movin' fer me!

The show hired the hall over Silverstein's store. Then one of them fancy vests walked up and down Front Street, givin' out hand-bills. The other sent word to all the ranches clost by, and the Injun went 'round to them scattered houses over where the parson and Doc Trowbridge lives.

Them hand-bills read somethin' like this: The Renowned Blackfoot Medicine Company Gives Its First Performance T'Night! Grand Open-Air Band Concert. Come One, Come All. Free! Free! Free! 3—The Marvellous Murrays—3. To-Ko, the Human Snake, The World Has Not His Equal. Miss Vera de Mille In Bewitchin' Song and Dance. Amuricaw's Greatest Nigger Impersynater. The Fav'rite Banjoist of the Sunny South. Injun Shadda Pictures,—and a hull lot more I cain't just recall.

When I seen that such a big bunch was a-goin' to preform, I walked over and peeked into that schooner. I figgered, y' savvy, that they was some more people in it that hadn't come out yet. But they wasn't—only boxes and boxes of bottles.

Right after supper, that medicine outfit played in front of Silverstein's. The judge-lookin' feller beat the drum, the Injun blowed a big brass dinguss, the gal a clari'net, and the other two fellers some shiny instruments curlier'n a pig's tail. But it was bully, that's all *I* got to say, and drawed like a mustard plaster. 'Cause whilst in Oklahomaw a *Injun* show don't count fer much, bein' that we got more'n our fill of reds, all the same, with music throwed in, Briggs City was there. And Silverstein's hall was just jampacked.

The front seats was took up by the town kids, a-course. Then come the women and gals,—a sprinklin' of men amongst 'em; behind *them*, the cow-punchers. And in the back end of the place a dozen 'r so of niggers and cholos. Whilst all was a-waitin' fer the show to begin, the punchers done a lot of laughin' and cat-callin' to each other, and made some consider'ble noise. I was along with the rest, only up in one of the side windas, settin' on the sill and swingin' my hoofs.

When the show opened, they was first a fine piece—a march, I reckon—by the band. All the time, more people was a-comin' in. 'Mongst 'em was Doc Trowbridge and Rose, and Up-State—he was that pore lunger that was here from the East, y' savvy. Next, right after them three, that Doc Simpson I was so all-fired stuck on. And, along with him, a gal.

Wal, who do you think it was! *I* knowed to oncet. They wasn't no mistakin' that slim, little figger and that pert little haid. It was *Her!*

“Cupid,” whispered Hairoil Johnson (he was settin' byside me), “it looks to me like you didn't much discourage that Noo York doc who owns what's left of a toot buggy. Failin' to git the oldest gal out at the Bar Y, why, now he's a-sailin' 'round with the youngest one.”

I didn't say nothin'. I was a-watchin' where *she* was. I wanted t' ketch sight of her face.

“I devilled ole man Sewell about kickin' him out and then takin' him back,” goes on Hairoil. “And Sewell said he was a punk doctor, but awful good comp'ny. Huh! Comp'ny ain't what *that* dude's after. He's after a big ranch and a graded herd. It's a blamed pity you didn't git *him* sent up t' Kansas City fer repairs.”

The band was a-playin', but I didn't pay much attention to it. I kept a-watchin' that slim, little figger a-settin' next Simpson—a-watchin' till I plumb fergot where I was, almost. “Macie,—Macie Sewell.”

Just then, I'm another if she didn't look round! And square at *me!* She wasn't smilin', just sober, and sorta inquirin'. Her eyes looked dark, and big. She had a

square little chin, like the gals you see drawn in pictures, and some soft, white, lacey stuff was a-restin' agin her neck. They was two 'r three good-lookin' gals at the eatin'-house them days, and Carlota Arnaz was awful pretty, too. But none of 'em couldn't hole a candle t' *this* one. Took in her cute little face whilst she looked straight back at me. Say! them eyes of hern come nigh pullin' me plumb outen that winda!

Then the Judge walked out onto the platform, and she faced for'ards again. "Ladies and gents," says the ole feller, talkin' like his mouth was full of mush, "we have come to give you' enterprisin' little city a free show. A free show, ladies and gents,—it ain't a-goin' to cost you a *nickel* to come here and enjoy you'self ev'ry night. More'n that, we plan to stay as long as you want us to. And we plan to give you the very best talent in this hull United States."

All this time, the fancy-vest fellers was layin' a carpet and fixin' a box and a table on the stage. The Judge, he turned and waved his hand. "Our first number," he says, "will be the Murrays in they marvellous act."

Wal, them fancy-vests and the lady was the Marvellous Murrays. And they was all in pink circus-clothes. "Two brothers and a sister, I guess," says Hairoil. I should *hope* so! 'Cause the way they jerked each other 'round was enough t' bring on a fight if they hadn't 'a' been relations. All three of 'em could walk on they hands nigh as good as on they feet, and turn somersets quicker'n lightnin'. And when the somersettin' and leap-froggin' come to oncet, it was grand! First the big feller'd git down; then, the other'd step onto his back. And as the big one bucked, his brother'd fly up,—all in a ball, kinda—spin 'round two 'r three times, and light right side up. And then they stood on each other's faces like they'd plumb flat 'em out!

When they was done, they all come to the edge of the platform, the lady kissin' her hand. All the punchers kissed back!

Wal, ev'rybody laughed then, and clapped, and the Judge brought on the Injun. That Injun was smart, all right. Wiggled his fingers behind a sheet and made 'em look like animals, and like people that was walkin' and bowin' and doin' jigs. I wondered if Macie Sewell liked it. Guess she did! She was a-smilin' and leanin' for'ards to whisper to Billy and Rose. But not much to Simpson, *I* thought. Say! I was glad of that. Wasn't *none* of my business, a-course. *Course*, it wasn't. But, just the same, whenever I seen him put his haid clost to hern, it shore got under my skin.

The Judge was out again. "Miss Vera de Mille," he says, "will sing 'Wait Till the

Sun Shines, Maggie.” Wal, if I hadn’t ’a’ had reasons fer stayin’, I wouldn’t ’a’ waited a *minute*—reg’lar cow-bellerin’ in place of a voice, y’ savvy. What’s more, she was only that Marvellous Murray woman in diff’rent clothes! (No wonder they wasn’t no more people in that outfit!) But I didn’t keer about the show. I just never took my eyes offen—

She looked my way again!

Say! I was roped—right ’round my shoulders, like I’d roped Simpson! And I was plumb helpless. That look of hern was a lasso, pullin’ me to her, steady and shore. “Macie—Macie Sewell,” I whispered to myself, and I reckon my lips moved.

“You blamed idjit!” says Hairoil, out loud almost, “what’s the matter with you? You’ll have me outen this winda in a minute!”

The Judge was bowin’ some more. “We have now come to the middle of our *program*,” he says. “But ’fore I begin announcin’ the last half, which is our best, I want to tell you all a story.

“Ladies and gents, I come t’ Briggs to bring you a message—a message which I feel bound to deliver. And I’ve gone through a turrible lot to be able to stand here to-night and say to you what I’m a-goin’ to say.

“Listen! Years ago, a little boy, about so high, with his father and mother and ’leven sisters and brothers, started to cross the Plains with a’ ox-team. They reached the Blackfoot country safe. But there, ladies and gents, a turrible thing happened to ’em. One day, more’n four hunderd Injuns surrounded they wagon and showed fight. They fit ’em back, ladies and gents,—the father and the mother and the children, killin’ a good many bucks and woundin’ more. But the Injuns was too many fer that pore fambly. And in a’ hour, the reds had captured one little boy—whilst the father and mother and the ’leven sisters and brothers was no more!” (The Judge, he sniffled a little bit.)

“The little boy was carried to a big Injun camp,” he goes on. “And it was here, ladies and gents,—it was here he seen *won*-derful things. He seen them Injuns that was wounded put some salve on they wounds and be healed; he seen others, that was plumb tuckered with fightin’, drink a blackish medicine and git up like new men. Natu’lly, he wondered what was *in* that salve, and what was *in* that medicine. Wal, he made friends with a nice Injun boy. He ast him *questions* about that salve and that medicine. He learnt what plants was dug to make both of ’em. Then, one dark night, he crawled outen his wigwam on his hands and knees. Behind him come his little Injun friend. They went slow and soft to where

was the pony herd. They caught up two fast ponies, and clumb onto 'em, dug in they spurs, and started eastwards as fast as they could go. The white boy's heart was filled with joy, ladies and gents. He had a secret in his bosom that meant health to ev'ry *man, woman and child* of his own race. As he galloped along, he says to hisself, 'I'll spend my *life* givin' this priceless secret to the world!'

"Wal, ladies and gents, that's what he begun to do—straight off. And t'-night, my dear friends, that boy is in Briggs City!" (A-course, ev'rybody begun to look 'round fer him.) "Prob-'bly," goes on the Judge, "they's more'n a hunderd people in this town that'll thank Providence he come: They's little children that won't be orphans; they's wives that won't be widdas. Fer he is anxious to tell 'em of a remedy that will cure a-a-all the ills of the body. And, ladies and gents, *I-am-that-boy!*"

That got the punchers so excited and so tickled, that they hollered and stamped and banged and done about twenty dollars' worth of damage to the hall.

"My friends," goes on the Judge, "I have *prepared*, aided by my dear Injun comrade here, the sev'ral kinds of medicines discovered by the Blackfeet." The fancy-vests, rigged out like Irishmen, was fixin' a table and puttin' bottles on to it. "I have these wonderful medicines with me, and I sell 'em at a figger that leaves only profit enough fer the five of us to live on. I do *more'n* that. Ev'rywheres I go, I *present*, as a soovneer of my visit, *a handsome, solid-gold watch and chain.*"

Out come that singin' lady, hoidin' the watch and chain in front of her so's the crowd could see. My! what a lot of whisperin'!

"This elegant gift," *continues* the Judge, "is *awarded* by means of a votin' contest. And it goes to the prettiest gal."

More whisperin', and I sees a brakeman git up and go over to talk to another railroad feller. Wal, *I* didn't have to be tole who was the prettiest gal!

"Ladies and gents,"—the Judge again—"in this contest, *ev'rybody* is allowed to vote. All a person has to do is to take two dollars' worth of my medicine. Each two-dollar buy gives you ten votes fer the prettiest gal; and just to add a little fun to the contest, it also gives you ten votes fer the homeliest man. If you buy these medicines, you'll never want to buy no others. Here's where you git the Blackfoot Injun Rootee, my friends, the Pain Balm, the Cough Balsam, the Magic Salve, and the Worm Destroyer—the *fi-i-ive* remedies fer two dollars!"

Then he drawed a good, long breath and begun again, tellin' us just what the

diff'rent medicines was good fer. When he was done, he says,—playin' patty-cake with them fat hands of hisn—"Now, who'll be the first to buy, and name a choice fer the prettiest gal?"

Up jumps that brakeman, "Gimme two dollars' worth of you' dope," he says, "and drop ten votes in the box fer Miss Mollie Brown."

(Eatin'-house waitress, y' savvy.)

"And the ugliest man?" ast the Judge, whilst one of the fancy vests took in the cash and handed over the medicine.

"Monkey Mike," answers the brakeman. And then the boys began t' josh Mike.

"I'm a sucker, too," hollers the other railroad feller. "Here's ten *more* votes fer Miss Brown."

Just then, in she come,—pompydore stickin' up like a hay-stack. The railroad bunch, they give a cheer. Huh!

I got outen that winda and onto my feet. "Judge," I calls, puttin' up one hand to show him who was a-talkin', "here's *eight* dollars fer you' rat-pizen. And you can chalk down forty votes fer Miss Macie Sewell."

Say! cain't you hear them Bar Y punchers?—"Yip! yip! yip! yip! yip! yip! ye-e-e!" A-course all the *other* punchers, they hollered, too. And whilst we was yellin', that tenderfoot from Noo York was a-jabberin' to Macie, mad like, and scowlin' over my way. And she? Wal, she was laughin', and blushin', and shakin' that pretty haid of hern—at *me!*

I was so *excited* I didn't know whether I was a-foot 'r a-hoss-back. But I knowed enough to *buy*, all right. Wal, that medicine went like hotcakes! I blowed *myself*, and Hairoil blowed *his-self*, and the Bar Y boys cleaned they pockets till the bottles was piled up knee-high byside the benches. And whilst we shelled out, the Judge kept on a-goin' like he'd been wound up—"Here's *another* feller that wants Root-ee! and here's another over on this side! And, lady, it'll be good fer you, too, *yas*, ma'am. The Blackfoot Injun Rootee, my friends, the Pain Balm, the Cough Balsam, the Magic Salve, and the Worm Destroyer,—the fi-i-ive remedies fer two dollars!"

When I come to, a little bit later on, the hall was just about empty, and Hairoil was pullin' me by the arm to git me to move. I looked 'round fer Macie Sewell. She was gone, and so was the Doc and Billy Trowbridge and Rose and Up-State. Outside, right under my window, I ketched sight of a white dress a-goin' past. It was her. "Macie," I whispers to myself; "Macie Sewell."

That night, I couldn't sleep. I was upset kinda, and just crazy with thinkin' how I'd help her to win out. And I made up my mind t' this: If more votes come in fer Mollie Brown than they did fer the gal that *oughta* have 'em, why, I'd just shove a gun under that Judge's nose and tell him to "count 'em over and *count 'em right.*" 'Cause, I figgered, no eatin'-house gal with a face like a flat-car was a-goin' to be elected the prettiest gal of Briggs. Not if *I* seen myself, *no*, ma'am. 'Specially not whilst Sewell's little gal was in the country. Anybody could pick *her* fer the winner if they had on blinders. "Cupid," I says, "you hump you'self!"

Next day, the Judge, he give consultin's in the eatin'-house sample-room. I went over and had a talk with him, tellin' him just how I wanted that votin' contest to go. He said he wisht me luck, but that if the railroad boys felt they needed his medicine, he didn't believe he had no right to keep 'em from buyin'. And, a-course, when a feller made a buy, he wanted t' vote like he pleased. Said the best thing was t' git holt of folks that 'd met Miss Sewell and liked her, 'r wanted t' work fer her ole man, 'r 'd just as lief do *me* a good turn.

I hunted up Billy. "Doc," I says, "I *hope* Briggs ain't a-goin' to name that Brown waitress fer its best sample. Now—"

"Aw, wal," says Billy, "think how it 'd tickle her!"

"Tickle some other gal just as much," I says.

"And the *prettiest* gal ought to be choosed. Now, it could be fixed—*easy.*"

"Who do you think it oughta be?" ast Billy.

"Strikes me you' wife's little sister is the pick."

"Cupid," says Billy, lookin' anxious like, "don't you git you'self too much interested in Macie Sewell. You know how the ole man feels towards you. And what can *I* do? He ain't any too friendly with *me* yet? So be keerful."

"Now, Doc," I goes on, "don't you go to worryin' about me. Just you help by *prescribin' that medicine.*"

"To folks that don't need none?" ast Billy. "Aw, I don't like to." (Billy's awful white, Billy is.) "It won't do 'em no good."

"Wal," I says, "it won't do 'em no *harm.*"

Billy said he'd see.

"You could let it out that somebody in town's been cured by the stuff," I suggests.

“Only make them railroad fellers buy more.”

“That’s so. Wal, I guess the best thing fer me to do is to hunt up people with a misery and tell ’em they’d better buy—and vote my way.”

Billy throwed back his haid and haw-hawed.

“You’re a *dickens* of a feller!” he says. “When you want to have you’ own way, I never seen *any*-body that could think up more gol-darned things.”

“And,” I *continues*, “if that Root-ee just had a lot of forty-rod mixed in it, it ’d be easier’n all git out to talk fellers into takin’ it. If they’d try *one* bottle, they’d shore take *another*.”

“Now, Cupid,” says Billy, like he was goin’ to scolt me.

“’R if ole man Baker ’d take the stuff and git his hearin’ back.”

“No show. Nothin’ but sproutin’ a new ear’d help Baker.”

Next person I seen was that Doc Simpson. He was a-settin’ on Silverstein’s porch, teeterin’ hissself in a chair. “Billy,” I says, “I’m goin’ over to put that critter up to buyin’. He’s got money and he cain’t do better’n spend it.”

Wal, a-course, Simpson was turrible uppy when I first spoke to him. Said he didn’t want nothin’ t’ say to me—not a *word*. (He had sev’ral risin’s on his face yet.)

“Wal, Doc,” I says, “I know you think I didn’t treat you square, *but*—has you city fellers any idear how mad you make us folks in the country when you go a-shootin’ ’round in them gasoline rigs of yourn? Why, I think if you’ll give this question some little study, you’ll see it has got two sides.”

“Yas,” says the Doc, “it *has*. But that ain’t why you treated *me* like you did. No, I ain’t green enough to think *that*.”

“You ain’t green at *all*,” I says. “And I’m shore sorry you feel the way you do. ’Cause I hoped mebbe you’d fergit our little trouble and bury the hatchet—long as we’re both workin’ fer the same thing.”

“What thing, I’d like t’ know?”

“Why, gittin’ Miss Macie Sewell elected the prettiest gal.”

Fer a bit he didn’t say nothin’. Then he made some *remark* about a gal’s name bein’ “handed ’round town,” and that a votin’ contest was “vulgar.”

Wal, he put it so slick that I didn’t just git the hang of what he was drivin’ at. Just

the same, I felt he was layin' it on to me, somehow. And if I'd 'a' been *shore* of it, I'd 'a' put some *more* risin's on to his face.

Wisht now I had—on gen'ral principles. 'Cause, thinkin' back, I know *just* what he done. If he didn't, why was him and that Root-ee Judge talkin' t'gether so long at the door of Silverstein's Hall—talkin' like they was thick, and laughin', and ev'ry oncet in a while lookin' over at me?

I drummed up a lot of votes that afternoon. Got holt of Buckshot Milliken, who wasn't feelin' more'n ordinary good. Ast him how he was. He put his hand to his belt, screwed up his mug, and said he felt plumb et up inside.

“Buckshot,” I says, “anybody else 'd give you that ole sickenin' story about it bein' the nose-paint you swallered last night. Reckon you' wife's tole you that a'ready.”

“That's what she has,” growls Buckshot.

“Wal, *I* knowed it! But is she *right*? Now, *I* think, Buckshot,—I think you've got the bliggers.” (Made it up on the spot.)

“The bliggers!” he says, turrible scairt-like.

“That's what I think. But all you need is that Root-ee they sell over yonder.”

He perked up. “Shore of it?” he ast.

“Buy a bottle and try. And leave off drinkin' anythin' else whilst you're takin' the stuff, so's it can have a fair chanst. In a week, you'll be a new man.”

“I'll do it,” he says, makin' fer that prairie-schooner.

I calls after him: “And say, Buckshot, ev'ry two dollars you spend with them people, you git the right to put in ten votes fer the prettiest gal. Now, most of us is votin' fer ole man Sewell's youngest daughter.” Then, like I was tryin' hard to recollect, “*I think* her name is Macie.”

“All right, Cupid. So long.”

Seen Sewell a little bit later. And braced right up to him. 'Cause fer two reasons: First, I wanted *him* t' do some buyin' fer his gal; then, I wanted t' find out if he didn't need another puncher out at the Bar Y. (Ketch on t' my little game?)

The ole man was pretty short, and wouldn't do a livin' lick about them votes. Said *he* knowed his gal, Mace, was the prettiest gal in Oklahomaw, and it didn't need no passel of breeds 'r quacks to cut her out of the bunch of heifers and give her the brand.

Then, I says, “S’pose you ain’t lookin’ fer no extra punchers out at the Bar Y? I’m thinkin’ some of quittin’ where I am.” (’Twixt you and me and the gate-post, I knowed from Hairoil that the Sewell outfit was shy two men—just when men was wanted *bad*.)

Fer a minute, Sewell didn’t answer nothin’. (Stiff-necked, y’ savvy,—see a feller dead first ’fore he’d give in a’ inch.) Pretty soon, he looked up, kinda sheepish. “I *could* use another puncher,” he says, “t’ ride line. Forty suit y’?”

“Shore, boss. Be out the first. So long.”

I was goin’ to the Bar Y, where *she* was! Wal, mebbe I wasn’t happy! And mebbe I wasn’t set worse’n ever on havin’ the little gal win in that contest! ’Fore night, I rounded up as many as five people that had a bony fido grunt comin’, and was glad to hear the grand things Doc Trowbridge said about Root-ee!

When the show started up in the hall after supper, and I slid in to take my seat in the winda, a lot of people,—women and kids and men—kinda turned round towards me and whispered and grinned. “They know I’m fer Macie Sewell,” I says to myself, “but that don’t bother *me* none.”

That Blackfoot Injun (he was turned into To-Ko, the Human Snake) was a-throwin’ squaw-hitches with hisself. The Judge come to the edge of the platform and pointed over his shoulder to him. “Do you think he could do that if he didn’t rub his hinges with Pain Balm?” he says. “Wal, he couldn’t. Pain Balm makes a man as limber as a willa. Ladies and gents, it’s *wonderful* what that remedy can do! It’ll prolong you’ life, make you healthy, wealthy, happy, and wise. Here you get the Blackfoot Injun Root-ee, the Pain Balm, the Cough Balsam, the Magic Salve, and the Worm Destroyer,—the fi-i-ive remedies fer two dollars!”

Say! it made my jaw plumb tired t’ listen to him.

“Hairoil,” I says to Johnson, “they got the names of the prettiest gals up on the blackboard, but where’s the names of the homeliest men?”

Hairoil snickered a little. Then he pulled his face straight and said that, bein’ as Monkey Mike ’d kicked up a turrible fuss about the votes that was cast fer *him*, why, the Judge had *decided* to keep the homeliest-man contest a secret.

Wal, I didn’t keer. Was only a-botherin’ my, haid over the way the prettiest gal countin’ ’d come out. I got holt of Dutchy, who ’d come in from his thirst-parlour to look on a minute. “Buyin’, Dutchy?” I ast.

“Nix.”

“But I reckon you need Root-ee, all the same. Do you ever feel kinda full and stuffy after meals?”

“Yaw.”

“Now, don’t that show! Dutchy, I’m sorry, but it’s a cinch you got the bliggers!”

Wal, *he* bit.

The station-agent was standin’ right next me. “Cupid,” he whispers, “I hear you got a *candi-date* in fer the prettiest gal. What you say about runnin’ as the homeliest man?”

“No,” I answers, quick, “I don’t hanker fer the honour. (That ’d hurt me with *her*, y’ savvy.) Then, I begun chinnin’ with Sparks, that owns the corral.

“Great stuff, that Root-ee,” I says. “Reckon the redskins knowed a heap more about curin’ than anybody’s ever give ’em credit fer. Tried the medicine yet, Sparks?”

Sparks said no, he didn’t think he needed it.

“Wal, a man never knows,” I goes on. “Now, mebbe, of a mornin’, when you wake up, you feel tired and sorta stretchy; wisht you could just roll over and take another snooze.”

“Bet I do!”

“That ain’t right, Sparks.” And I turned in and give him that bliggers talk.

But he hung off till I tole him about the scheme of the railroad bunch. Seems that Sparks had a grudge agin the eatin’-house ’cause it wouldn’t give him trainmen’s rates fer grub. So he fell right into line.

Macie Sewell didn’t come to the show that night, so I didn’t stay long. Over to the bunk-house, I got a piece of paper and some ink and (ain’t ashamed of it, *neither*,) writ down her name. Under it, I put mine. Then, after crossin’ out all the letters that was alike, and countin’ “Friendship, love, indiff’rence, hate, courtship, marriage,” it looked like this:

code

By jingo, I reckon it stood just about that way!

Next mornin’, whilst I was standin’ outside the post-office, she come ridin’ up! Say, all to oncet my heart got to goin’ somethin’ turrible—I was feard she’d hear it, no josh. My hands felt weak, too, so’s I could hardly pull off my Stetson; and

my ears got red; and my tongue thick, like the time I got offen the trail in Arizonaw and din't have no water fer two 'r three days.

She seen me, and smiled, sorta bashful.

“Miss Sewell,” I says, “can I ast fer you' mail? Then you won't have to git down.”

“Yas, thank y'.”

When I give it to her, I got my sand back a little. “I hope,” I says, “that you didn't mind my puttin' you' name up in that votin' contest. Did y'?”

“Why,—why, no.”

“I'm awful glad. And I'm a-comin' out to the Bar Y the first to ride line.”

“Are y'?” Them pink cheeks of hern got pinker'n ever, and when she loped off, she smiled back at me!

Say! I never was so happy in all my life! I went to work gittin' votes fer her, feelin' like ev'rybody was my friend—even ole Skinflint Curry, that I'd had words with oncet. That railroad bunch was a-workin', too, and a-talkin' up Mollie Brown. And I heerd that they planned to hole back a lot of votes till Macie Sewell's count was all in, and then spring 'em to elect the other gal. That got me worried some.

About six o'clock, one of them fancy vests went 'round town, hollerin' it out that the show 'd give its last performance that night. “What's you sweat?” I ast him. Nothin', he says, only the Judge reckoned about all the folks that intended to buy Root-ee had bought a'ready.

Wal, the show got a turrible big crowd—hall chuch full. And I tell y' things was livelier'n they was at the dawg fight. The Mollie Brown crowd was rushin' 'round and lookin' corkin' shore, and the punchers holdin' up people as they come in, and the Marvellous Murray's doin' anty-I-overs with theyselves plumb acrosst the stage.

All the time, the Judge was exercisin' that jaw of hisn. “Ladies and gents,” he says, (banjo goin' ev'ry minute) “here's where you git cured whilst you stand—like buffalo grass. Don't you be scairt that you'll buy me out—I got more down cellar in a teacup!”

Then *she* come in, and I wouldn't 'a' pulled outen that place fer a new dollar. She looked so cool and pretty, that little haid up, and a wisp of hair blowin' agin her one cheek 'cause they was a breeze from the windas. Simpson was with her.

What did *I* keer! She wasn't noticin' *him* much. Wal, I just never looked anywheres else but at her. Aw, I hoped that pretty soon she'd look round at me!

She did!—straighter'n a string. And the hull room got as misty and full of roarin' as if a Santa Fee ingine was in there, a-leakin' steam. I tried t' smile at her. But my face seemed hard, like a piece of leather. I *couldn't* smile.

Then, my eyes cleared. And I seen she was sad, like as if somethin' was botherin' her mind. "She thinks she's a-goin' t' git beat," I says to myself. "But she *ain't*." And I reached down to see if my pop-gun was all right.

She turned back towards the stage. The Murray woman 'd just finished one of them songs of hern, and the Judge was talkin' again. "Ladies and gents," he says, "we shall not drag out our *program* too long. Fer the reason that I know just what you-all want to hear *most*. And that is, the *result* of the contest."

That railroad gang begun t' holler.

Don't know why,—wasn't no reason fer it, but my heart went plumb down into my boots. "Aw, little Macie!" I says to myself; "aw, little Macie!" Say! I come mighty nigh prayin' over it!

"The count fer the prettiest gal," goes on the Judge, "is complete. Miss de Mille, kindly bring for'ard the watch. I shall have to ast some gent to escort the *fortunate* young lady to the platform." (I seen a brakeman start over to Mollie Brown.)

"I don't intend"—the Judge again—"to keep you in suspenders no longer. And I reckon you'll all be glad to know" (here he give a bow) "that the winner is—Miss Macie Sewell."

Wal, us punchers let out a yell that plumb cracked the ceiling. "Wow! wow! wow! Macie Sewell!" And we whistled, and kicked the floor, and banged the benches, and whooped.

Doctor Bugs got to his feet, puttin' his stylish hat and gloves on his chair, and crookin' a' elbow. Wal, I reckon *this* part wasn't vulgar!

Then, *she* stood up, took holt of his arm, and stepped out into the aisle. She was smilin' a little, but kinda sober yet, I thought. She went towards the Judge slow, and up the steps. He helt out his hand. "With the compliments of the company," he says. She took the watch. Then she turned.

Another cheer—a *whopper*.

She stood there, lookin' like a' angel, 'r a bird, 'r a little bobbin' rose.

“Thank y’, boys,” she says; “thank y’.”

If I’d ’a’ knowed what was a-goin’ to happen next, I’d ’a’ slid out then. But, a-course, I didn’t.

“My friends,” says the Judge, “I will now read the vote for the homeliest man. Monkey Mike received the large count of twenty. But it stands nineteen hunderd and sixty fer—Cupid Lloyd.”

All of a suddent two ’r three fellers had holt of me. And they was a big yell went up—“Cupid! Cupid! The homeliest man! Whee!” The next second, I was goin’ for’ards, but shovin’ back. I *hated* to have her see me made a fool of. I seen red, I was so mad. I could ’a’ kilt. But she was lookin’ at me, and I was as helpless as a little cat. I put down my haid, and was just kinda dragged up the aisle and onto the platform.

She went down the steps to her seat then. But she didn’t stop. She bent over, picked up her jacket, whispered somethin’ to Rose and, with that Simpson trailin’, went to the back of the hall. There she stopped, kinda half turned, and waited.

I wisht fer a knot-hole that I could crawl through. I wisht a crack in the floor ’d open and let me slip down, no matter if I tumbled into a barrel of *molasses* below in Silverstein’s. I wisht I was dead, and I wisht the hull blamed bunch of punchers was—Wal, I felt something *turrible*.

“Cupid!” “You blamed fool!” “Look at him, boys!” “Take his picture!” “Say! he’s a beauty!” Then they hollered like they’d bust they sides, and stomped.

I laughed, a-course,—sickish, though.

The Judge, I reckon, felt kinda ’shamed of hissself. ’Cause I’d helped to sell a heap of medicine, and he knowed it. “That’s all right, Lloyd,” he says; “they ain’t no present fer you. You can vamoise—back stairway.”

“Whee-ooop!” goes the boys.

I seen her start down then. Billy and his wife got up, too. So did the crowd, still a-laughin’ and a-hootin’.

I kinda backed a bit. When I reached the stairs, I went slower, feelin’ my way. Minute and I come out onto Silverstein’s hind porch. Nobody was there, so I went over to the edge and lent agin a’ upright.

Right back of Silverstein’s they’s a line of hitchin’-posts. Two hosses was fastened there when I come, but it was so dark, and I felt so kinda bad, that I

didn't notice the broncs particular. Till, 'round the corner, towards 'em, come that Simpson. Next, walkin' slow and lookin' down—Macie.

But she got onto her hoss quick, and without no help. All the time, Bugsey was a-fussin' with his mustang. But the critter was nervous, and wasn't no easy job. Macie waited. She was nighest to me, and right in line with the light from a winda. I could see her face plain. But I couldn't tell how she was feelin',—put out, 'r quiet, 'r just kinda tired.

Simpson got into the saddle then, his hoss rearin' and runnin'. He could steer a gasoline wagon, but he couldn't handle a cayuse. He turned to holler: "Comin', Miss Sewell?"

She said she was, but she started awful slow, and kinda peered back, and up to the hall. At the same time, she must 'a' saw that they was a man on the back porch, 'cause she pulled in a little, lookin' hard.

I felt that rope a-drawin' me then. I couldn't 'a' kept myself from goin' to her. I started down. "Miss Macie!" I says; "Miss Macie!"

"Why,—why, Mister Lloyd!" She wheeled her hoss. "Is that you?"

I went acrosst the yard to where she was. "Yas,—it's me," I says.

She lent down towards me a little. "You been awful good to me," she says. "I know. It was *you* got all them votes. Hairoil said so."

"Don't mention it."

"And—and"—I heerd her breath 'way deep, kinda like a sob—"you *ain't* the homeliest man! you *ain't*! Aw, it was *mean* of 'em! And it hurt—"

"No, it didn't—please, I don't mind."

"It hurt—me."

That put the cheek of ten men into me. I Straightened up, and I lifted my chin. "Why, Gawd *bless* you, little gal!" I says. "It's all *right*."

Her one hand was a-restin' on the pommel. I reached up—only a stay-chain could a' helt me back then—and took it into both of mine. Say! did you ever holt a little, flutterin' bird 'twixt you' two palms?

"Macie," I says, "Macie Sewell." And I pressed her hand agin my face.

She lent towards me again. It wasn't more'n a soft breath, and I could hardly hear. But nobody but me and that little ole bronc of hern'll ever know what it was she said.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCERIN' THE SHERIFF AND ANOTHER LITTLE WIDDA

Aw! them first days out at the Bar Y ranch-house!—them first days! Nobody could 'a' been happier'n I was then.

I hit the ranch on a Friday, about six in the evenin', it was, I reckon,—in time fer supper, anyhow. The punchers et in a room acrosst the kitchen from where the fambly et. And I recollect that sometimes durin' that meal, as the Chink come outen the kitchen, totin' grub to us, I just could ketch sight of Macie's haid in the far room, bobbin' over her plate. And ev'ry time I'd see her, I'd git so blamed flustered that my knife 'd miss my mouth and jab me in the jaw, 'r else I'd spill somethin' 'r other on to Monkey Mike.

And after supper, when the sun was down, and they was just a kinda half-light on the mesquite, and the ole man was on the east porch, smokin', and the boys was all lined up along the front of the bunk-house, clean outen sight of the far side of the yard, why, I just sorta wandered over to the calf-coral, then 'round by the barn and the Chink's shack, and landed up out to the west, where they's a row of cottonwoods by the new irrigatin' ditch. Beyond, acrosst about a hunderd mile of brown plain, here was the moon a-risin', bigger'n a dish-pan, and a cold white. I stood agin a tree and watched it crawl through the clouds. The frogs was a-watchin', too, I reckon, fer they begun to holler like the dickens, some bass and some squeaky. And then, from the other side of the ranch-house, struck up a mouth-organ:

*“Sweet is the vale where the Mohawk gently glides
On its fair, windin' way to the sea—”*

A wait—ten seconds 'r so (it seemed longer); then, the same part of the song, over again, and—

Outen the side door of the porch next me come a slim, little figger in white. It stepped down where some sun-flowers was a-growin' agin the wall. Say! it was just sunflower high! Then it come acrosst the alfalfa—like a butterfly. And then—

“Don't you want a shawl 'round you' shoulders, honey? It's some chilly.”

“No.” (Did you ever see a gal that’d own up she needed a wrap?)

“Wal, you got to have *somethin’* ’round you.” And so I helt her clost, and put my hand under her chin t’ tip it so’s I could see her face.

“You *mustn’t*, Alec!” (She was allus shy about bein’ kissed.)

“I tole Mike to give me ten minutes’ lee-way ’fore he played that tune. But he must ’a’ waited a hull hour.” And then, with the mouth-organ goin’ at the bunk-house (t’ keep the ole man listenin’, y’ savvy, and make him fergit t’ look fer Mace), we rambled north byside the ditch, holdin’ each other’s hand as we walked, like two kids. And the ole moon, it smiled down on us, awful friendly like, and we smiled back at the moon.

Wal, when we figgered that Mike ’d blowed hissself plumb outen breath, we started home again. And under the cottonwoods, the little gal reached up her two arms t’ me; and they wasn’t nothin’ but love in them sweet, grey eyes.

“You ain’t never liked nobody else, honey?”

“No—just you, Alec!—*dear* Alec!”

“Same here, Macie,—and this is fer keeps.”

Wal, ’most ev’ry night it was just like that. And the follerin’ day, mebbe I wouldn’t know whether I was a-straddle of a hoss, drivin’ steers, ’r a-straddle of a steer, drivin’ hosses. And it’s a blamed good thing my bronc savvied how t’ tend to business without *me* doin’ much!

Then, mebbe, I’d be ridin’ line. Maud ’d go weavin’ away up the long fence that leads towards Kansas, and at sundown we’d reach the first line-shack. And there, with the little bronc a-pickin’, and my coffee a-coolin’ byside me on a bench, I’d sit out under the sky and watch the moon—alone. Mebbe, when I got home, it’d be ole man Sewell’s lodge-night, so he’d start fer town ’long about seven o’clock, and Mace and me ’d have the porch to ourselves—the side-porch, where the sun-flowers growed. But the next night, we’d meet by the ditch again, and the next, and the next. Aw! them first happy days at the ole Bar Y!

And I reckon it was just ’*cause* we was so turrible happy that we got interested in Bergin’s case—Mace and me both. (Next t’ Hairoil, Bergin’s my best friend, y’ savvy.) Figgerin’ on how t’ fix things up fer him—speakin’ matreemonal—brung us two closter t’gether, and showed me what a *dandy* little pardner she was a-goin’ t’ make.

But I want t’ say right here that we wasn’t *re*-sponsible fer the way that case of

hisn turned out—and neither was *no other livin' soul*. No, ma'am. The hull happenstance was the kind that a feller cain't explain.

It begun when I'd been out at the Sewell ranch about two weeks. (I disremember the exac' day, but *that* don't matter.) I'd rid in town fer somethin', and was a-crossin' by the deepot t' git it, when I ketched sight of Bergin a-settin' on the end of a truck,—all by hisself. Now, that was funny, 'cause they wasn't a man in Briggs City but liked George Bergin and would 'a' hoofed it a mile to talk to him. "What's skew-gee?" I says to myself, and looked at him clost; then,—“Cæsar Augustus Philabustus Hennery Jinks!” I kinda gasped, and brung up so suddent that I bit my cigareet clean in two and come nigh turnin' a somerset over back'ards.

White as that paper, he was, and nervous, and so all-fired shaky and caved-in that they couldn't be no question what was the matter. *The sheriff was scairt*.

First off, I wasn't hardly able to believe what I seen with my own eyes. Next, I begun to think 'round fer the cause why. Didn't have to think much. Knowed they wasn't a *pinch* of 'fraid-cat in Bergin—no crazy-drunk greaser 'r no passel of bad men, *red* 'r white, could put *him* in a sweat, *no*, sir-ree. They was just *one* thing on earth could stampede the sheriff. I kinda tip-toed over to him. “Bergin,” I says, “*who is she?*”

He looked up—slow. He's a six-footer, and about as heavy-set as the bouncer over to the eatin'-house. Wal, I'm another if ev'ry square inch of him wasn't tremblin', and his teeth was chatterin' so hard I looked to see 'em fall out—that's *straight*. Them big, blue eyes of hisn was sunk 'way back in his haid, too, and the rest of his face looked like it 'd got in the way of the hose. “Cupid,” he whispered, “you've struck it! Here—read this.”

It was a telegram. Say, you know I ain't got *no* use fer telegrams. The blamed things *allus* give y' a dickens of a start, and, nine times outen ten, they've got somethin' to say that no man wants to hear. But I opened it up.

“sheriff george bergin,” it read,—all little letters, y' savvy. (Say! what's the matter that they cain't send no capitals over the wire?) “briggs city oklahomaw meet mrs bridger number 201 friday phillips.”

“Aw,” I says, “Mrs. Bridger. Wal, Sheriff, who's this Mrs. Bridger?”

Pore Bergin just wagged his haid. “You'll have to give me a goose-aig on that one,” he answers.

“Wal, who's Phillips, then?” I continued.

“The Sante Fee deepot-master at Chicago.”

“Which means you needn’t to worry. Mrs. Bridger is likely comin’ on to boss the gals at the eatin’-house.”

“If that’s so, what ’d he telegraph to *me* fer?”

“Don’t know. Buck up, anyhow. I’ll bet she’s gone ’way past the poll-tax age, and has got a face like a calf with a blab on its nose.”

“Cupid,” says the sheriff, standin’ up, “thank y’. I feel better. Was worried ’cause I’ve had bad luck lately, and bad luck most allus runs in threes. Last week, my dawg died—remember that one with a buck tooth? I was turrible fond of that dawg. And yesterday—”

He stopped then, and a new crop of drops come out on to his face. “Look!” he says, hoarse like, and pointed.

’Way off to the north was a little, dark, puffy cloud. It was a-travelin’ our *direction*. Number 201!

“Gosh!” says the sheriff, and sunk down on to the truck again.

I didn’t leave him. I recollected what happened that time he captured “Cud” and Andy Foster and brung ’em into town, his hat shot off and his left arm a-hangin’ floppy agin his laig. Y’ see, next day, a bunch of ladies—*ole* ladies, they was, too,—tried to find him and give him a vote of thanks. But when he seen ’em comin’, he swore in a deputy—*quick*—and vamosed. Day ’r two afterwards, here he come outen that cellar back of Dutchy’s thirst-parlour, his left arm in a red bandaner, a rockin’-chair and a pilla under his right one, and a lantern in his teeth!

But *this* time, he wasn’t a-goin’ to *have* no deputy. I made up my mind to stay right byside him till he’d did his duty. Yas, ma’am.

“Cupid,” he begun again, reachin’ fer my fist, “Cupid, when it comes to feemales—”

Too-oo-oot! too-oo-oot! Couldn’t make him hear, so I just slapped him on the shoulder. Then I hauled him up, and we went down the platform to where the crowd was.

When the train slowed down, the first thing I seen was the conductor with a kid in his arms,—a cute kid, about four, I reckon,—a boy. Then the cars stopped, and I seen a woman standin’ just behind them. Next, they was all out on to the platform, and the woman was holdin’ the kid by one hand.

The woman was cute, too. Mebbe thirty, mebbe less, light-complected, yalla-haired, kinda plump, and about so high. Not pretty like Mace 'r Carlota Arnaz, but *mighty* good t' look at. Blabbed calf? Say! this was *awful!*

“Ber-r-gin!” hollers the corn-doc.

“Bergin,” I repeats, encouragin'. (Hope I never see a man look worse. He was all blue and green!)

Bergin, he just kinda staggered up. He'd had *one* look, y' savvy. Wal, he didn't look no more. Pulled off his Stetson, though. Then he smoothed the cow-lick over his one eye, and sorta studied the kid.

“Sheriff,” goes on the corn-doc, “here's a lady that has been *consigned* to you' care. Good-bye, ma'am, it's been a pleasure to look out fer you. Good-bye, little feller,” (this to the kid). “Aw-aw-awl abroad!”

As Number 201 pulled out, you can bet you' little Cupid helt on to that sheriff! “Bergin,” I says, under my breath, “fer heaven's sake, remember you' oath of office! And, *boys*,” (they was about a dozen cow-punchers behind us, a-smilin' at Mrs. Bridger so hard that they plumb laid they faces open) “you'll have us all shoved on to the tracks in a minute!”

It was the kid that helped out. He'd been lookin' up at Bergin ever since he hit the station. Now, all to oncet, he reached towards the sheriff with both his little hands—as friendly as if he'd knowed him all his life.

Y' know, Bergin's heart 's as big as a' ox. He's tender and *awful* kind, and kids like him straight off. He likes kids. So, 'fore you could say Jack Robinson, that Bridger young un was histed up. I nodded to his maw, and the four of us went into the eatin'-house, where we all had some dinner t'gether. Leastways, me and the kid and Mrs. Bridger et. The sheriff, he just sit, not sayin' a word, but pullin' at that cow-lick of hisn and orderin' things fer the baby. And whilst we grubbed, Mrs. Bridger tole us about herself, and how she 'd happened to come out Oklahomaw way.

Seems she 'd been livin' in Buffalo, where her husband was the boss of a lumber-yard. Wal, when the kid was three years old, Bridger up and died, not leavin' much in the way of cash fer the widda. Then she had to begin plannin' how to git along, a-course. Chicken-ranchin' got into her haid. Somebody said Oklahomaw was a good place. She got the name of a land-owner in Briggs City and writ him. He tole her he had a nice forty acres fer sale—hunderd down, the balance later on. She bit—and here she was.

“Who’s the man?” I ast.

The widda pulled a piece of paper outen her hand-satchel. “Frank Curry,” she answers.

Bergin give a jump that come nigh to tippin’ the table over. (Ole Skinflint Curry was the reason.)

“And where’s the ranch?” I ast again.

“This is where.” She handed me the paper.

I read. “Why, Bergin,” I says, “it’s that place right here below town, back of the section-house—the Starvation Gap Ranch.”

The sheriff threwed me a quick look.

“I hope,” begun the widda, leanin’ towards him, “—I hope they’s nothin’ *agin* the property.”

Fer as much as half a minute, neither of us said nothin’. The sheriff, a-course, was turrible flustered ’cause she ’d spoke *direct* to him, and he just jiggled his knee. *I* was kinda bothered, too, and got some coffee down my Sunday throat.

“Wal, as a *chicken* ranch,” I puts in fin’lly “it’s O. K.,—shore *thing*. On both sides of the house—see? like this,” (I took a fork and begun drawin’ on the table-cloth) “is a stretch of low ground,—a swale, like, that keeps green fer a week ’r so ev’ry year, and that’ll raise Kaffir-corn and such roughness. You git the tie-houses of the section-gang plank in front—here. But behind, you’ *possessions* rise straight up in to the air like the side of a house. Rogers’s Butte, they call it. See it, out there? A person almost has to use a ladder to climb it. On top, it’s all piled with big rocks. Of a mornin’, the hens can take a trot up it fer exercise. The fine view ’ll encourage ’em to lay.”

“I’m so glad,” says the widda, kinda clappin’ her hands. “I can make enough to support Willie and me easy. And it’ll seem awful fine to have a little home all my own! I ain’t never lived in the country afore, but I know it’ll be lovely to raise chickens. In pictures, the little bits of ones is allus so cunnin’.”

Wal, I didn’t answer her. What could I ’a’ *said*? And Bergin?—he come nigh pullin’ his cow-lick clean out.

By this time, that little kid had his bread-basket full. So he clumb down outen his chair and come ’round to the sheriff. Bergin took him on to his lap. The kid lay back and shut his eyes. His maw smiled over at Bergin. Bergin smiled down at the kid.

“Wal, folks,” I begun, gittin’ up, “I’m turrible sorry, but I got to tear myself away. Promised to help the Bar Y boys work a herd.”

“*Cupid!*” It was the sheriff, voice kinda croaky.

“Good-bye fer just now, Mrs. Bridger,” (I pretended not t’ hear *him*.) “So long, Bergin.”

And I skedaddled.

Two minutes afterwards here they come outen the eatin’-house, the widda totin’ a basket and the sheriff totin’ the kid. I watched ’em through the crack of Silverstein’s front door, and I hummed that good ole song:

*“He never keers to wander from his own fireside;
He never keers to ramble ’r to roam.
With his baby on his knee,
He’s as happy as can be-e-e,
Cause they’s no-o-o place like home, sweet home.”*

When I got back to the Bar Y, I was dead leary about tellin’ Mace that I had half a mind t’ git Bergin married off. ’Cause, y’ see, I’d been made fun of so much fer my Cupid business; and I hated t’ think of doin’ somethin’ she wouldn’t like. But, fin’lly, I managed t’ spunk up sufficient, and *described* Mrs. Bridger and the kid, and said what I’d like t’ do fer the sheriff.

“Alec,” says the little gal, “I been tole (Rose tole me) how you like t’ help couples that’s in love. It’s what made me first like you.”

“Honey! Then you’ll help me?”

“*Shore*, I will.”

I give her a whoppin’ smack right on that cute, little, square chin of hern. “You darlin’!” I says. And then I put another where it’d do the most good.

“Alec,” she says, when she could git a word in edgeways, “this widda comin’ is mighty fortu-*nate*. Bergin’s too ole fer the gals at the eatin’-house. But Mrs. Bridger’ll suit. Now, I’ll lope down to the Gap right soon t’ visit her, and you go back t’ town t’ see how him goin’ home with her come out.”

“Mace,” I says, “if we *just* can help such a fine feller t’ git settled. But it’ll be a job—a *awful* job. She’s a nice, affectionate little thing. Why, he’d be a *blamed* sight happier. And he likes the kid—”

“Let’s not count our chickens ’fore they hatch,” breaks in Mace.

Wal, I hiked fer town, and found the sheriff right where he was settin' that mornin'. But, say! *he was a changed man!* No shakin', no caved-in look—*nothin'* of that kind. He was gazin' thoughtful at a knot in the deepot platform, his mouth was part way open, and they was a sorta sickly grin spread all over them features of hisn.

I stopped byside him. "Wal, Sheriff," I says, inquirein'.

He sit up. "Aw—is that you, Cupid?" he ast. (I reckon I know a guilty son-of-a-gun when I see one!)

I sit down on the other end of the truck. "Did Mrs. Bridger git settled all right?" I begun.

"Yas," he answers; "I pulled the rags outen the windas, and put some panes of glass in—"

"*Good* fer you, Bergin! But, thunder! the idear of her thinkin' she can raise chickens fer a livin'—'way out here. Why, a grasshopper ranch ain't *no* place fer that little woman." (And I watched sideways to see how he'd take it.)

"You're right, Cupid," he says. Then, after swallerin' hard, "Did you happen t' notice how soft and kinda pinky her hands is?"

Was that the *sheriff* talkin'? Wal, you could 'a' knocked me down with a feather!

"Yas, Sheriff," I answers, "I noticed her pretty particular. And it strikes me that we needn't to worry—she won't stay on that ranch *long*. Out here in Oklahomaw, *any* widda is in line fer another husband if she'll take one. In Mrs. Bridger's case, it won't be just any ole hobo that comes along. She'll be able to pick and choose from a grea-a-at, bi-i-ig bunch. *I* seen how the boys acted when she got offen that train t'-day—and I knowed then that it wouldn't be *no* time till she'd marry."

The sheriff is tall, as I said afore. Wal, a kinda shiver went up and down the hull length of him. Then, he sprung up, givin' the truck a kick. "Marry! marry! marry!" he begun, grindin' his teeth t'gether. "Cain't you talk nothin' *else* but marry?"

"No-o-ow, Bergin," I says, "what diff'rence does it make t' *you*? S'pose she marries, and s'pose she don't. *You* don't give a bean. Wal, *I* look at it diff'rent. *I* know that nice little kid of hern needs the keer of a father—yas, Bergin, the keer of a *father*." And I looked him square in the eye.

"It's *just* like Hairoil says," he went on. "If Doc Simpson was t' use a spy-glass

on *you*, he'd find you plumb alive with *bugs*—*marryin'* bugs. *Yas*, sir. With you, it's a *disease*."

"*Wal*," I answers, "don't git anxious that it's ketchin'. You? Huh! If I had anythin' *agin* the widda, I *might* be a-figgerin' on how t' hitch her up t' *you*—you ole *woman-hater!*"

"The best thing *you* can do, Mister Cupid," growls Bergin (with a few cuss words throwed in), "is to *mind-you'-own-business*."

"All right," I answers cheerful. "*I* heerd y'. But, I never could see why you fellers are so down on me when I *advise* marryin'. Take my word fer it, Sheriff, *any* man's a heap better off with a nice wife to look after his shack, and keep it slicked up, and a nice baby 'r two t' pull his whiskers, and I reckon—"

But Bergin was makin' fer the freight shed, two-forty.

When I tole Mace what'd passed 'twixt me and the sheriff, she says, "Alec, leave him alone fer a while, and mebbe he'll look *you* up. In love affairs, don't never try t' drive *nobody*."

"But ain't it funny," I says (it was lodge night, and we had the porch to ourselves), "—ain't it funny how dead set some fellers is *agin* marryin'—the blamed fools! Y' see, they think that if they *don't* hitch up t' some sweet gal, why, they git ahaid of somebody. It makes me plumb sick!"

"But think of the lucky gal that don't marry such a yap," says Mace. "If she was to, by some hook 'r crook, why, he'd throw it up to her fer the balance of his life that she'd ketched him like a rat in a trap."

"*I* never could git no such notion about you," I says; "aw, little gal, we'll be so happy, you and me, won't we, honey,—"

Wal, to *continue* with the Bridger story: You recollect what I said about that kid needin' a father? Wal, say! if he'd 'a' wanted one, he shore could 'a' picked from plenty of *candi-dates*. Why, 'fore long, ev'ry bach in town had his cap set fer Mrs. Bridger—that's *straight*. All other subjects of *polite* conversation was fergot byside the subject of the widda. Sam Barnes was in love with her, and went 'round with that red face of hisn lookin' exac'ly like the full moon when you see it through a sandstorm. Chub Flannagan was in love with her, too, and 'd sit by the hour on Silverstein's front porch, his pop eyes shut up tight, a-rockin' hisself back'ards and for'ards, back'ards and for'ards, and a-hummin'. Then, they was Dutchy's brother, August. Aw, he had it *bad*. And took t' music, just like Chub, *yas*, ma'am. Why, that feller spent *hours* a-knockin' the wind outen a' pore

accordion. And next come Frank Curry—haid over heels, too, *mean* as he was, and to hear him talk you'd 'a' bet they wasn't *nothin'* he wouldn't 'a' done fer Mrs. Bridger. But big talk's cheap, and he was small potatoes, *you* bet, and few in the hill.

Wal, one after the other, them four fellers blacked they boots, wet they hair down as nice and shiny as Hairoil's, and went to see the widda. She ast 'em in, a-course, and was neighbourly; fed 'em, too, if it was nigh meal-time, and acted, gen'ally speakin', as sweet as pie.

But she treated 'em all *alike*. And they knowed it. *Consequently*, in order so's all of 'em would git a' even chanst, and so's they wouldn't be no gun-play account of one man tryin' to cut another out by goin' to see her twicet to the other man's oncet, the aforesaid boys fixed up a calendar. Sam got Monday, Curry, Wednesday, Dutch August, Friday, and Chub, Sunday afternoons. That tickled Chub. He owns a liv'ry-stable, y' savvy, and ev'ry week he hitched up a rig and took the widda and her kid fer a buggy ride.

And, Bergin? Wal, I'd took Macie's *advice* and stayed away from him. But—the stay-away plan hadn't worked worth a darn. The sheriff, he kept to his shack pretty steady. And one mornin', when I seen him at the post-office, he didn't have nothin' t' say to nobody, and looked sorta down on creation.

That fin'lly riled Mace. “What's the *matter* with him?” she says one day. “Why, havin' saw the widda, how can he *help* fallin' in love with her! She's the *nicest* little woman! And she's learned me a new crochet stitch.”

“Little gal,” I answers, “you' idear has been carried out faithful—and has gone fluey. Wal, let Cupid have a try. A-course, I was sit on pretty hard in that confab I had with him, but, all the same, I'll just happen 'round fer a little neighbourly call.”

His shack was over behind the town cooler, and stood by itself, kinda—a' ashes dump on one side of it and Sparks's hoss-corral on the other. It had one room, just high enough so's Bergin wouldn't crack his skull, and just wide enough so's when he laid down on his bunk he wouldn't kick out the side of the house. And they was a rusty stove with a dictionary toppin' it, and a saddle and a fryin'-pan on the bed, and a big sack of flour a-spillin' into a pair of his boots.

I put the fryin'-pan on the floor, and sit down. “Wal, Sheriff,” I begun (he had a skittle 'twixt his knees and was a-peelin' some spuds fer his dinner), “I ain't come t' sponge offen you. Me and Macie Sewell had our dinner down to Mrs. Bridger's t'-day.”

He let slip the potato he was peelin', and it rolled under the stove. "Yas?" he says; "that so?"

"And *such* a dinner as she give us!" I goes on. "Had a white oilcloth on the table,—white, with little blue vi'lets on it—and all her dishes is white and blue. She brung 'em from Buffalo. And we had fried chicken, and corn-dodgers, and prune somethin'-'r-other. Say! I—I s'pose *you* ain't been down."

"No,"—kinda wistful, and eyes on his peelin'—"no. How—how is she?"

"Aw, *fine!* The kid, he ast after you."

"Did he?" He looked up, awful tickled. Then, "He's a nice, little kid," he adds thoughtful.

"He *shore* is." I riz. "Sorry," I says, "but I got to mosey now. Promised Mrs. Bridger I'd take her some groceries down." I started out, all business. But I stopped at the door. "Reckon I'll have to make two trips of it—if I cain't git someone t' help me."

Say! it was plumb pitiful the way Bergin grabbed at the chanst. "Why, *I* don't mind takin' a stroll," he answers, gittin' some red. So he put down the spuds and begun to curry that cowlick of hisn.

First part of the way, he walked as spry as me. But, as we come closter to the widda's, he got to hangin' back. And when we reached a big pile of sand that was out in front of the house—he balked!

"Guess I won't go in," he says.

"O. K.," I answers. (No use to cross him, y' savvy, it'd only 'a' made him worse.)

When I knocked, and the widda opened the door, she seen him.

"Why, how d' you do!" she called out, lookin' mighty pleased. "Willie, dear, here's Mister Bergin."

"How d' do," says the sheriff.

Willie come nigh havin' a duck-fit, he was so happy. And in about two shakes of a lamb's tail, he was outen the house and a-climbin' the sheriff.

Inside, I says to Mrs. Bridger, "Them chickens of yourn come, ma'am. And Hairoil Johnson'll drive 'em down in a' hour 'r so. The most of 'em looked fat and sassy, but one 'r two has got the pip."

She didn't act like she'd heerd me. She was watchin' the sandpile.

“One ’r two has got the pip,” I repeats.

“What?–how’s that?” she ast.

“Don’t worry about you’ boy,” I says. “Bergin’ll look after him. Y’ know, Bergin is one of the whitest gents in Oklahomaw.”

“I ain’t a-worryin’,” answers the widda. “I know Mister Bergin is a fine man.” And she kept on lookin’ out.

“In this wild country,” I begun, voice ’way down to my spurs, “–this wild country, full of rattlesnakes and Injuns and tramps, ev’ry ranch needs a good man ’round it.”

She turned like lightnin’. “What you mean?” she ast, kinda short. (Reckon she thought *I* was tryin’ t’ spark her.)

“A man like Bergin,” I continues.

“Aw,” she says, plumb relieved.

And I left things that-a-way–t’ sprout.

Walkin’ up the track afterwards, I remarked, casual like, that they wasn’t *many* women nicer ’n Mrs. Bridger.

“They’s *one* thing I like about her,” says the sheriff, “–she’s got eyes like the kid.”

(Dang the kid!)

Wal, me and Macie and them four sparkers wasn’t the only folks that thought the widda was mighty nice. She’d made lots of friends at the section-house since she come. The section-boss’s wife said they was *nobody* like her, and so did all the greaser women at the tie-camp. She was so handy with a needle, and allus ready to cut out calico dingusses that the peon gals could sew up. When they’d have one of them everlastin’ fiestas of theirs, she’d make a big cake and a keg of lemonade, and pass it ’round. And when you *consider* that a ten-cent package of cigareets and a smile goes further with a Mexican than fifty plunks and a cuss, why, you can git some idear of how that hull outfit just *worshipped* her.

Wal, they got in and done her a *lot* of good turns. Put up a fine chicken-coop, the section-boss overseenin’ the job; and, one Sunday, cleaned out her cellar. *Think* of it! (Say! fer a man to appreciate that, he’s got to know what lazy critters greasers is.) Last of all, kinda to wind things up, the cholos went out into the mesquite and come back with a present of a nice black-and-white Poland China hawg.

Wal, she *was* tickled at that, and so was the kid. (Hairoil Johnson was shy a pig that week, but you bet *he* never let on!) The gang made a nice little pen, usin’

ties, and ev'ry day they packed over some feed in the shape of the camp leavin's. The widda was settled fine, had half a dozen hens a-settin' and some castor beans a-growin' in the low spots next her house, when things begun to come to a haid with the calendar gents. I got it straight from her that in just one solitary week, she collected four pop-the-questions!

She handed out exac'ly that many pairs of mittens—handed 'em out with such a sorry look in them kind eyes of hern, that the courtin' quartette got worse in love with her 'n ever. Anybody could a' seen *that* with one eye. They all begun shavin' twicet a week, most ev'ry one of 'em bought new things to wear, and—best sign of *any*—they stopped drinkin'! Ev'ry day 'r so, back they'd track to visit the widda.

She didn't like that fer a cent. Wasn't nary one of 'em that suited her, and just when the chickens 'r the cholo gals needed her, here was a Briggs City galoot a-crossin' the yard.

“Sorry,” she says to Macie, “but I'll have to give them gents they walkin'-papers. If I don't, I won't never git a lick done.”

“Bully fer you!” Mace answers. “It'll be good riddance of bad rubbish. They're too gally.” (Somethin' like that, anyhow.) “Learn 'em to act like they was civilised. But, say, Mrs. Bridger, you—you ain't a-goin' to give the rinky-dink to the Sheriff?”

“Mister Bergin,” answers the widda, “ain't bothered me none.” (Mace was shore they was tears in her eyes.)

“Aw—*haw!*” I says, when the little gal tole me. *I savvied.*

That same afternoon, whilst the widda was a-settin' on the shady side of the house, sewin' on carpet-rags, up come Sam Barnes. (It was Monday.)

“Mrs. Bridger,” he begun, “I'm a-goin' to ast you to think over what I said to you last week. I don't want to be haidstrong, but I'd like to git a 'yas' outen you.”

“Mister Barnes,” she says. “I'm feard I cain't say yas. I ain't thinkin' of marryin'. But if I was, it'd be to a man that's—that's big, and tall, and has blue eyes.” And she looked out at the sand-pile, and sighed.

“Wal,” says Sam, “I reckon I don't fit specifications.” And he hiked fer town.

He was plumb huffy when he tole me about it. “Fer a woman,” he says, “that's got to look after herself, and has a kid on her hands to boot, she's got more airs'n

a windmill.”

Next!

That was Chub.

Now, Chub, he knowed a heap about handlin’ a gun, and I reckon he’d pass as a liv’ry-stable keeper, but he didn’t know much about *women*. So, when he went down to ast the widda fer the second time, he put his foot in it by bein’ kinda short t’ little Willie.

“Say, kid,” he says, “you locate over in that rockin’-chair yonder. Young uns of you’ age should be saw and not heerd.”

Mrs. Bridger, she sit right up, and her eye-winkers just snapped. “Mister Flannagan,” she Says, “I’m feard you’re wastin’ you’ time a-callin’ here. If ever I marry again, it’s goin’ t’ be a man that’s fond of childern.”

Wal, ta-ta, Chub!

And, behind, there was the widda at the winda, all eyes fer that sand-pile.

We never knowed what she said to Dutchy’s brother, August. But he come back to town lookin’ madder’n a wet hen. “Huh!” he says, “I don’t vant her *nohow*. *She* couldn’t vork. She’s pretty fer *nice*, all right, but she’s *nichts* fer stoudt.”

When ole stingy Curry tried *his* luck over, he took his lead from Chub’s experience. Seems he put one arm ’round the kid, and then he said no man could kick about havin’ to adopt Willie, and he knowed that with Mrs. Bridger it was “love me, love my dawg.” Then he tacked on that the boy was a nice little feller, and likely didn’t eat much.

“And long’s I ain’t a-goin’ to marry you,” says the widda, “why, just think—you won’t have to feed Willie at all!”

But the next day we laughed on the other side of our face. I went down to Mrs. Bridger’s, the sheriff trailin’, (he balked half-way from the sand-pile to the door, this time, and sit down on a bucket t’ play he was Willie’s steam-injine), and I found that the little woman had been cryin’ turrible.

“What’s the matter?” I ast.

“Nothin’,” she says.

“Yas, they is. Didn’t you git a dun t’-day?”

“Wal,” she answers, blushin’, “I bought this place on tick. But,” (brave as the dickens, she was) “I’ll be able t’ pay up all right—what with my chickens and the

pig.”

I talked with her a good bit. Then me and the sheriff started back to town. (Had to go slow at first; Bergin’d helt the engineer on his knee till his foot was asleep.) On the way, I mentioned that dun.

“Curry,” says the sheriff. And he come nigh rippin’ up the railroad tracks.

He made fer Curry’s straight off. “What’s the little balance due on that Starvation Gap property?” he begun.

“What makes you ast?” says Curry, battin’ them sneaky little eyes of hisn.

“I’m *prepared* t’ settle it.”

“But it happens I didn’t sell to *you*. So, a-course, I cain’t take you’ money. Anyhow, I don’t think the widda is worryin’ much. She could git shet of that balance easy.” And he moseyed off.

She could git shet of it by marryin’ *him*, y’ savvy—the polecat!

The sheriff was boilin’. “Here, Cupid,” he says, “is two hunderd. Now, we’ll go down to Mrs. Bridger’s again, and you offer her as much as she wants.”

“Offer it you’self.”

“No, *you* do it, Cupid,—please. But don’t you tell her whose money it is.”

“I won’t. Here’s where we git up The Ranchers’ Loan Fund.”

I coaxed Bergin as far as the front step *this* time. Wasn’t that fine? But, say! Mrs. Bridger wouldn’t touch a cent of that money, no ma’am.

“If I was to take it as a loan,” she says, “I’d have interest to pay. So I’d be worse off ’n I am now. And I couldn’t take it in no other way. Thank y’, just the same. And how’s Miss Sewell t’-day?”

It wasn’t no use fer me to tell her that The Ranchers’ Loan Fund didn’t want no interest. She was as set as Rogers’s Butte.

During the next week ’r two, the sheriff and me dropped down to the widda’s frequent. I’d talk to her—about chicken-raisin’ mostly—whilst Bergin ’d play with the kid. One day I got him to come *as far as the door!* But I never got him no further. There he stuck, and ’d stand on the sill fer hours, lookin’ out at Willie—like a great, big, scairt, helpless calf.

At first the widda talked to him, pleasant and encouragin’. But when he just said, “Yas, ma’am,” and “No, ma’am,” and nothin’ else, she changed. I figger (’cause

women is right funny) that her pride was some hurt. What if he *was* bound up in the boy? Didn't he have no interest in *her*? It hurt her all the worse, mebbe, 'cause I was there, and seen how he acted. 'Fore long she begun to git plumb outen patience with him. And one day, when he was standin' gazin' out, she flew up.

"George Bergin," she says, "a door is somethin' else 'cept a place to scratch you back on." And she shut it—him outside, plumb squashed!

Wal, we'd did our best—both Mace and me—and fell down. But right here is where somethin' better'n just good luck seemed to take a-holt of things. In the first place, *considerin'* what come of it, it shore was *fortunate* that Pedro Garcia, one of them trashy section-gang cholos, was just a-passin' the house as she done that. He heerd the slam. He seen the look on Bergin's face, too. And he fixed up what was the matter in that crazy haid of hisn.

In the second place, the very *next* day, blamed if Curry didn't hunt Bergin up. "Sheriff," he begun, "I ain't been able to collect what's due me from Mrs. Bridger. She ain't doin' nothin' with the property, neither. So I call on you to put her off." And he helt out a paper.

Put her off! Say! You oughta saw Bergin's face!

"Curry," he says, "in Oklahomaw, a dis-possess notice agin a widda ain't worth the ink it's drawed with."

"Ain't it?" says Curry. "You mean you won't act. All right. If you won't, they's other folks that *will*."

"*Will* they," answers the sheriff, quiet. But they was a fightin' look in his eyes. "Curry, go slow. Don't fergit that the Gap property ain't worth such a hull lot."

The next thing, them cholos in the section-gang 'd heerd what Bergin was ordered to do. And, like a bunch of idjits, 'stead of gittin' down on Curry, who was *responsible*, they begun makin' all kinds of brags about what they'd do when next they seen the sheriff. And it looked to me like gun-play was a-comin'.

But not just yet. Fer the reason that the sheriff, without sayin' "I," "Yas," 'r "No" to nobody, all of a suddent *disappeared*.

"What in the dickens has struck him!" I says t' Mace.

"Just you wait," she answers. "It's got t' do with Mrs. B. He ain't down in a cellar *this* time."

Wal, he wasn't. But we was in the dark as much as the rest of the town, till one

evenin' when the section-boss called me to one side. He had somethin' t' tell me, he said. Could I keep a secret—cross my heart t' die? Yas. Wal, then—what d' you think it was? *The sheriff was camped right back of the widda's—on Rogers's Butte!*

“Pardner,” I says, “don't you cheep that to another soul. Bergin is up there t' keep Curry from puttin' the widda out.”

The section-boss begun to haw-haw. “It'd take a hull regiment of soldiers to put the widda out,” he says, “—with them greasers of mine so clost.”

“I'll go down that way on a kinda scout,” I says, and started off. When I got clost to the widda's,—about as far as from here to that hitchin'-post yonder—I seen a crowd of women and kids a-lookin' at somethin' behind the house. I walked up and stretched *my* neck. And there in that tie-pen was a' even dozen of new little pigs!

“Ma'am,” I says, “this *is* good luck!”

“Good luck?” repeats the widda. “I reckon it's somethin' more'n just good luck.” (Them's *exac'ly* her words—“Somethin' more'n just good luck.”)

“Wal,” I goes on, “oncet in a while, a feller's got to *admit* that somethin' better'n just or-d'nary good luck *does* git in a whack. Mebbe it'll be the case of a gezaba that ain't acted square; first thing you know, *his* hash is settled. Next time, it's *exac'ly* the *other* way 'round, and some nice lady 'r gent finds theyselves landed not a' inch from where they wanted to be. But neither case cain't be called just good *luck*, *no*, ma'am. Fer the reason that the contrary facts is plumb shoved in you' face.

“Now, take what happened to Burt Slade. Burt had a lot of potatoes ready to plant—about six sacks of 'em, I reckon. The ground was ready, and the sacks was in the field. Wal, that night, a blamed ornery thief come 'long and stole all them potatoes. (This was in Nebraska, mind y'. Took 'em fifty mile north and planted 'em clost to his house. So far, you might call it just *bad* luck. *But*—a wind come up, a *turrible* wind, and blowed all the dirt offen them potatoes; next, it lifted 'em and sent 'em a-kitin' through the windas of that thief's house—yas, ma'am, it took 'em in at the one side, and outen the other, breakin' ev'ry blamed pane of glass; then—I'm another if it ain't so!—it sailed 'em all that fifty mile back to Slade's and druv 'em into the ground that he'd fixed fer 'em. And when they sprouted, a little bit later on that spring, Slade seen *they'd been planted in rows!*

“They ain't no doubt about this story bein' *true*. In the first place, Slade ain't a

man that'd lie; in the second place, ev'rybody knows his potatoes was *stole*, and ev'rybody knows that, just the same, he had a powerful big crop that year; and, then, Slade can show you his field any time you happen to be in that part of Nebraska. And no man wants any better proof'n *that*."

"A-course, he don't," says the widda. "And I'd call that potato transaction plumb wonderful."

"It shore was."

She turned back to the hawgs. "I can almost see these little pigs grow," she says, "and I'm right fond of 'em a'ready. I—I hope nothin' bad'll happen to 'em. I'm a little nervous, though. 'Cause—have you noticed, Mister Lloyd?—*they's just thirteen pigs in that pen*."

"Aw, thirteen ain't never hurt nobody in Oklahomaw," I says. And I whistled, and knocked on wood.

"Anyhow, I'm happy," she goes on, "I'm better fixed than I been fer a coon's age."

"The eatin'-house 'll buy ev'ry one of these pigs at a good price," I says, leanin' on the pen till I was well nigh broke in two, "they bein' pen-fed, and not just *common* razor-backs. That'll mean fifty dollars—mebbe more. Why, it's like *findin' it!*"

"These and the chickens," she says, "ll pay that balance, and" (her voice broke, kinda, and she looked over to where pore little Willie was tryin' to play injine all by hisself) "without the help of *no* man."

I looked up at the Butte. Was that black speck the sheriff? And wasn't his heart a-bustin' fer her? Wal, it shore was a fool sittywaytion!

"The section-hands is turrible tickled about these pigs," *continues* Mrs. Bridger. "They come over this mornin' t' see how the fambly was doin', and they named the hull litter, beginnin' with Carmelita, and ending' with Polky Dot."

You couldn't 'a' blamed *nobody* fer bein' proud of them little pigs. They was smarter 'n the dickens, playin' 'round, and kickin' up they heels, and *squee-ee-eelin'*. All black and white they was, too, and favoured they maw strong. Ev'ry blamed one had a pink snoot and a kink in its tail, and reg'lar roolly buckshot eyes. And fat!—say, no josh, them little pigs was so fat they had double chins—just one chin right after another—from they noses plumb back to they hind laigs!

But you never can gamble on t'-morra. And the widda, countin' as she did on

them pigs, had to find that out. A-course, if she'd been a' Irish lady, she'd 'a' just natu'lly *took* to ownin' a bunch of hawgs, and she'd 'a' likely penned 'em closter to the house. Then nothin' would 'a' hurt 'em. Again, mebbe it *would*—if the hull thing that happened next was accidentally a-purpose. And I reckon that shore was the truth of it.

But I'm a-goin' too fast.

It was the mornin' after the Fourth of July. (That was why I was in town.) I was in the Arnaz bunk-house, pullin' on my coat, just afore daylight, when, all of a suddent, right over Rogers's Butte, somethin' popped. Here, acrosst the sky, went a red ball, big, and as bright as if it was on fire. As it come into sight, it had a tail of light a-hangin' to it. It dropped at the foot of the butte.

First off, I says, "More celebratin'." Next, I says, "Curry!"—and streaked it fer the widda's.

'Fore I was half-way, I heerd hollerin'—the scairt hollerin' of women and kids. Then I heerd the grumble of men's voices. I yelled myself, hopin' some of the boys 'd hear me, and foller. "Help! help!" I let out at the top of my lungs, and brung up in Mrs. Bridger's yard.

It was just comin' day, and I could see that section-gang all collected t'gether, some with picks, and the rest with heavy track tools. All the greaser women was there, too, howlin' like a pack of coyotes. Whilst Mrs. Bridger had the kid in her arms, and her face hid in his little dress.

"What's the matter?" I screeched—*had* t' screech t' git *heerd*.

The cholos turned towards me. (Say! You talk about mean faces!) "Diablo!" they says, shakin' them track tools.

Wal, it shore looked like the Ole Harry 'd done it! 'Cause right where the pig-pen used to was, I could see the top of a grea-a-at, whoppin' rock, half in and half outen the ground, and *smokin' hot*. Pretty nigh as big as a box-car, it was. Wal, as big as a wagon, *anyhow*. But neither hide 'r hair of them pigs!

I walked 'round that stone.

"My friend," I says to the section-boss, "the maw-pig made just thirteen. It's a proposition you cain't beat."

Them cholos was all quiet now, and actin' as keerful as if that rock was dynamite. Queer and shivery, they was, about it, and it kinda give me the creeps.

Next, they begun pointin' up to the top of the Butte!

I seen what was comin'. So I used my haid—quick, so's to stave off trouble. "Mebbe, boys," I says, lookin' the ground over some more, "—mebbe they was a cyclone last night to the north of here, and this blowed in from Kansas."

The section-boss walked 'round, studyin'. "I'm from Missoura," he says, "and it strikes *me* that this rock looks kinda familiar, like it was part iron. Now, mebbe they's been a thunderin' big explosion in the Ozark Mountains. But, Mrs. Bridger, as a native son of the ole State, I don't want to *advise* you to sue fer da—"

I heerd them cholos smackin' they lips. I looked where they was lookin', and here, a-comin' lickety-split, was the sheriff!

That section-boss was as good-natured a feller as ever lived, and never liked t' think bad of *no* man. But the minute he seen Bergin racin' down offen that Butte, he believed like the peons did. He turned t' me. "By George!" he says—just like that.

Wal, sir, that "By George" done it. Soon as the Mexicans heerd him speak out what *they* thought, they set up a Comanche yell, and, with the whites of they eyes showin' like a nigger's, they made towards the sheriff on the dead run.

He kept a-comin'. Most men, seein' a passel of locoed greasers makin' towards 'em with pickaxes, would 'a' turned and run, figgerin' that leg-bail was good enough fer *them*. But the sheriff, he wasn't scairt.

A second, and the Mexicans 'd made a surround. He pulled his gun. They jerked it outen his hand. He throwed 'em off.

I drawed *my* weapon.

Just then—"Sheriff! sheriff!" (It was the widda, one hand helt out towards him.)

A great idear come to me then. I put my best friend back into my pocket. "I won't interfere fer a while yet," I says to myself. "Mebbe this is where they'll be a show-down."

"Cupid," says Bergin, "what's the matter?"

I fit my way to him. "They think you throwed this rock, here," I answers.

"The low-down, ornery, lay-in-the-sun-and-snooze good-fer-nothin's is likely t' think 'most *any* ole thing," he says. "Pedro, let go my arm."

Just then, one of the cholos come runnin' up with a rope!

The section-boss seen things was gittin' pretty serious. He begun to wrastle with

the feller that had the rope. Next, all the women and kids set up another howlin', Mrs. Bridger cryin' the worst. But I wasn't ready to play my last card. I stepped out in front of the gang and helt up my hand.

"Boys," I says; "*boys! Give* the man a chanst t' talk. Why, this rock ain't like the rocks on the Butte."

"You blamed idjits!" yells Bergin. "Use you' haid! How could *I 'a'* hefted the darned thing?"

"Aw, he *couldn't 'a'* done it!" (This from the widda, mind y',—hands t'gether, and comin' clost.)

"Thank y', little woman," says the sheriff.

(Say! that was *better*.)

"He pulled his gun, they jerked it outen his hand"

But the cholos wasn't a-foolin'—they was in dead earnest. Next minute, part of 'em grabbed Bergin, got that rope 'round him, and begun draggin' him towards a telegraph pole.

I was some anxious, but I knowed enough to hole back a while more.

"Aw, boys," begged the widda, droppin' Willie and runnin' 'longside, "don't hurt him! *don't!* What does the pigs matter?"

"I'll discharge ev'ry one of you," says the section-boss.

"Boys," I begun again, "*why* should this gent want to harm this lady. Why, I can tell you—"

Pedro Garcia stuck his black fist into my face. "He lof her," he says, "and she say no. So he iss revenge hisself." (Say! the grammar they use is plumb fierce.)

"He iss revenge hisself!" yells the rest of the bunch. Then they all looked at the widda.

"Boys," she sobs, "I ain't *never* refused him. Fer a good reason—he ain't never ast me."

(The cholos, they just growled.)

"*What?*" I ast, turnin' on Bergin like I was hoppin'. "You love her, and yet you ain't never ast her to marry you? Wal, you blamed bottle of ketchup, you *oughta* die!"

“How *could* I ast her?” begun the sheriff. “She plumb hates the sight of me.”

“I don’t! I don’t!” sobs the widda. “Mister Lloyd knows that ain’t so. Willie and me, we—we—”

“Y’ see?” I turned to the Mexicans. “He loves her; she loves him. We’re a-goin’ to have a weddin’, not a hangin’.”

“The stone—he iss revenge,” says Pedro.

“The stone,” I answers, “come outen the sky. It’s a mete’rite.”

“I felt it hit!” cries the widda.

Wal, you couldn’t expect a Mexican t’ swaller *that*. So we’d no more’n got the words outen our mouths when they begun to dance ’round Bergin again with the halter.

Wal, how do you think it come out?

Mebbe you figger that Mrs. Bridger drewed a knife and sa-a-aved him, ’r I pulled my gun and stood there, tellin’ ’em they ’d only hang the sheriff over my dead body. But that ain’t the way it happened. No, ma’am. *This* is how:

’Round the bend from towards Albuquerque come the pay-car. Now, the pay-car, she stops just one minute fer ev’ry section-hand, and them section-hands was compelled to git into line and be quick about it, ’r not git they money. So they didn’t have no spare time. They let go of Bergin’s rope and run—the section-boss leadin’.

The sheriff, he slung the rope to one side—and the widda goes into his arms. “Little woman,” he says, lookin’ down at her, “I’ll—I’ll be a good father to the boy.” Then he kissed her.

(Wal, that’s about all you could reas’nably expect from *Bergin*.)

Next thing, he borraed my gun and just kinda happened over towards the pay-car. And when a cholo got his time and left the line, he showed him the way he was to go. And you bet he *minded!*

Wal, things come out *fine*. A big museum in Noo York bought that rock (If you don’t believe it, just go to that museum and you’ll see it a-settin’ out in front—big as life.) A-course, Mrs. Bridger got a nice little pile of money fer it, and paid Curry the balance she owed him. Then, the sheriff got Mrs. Bridger!

And the bunch that didn’t git her? Wal, the bunch that didn’t git her just natu’lly got *left!*

CHAPTER FIVE

THINGS GIT STARTED WRONG

Up to the day of the sheriff's weddin', I reckon I was about the happiest feller that's ever been in these parts. Gee! but I was in high spirits! It'd be Macie's and my turn next, I figgered, and if the ole man didn't like it, he could just natu'lly lump it. So when I walked through Briggs, why, I hit both sides of the street, exac'ly as if I was three sheets in the wind.

But—this was one time when you' friend Cupid was just a little bit too previous. And I want to say right here that *no* feller needs to think he's the hull shootin'-match with a gal, and has the right-a-way, like a wild-cat ingine on a' open track, just 'cause she's ast him to write in her autograph-album. It don't mean such a blamed lot, neither, if his picture is stuck 'longside of hern on top of the organ. Them signs is encouragin', a-course; but he'd best take his coat off and *git to work*. Even when she's give all the others the G. B., and has gone to church with him about forty Sunday evenin's, hand runnin', and has allus saved him the grand march and the last waltz at the Fireman's Ball, and mebbe six 'r seven others bysides, why, even *then* it's a toss-up. Yas, ma'am. It took hard knocks t' learn me that they's nothin' dead certain short of the parson's "amen."

Y' see, you can plug a' Injun, and kick a dawg, and take a club to a mule; but when it's a gal, and a feller thinks a turrible lot of her, and she's so all-fired skittish he cain't manage her, and so eludin' he cain't find her no two times in the same place, *what's he goin' to do?* Wal, they ain't no reg'lar way of proceedin'—ev'ry man has got to blaze his own trail.

But I couldn't, and that was the hull trouble. I know now that when it come to dealin' with Mace, I shore was a darned softy. That little Muggins could twist me right 'round her finger—and me not know it! One minute, she'd pallaver me fer further orders, whilst I'd look into them sweet eyes of hern till I was plumb dizzy; the next, she'd be cuttin' up some dido 'r other and leadin' me a' awful chase.

Then, mebbe, I'd git sore at her, and think mighty serious about shakin' the Bar Y dust offen my boots fer good. "Cupid," I'd say to myself, "git you' duds t'gether, and do you' blankets up in you' poncho."

Just about then, here she come lopin' home from town, her hoss cuttin' up like Sam Hill, and her a-settin' so straight and cute. She'd look towards the bunk-house, see me, motion me over with her quirt, and—wal, a-course, I'd go.

I made my *first* big beefsteak at the very beginnin'. Somehow 'r other, right from the minute we had our confidential talk t'gether back of Silverstein's, that last night of the Medicine Show. I got it into my fool haid that I as good as had her, and that all they was left to be did was t' git 'round the ole man. Wal, this idear worked fine as long as we was so busy with Bergin's courtin'. But when the sheriff was hitched, and me and the little gal got a recess, my! my! but a heap of things begun t' happen!

They started off like this: The parson wanted money fer t' buy some hymn-books with. So he planned a' ice-cream social and entertainment, and ast Mace to go down on the *program* fer a song. She was willin'; I was, *too*. So far, ev'ry-thin' smooth as glare-ice.

But fer a week afore that social, they was a turrible smell of gasoline outside the sittin'-room of the Bar Y ranch-house. That's 'cause Doctor Bugs come out ev'ry day—to fetch a Goldstone woman from the up-train. (That blamed sulky of hisn 'd been stuck t'gether with flour paste by now, y' savvy, and was in apple-pie order.) After the woman 'd git to the ranch-house, why, the organ 'd strike up. Then you could hear Macie's voice—doin', "*do, ray, me.*" Next, she'd break loose a-singin'. And pretty soon the doc and the woman 'd go.

Wal, I didn't like it. Y' see, I've allus noticed that if a city feller puts hisself out fer you a hull lot, he expects you t' give him a drink, 'r vote fer him, 'r loan him some money. And why was Bugsey botherin' t' make so many trips to the Bar Y? *I* knowed what it was. It was just like Hairoil 'd said—he wanted my Macie.

One night, I says to her, "What's that Goldstone woman doin' out here so much, honey?"

"Givin' me music lessons," she answers.

"I know," I says. "But you don't need no lessons. You sing good enough t' suit me right now."

"Wal, I don't sing good enough t' suit myself. And bein' as I'm on that *program*—"

"Wal, just the same," I cut in, "I don't like that Simpson hangin' 'round here."

"Alec," she come back, stiffenin' right up, "it's my place to say who comes into this ranch-house, and who don't."

“But, look a-here! Folks ’ll think you like him better’n you do me.”

“Aw, that’s crazy.”

“It ain’t. And I won’t have him ’round.”

Then, she got *turrible polite*. “I’m sorry, Mister Lloyd,” she says, “but I’m a-goin’ t’ take my lessons.”

Wal, the long and short of it is, she did—right up t’ the very day of the social.

“All right,” I says to myself; “but just wait till this shindig is over.” And when Mace and her paw started fer town that evenin’, I saddled up my bronc and follered ’em.

Simpson was kinda in charge of that social. He got up and made a’ openin’ speech, sayin’ they was lots of ice-cream and cake fer sale, and he hoped we’d all shell out good. Then, he begun t’ read off the *program*.

“We have with us t’night,” he says, “one of the finest and best trained voices in this hull United States—a voice that I wouldn’t be surprised if it ’d be celebrated some day.”

I looked over at Mace. She was gittin’ pink. Did he mean her?

“And,” Simpson goes on, “the young lady that owns it is a-goin’ t’ give us the first number.” And he bowed—Shore enough!

Wal, she sung. It was somethin’ about poppies, and it was awful sad, and had love in it. I liked it pretty nigh as good as The Mohawk Vale. But the ole man, he didn’t. And when she was done, and settin’ next him again, he said out loud, so’s a lot of people heerd him, “I’m not stuck on havin’ you singin’ ’round ’fore ev’ry-body. And that Noo York Doc is too blamed fresh.”

“Paw!” she says, like she was ashamed of him.

“I *mean* it,” he says, and jerked his haid to one side.

Wal, y’ know, Mace got her temper offen him, and never handed it back. So all durin’ the social, they had it—up and down. I couldn’t ketch all what they said—only little bits, now and then. “Cheek,” I heard the boss say oncet, and Mace come back with somethin’ about not bein’ “a baby.”

Afterwards, when the ole man was out gittin’ the team, she come over t’ me, lookin’ awful appealin’. “Alec,” she says, like she expected I’d shore sympathise with her, “did you hear what paw said? Wasn’t it mean of him?”

I looked down at my boots. Then, I looked straight at her. “Mace,” I says, “he’s

right. Mebbe you'll git mad at me, too, fer sayin' it. But that Simpson's tryin' t' cut me out—and so he's givin' you all this taffy about your voice."

"Taffy!" she says, fallin' back a step. "Then you didn't *like my singin'*."

"Why, yas, I did," I answers, follerin' along after her. "I thought it was *fine*."

But she only shook her haid—like she was hurt—and clumb into the buckboard.

I worried a good deal that night. The more I turned over what Simpson 'd said, the more I wondered if I knowed all they was to his game. What was he drivin' at with that "celebrated" business? Then, too, it wouldn't do Mace no good t' be puffed up so much. She'd been 'lected the prettiest gal. Now she'd been tole she had a way-up voice. 'Fore long, she'd git the big haid.

"Wal, I'll put a quietus on it," I says. And, next mornin', when I seen her, I opened up like this: "Honey, I reckon we've waited just about long enough. So we git married Sunday week."

"That's too soon," she answers. "We got t' git paw on our side. And I ain't got no new clothes."

"We'll splice first and ast him about it afterwards. And when you're Mrs. Alec, I'll git you all the clothes you want." (Here's where I clean fergot the *advice* she give me that time in the sheriff's case: "In love affairs," was what she said, "don't never try t' drive *nobody*.")

"But, Alec,—” she begun.

"Sunday week, Mace," I says. "We'll talk about it t'-night."

But that night Monkey Mike come nigh blowin' his lungs out; and I waited under the cottonwoods till I was asleep standin'—and no Macie.

Wasn't it cal'lated t' make any man lose his temper? Wal, I lost mine. And when we went in town to a party, a night 'r two afterwards, the hull business come to a haid.

I was plumb sorry about the blamed mix-up. But *no* feller wants t' see his gal dance with a kettle-faced greaser. I knowed she was goin' to fer the reason that I seen Mexic go over her way, showin' his teeth like a badger and lettin' his cigareet singe the hair on his dirty shaps—shaps, mind y', at a school-house dance! Then I seen her nod.

Our polka come next. And when we was about half done, I says, "They's lemonade outside, honey. Let's git a swig." But outside I didn't talk no

lemonade. “Did Mexic ast you to dance with him?” I begun.

“Wal, he’s one of our boys,” she answers; “and I’m going to give him a schottische.”

“No, you *ain’t*,” I come back. “I won’t stand fer it.”

“Yas, I *am*, Alec Lloyd,”—she spoke determined,—“and please don’t try to boss me.”

I shut up and walked in again. Mexic was talkin’ to the school-ma’am—aw, he’s got *gall!* I shassayed up and took him a little one side. “Mexic,” I says, soft as hair on a cotton-tail, “it’s gittin’ on towards mornin’ and, natu’lly, Macie Sewell ain’t feelin’ just rested; so I wouldn’t insist on that schottische, if I was you.”

“Why?” he ast.

“I tole you why,” I says; “but I’ll give you another reason: You’ boots is too tight.”

We fussed a little then. Didn’t amount to much, though, ’cause neither of us had a gun. (Y’ see, us punchers don’t pack guns no more ’less we’re out ridin’ herd and want t’ pick off a coyote; ’r ’less we’ve had a little trouble and ’re lookin’ fer some one.) But I managed to change that greaser’s countenance consider’ble, and he bit a chunk outen my hand. Then the boys pulled us separate.

They was all dead agin me when I tole ’em what was the matter. They said the other gals danced with Mexic, and bein’ Macie was the Bar Y gal, she couldn’t give him the go-by if she took the rest of the outfit fer pardners.

Just the same, I made up my mind she wouldn’t dance with that *greaser*. And I says to myself, “This is where you show you’re a-goin’ to run the Lloyd house. She’ll like you all the better if you git the upper hand.” So when I got her coaxed outside again, I led her to where my bronc was tied. She liked the little hoss, and whilst we was chinnin’, I put her into the saddle. Next minute, I was on behind her, and the bronc was makin’ quick tracks fer home.

Wal, sir, she was madder’n a hen in a thunder-shower. She tried to pull in the bronc; she twisted and scolted and cried. Tole me she hated me like arsenic.

“Alec Lloyd,” she says, “after t’night, I’ll never, never speak to you again!”

When we rode up to the corral, I lifted her down, and she went tearin’ away to the house. The ole man heerd her comin’, and thought she was singin’. He slung open the door on the porch.

“Aw, give that calf more rope!” he calls out.

Say! she went by him like a streak of lightnin’, almost knockin’ him down. And the door slammed so hard you could ’a’ heerd it plumb t’ Galveston.

I hung ’round the corral fer as much as half a’ hour, listenin’ to the pow-wow goin’ on at the house. But nobody seemed to be a-hollerin’ fer me t’ come in, so I made fer the straw. “Aw, wal,” I says to myself, “her dander ’ll cool off t’-morra.”

But the next day, she passed me by without speakin’. And I, like a sap-head, didn’t speak neither. I was on my high hoss,—wouldn’t speak till *she* did. So off I had t’ go to Hasty Creek fer three days—and no good-bye t’ the little gal.

I got back late one afternoon. At the bunk-house, I noticed a change in the boys. They all seemed just about t’ bust over somethin’—not laughin’, y’ savvy, but anxious, kinda, and achin’ to tell news.

Fin’lly, I went over to Hairoil. “Pardner,” I says, “spit it out.”

He looked up. “Cupid,” he says, “us fellers don’t like t’ git you stirred up, but we think it’s about time someone oughta speak—and put you next.”

“Next about what?” I ast. The way he said it give me a kinda start.

“We’ve saw how things was a-goin’, but we didn’t say nothin’ to you ’cause it wasn’t none of our funeral. Quite a spell back, folks begun to talk about how crazy Macie Sewell was gittin’ to be on the singin’ question. It leaked out that she’d been tole she had a A1 voice—”

“It ain’t no lie, neither.”

“And that her warblin’ come pretty clost to bein’ as good as Melba’s.”

“It’s a heap *better* ’n Melba’s.”

“Also”—Hairoil fidgited some—“you know, a-course, that she’s been tackin’ up photographs of op’ra singers and actresses in her room—”

“Wal, what’s the harm?”

“And—and practicin’ bows in front of a glass.”

I begun t’ see what he was drivin’ at.

“And whilst you was away, she had a talk with the station-agent—about rates East.”

“Hairoil! You don’t mean it!” I says. I tell y’, it was just like a red-hot iron ’d

been stuck down my wind-pipe and was a-burnin' the lower end offen my breast-bone!

"I'm sorry, ole man." He reached out a hand. "But we thought you oughta know." And then he left me.

So *that* was it! And she'd been keepin' me in the dark about it all—whilst ev'ry fence post from the Bar Y t' Briggs knowed what was happenin'! Wal, I was mad clean *through*.

Then I begun t' see that I'd been a blamed fool. A fine, high-strung gal!—and I'd been orderin' her 'round like I owned her! And I'd gone away on that ride without tryin' t' make up. Wal, I'd *druv* her to it.

I started fer the house.

As I come clost, acrosst the curtains, back'ards and for'ards, back'ards and for'ards, I could see her shadda pass. But when I rapped, she pulled up; then, she opened the door.

"Honey," I says, "can I come in?"

Her eyes was red; she'd been cryin'. But, aw! she was just as nice and sweet as she could be. "Yas, Alec, come in," she says.

"Little gal," I begun, "I want t' tell you I done wrong to kick about that greaser, yas, I did. And fetchin' you home that-a-way wasn't right."

"Never mind—I wanted t' come anyhow."

"Thank y' fer bein' so kind. And I ain't never goin' to try to run you no more."

"I'm glad of that No gal likes t' be bossed."

"Just give me another chanst. Just fergive me this oncet."

She smiled, her eyes shinin' with tears. "I do," she says; "Alec, I do."

The next second, I had her helt clost in my arms, and her pretty haid was agin my breast. Aw, it was like them first days once more. And all the hurt went of a suddent, and the air cleared kinda—as if a storm'd just passed. My little gal!

Pretty soon, (I was settin' on the organ-stool, and she was standin' in front of me, me holdin' her hands) I says, "They *is* one thing—now that I've tole you I was wrong—they *is just* one thing I'm goin' to ast you t' do as a favour. If you do it, things 'll go smooth with us from now on. It's this, little gal: Cut out that Doctor Bugs."

“I know how you don’t like him,” she answers; “and you’re right. ’Cause he shore played you a low-down trick at that Medicine Show. But, Alec, he brings my music-teacher.”

“Wal, honey, what you *want* the teacher fer?”

She stopped, and up went that pert, little haid. “You recollect what Doctor Simpson said about my voice that night at the social?” she begun. “This teacher says *the same thing*.”

Like a flash, I recalled what *Hairoil* ’d tole me. “Mace,” I says, “I want t’ ast you about that. A-course, I know it ain’t so. But Hairoil says you got pictures of actresses and singers tacked up in you’ room—just one ’r two.”

“Yas,” she answers; “that’s straight. What about it?”

“It’s all right, I guess. But the ole son-of-a-gun got the idear, kinda, that you was thinkin’ some of—of the East.”

“Alec,” she says, frank as could be, “yesterday Doctor Simpson got a letter from Noo York. He’d writ a big teacher there, inquiren’ if I had a chanst t’ git into op’ra—*grand* op’ra—and the teacher says yas.”

I couldn’t answer nothin’. I just sit there, knocked plumb silly, almost, and looked at a big rose in the carpet. *Noo York!*

She brung her hands t’gether. “Why not?” she answers. “It’ll give me the chanst I want. If I’m a success, you could come on too, Alec. Then we’d marry, and you could go along with me as my manager.”

I looked at her. I was hurt—hurt plumb t’ the quick, and a little mad, too. “I see myself!” I says. “Travel along with you’ poodle. Huh! And you wearin’ circus clothes like that Miss Marvellous Murray, and lettin’ some feller kiss you in the play. Macie,”—and I meant what I said—“you can just put the hull thing right to one side. I—won’t—*have*—it!”

She set her lips tight, and her face got a deep red.

“So *this* is the way you keep you’ word!” she says. “A minute ago, you said you wasn’t goin’ t’ try to run me no more. Wal,—you wasn’t in earnest. I can see that. ’Cause here’s the same thing over again.”

The door into the ole man’s bedroom opened then, and he come walkin’ out. “You two make a thunderin’ lot of noise,” he begun. “What in the dickens is the matter?”

Mace turned to him, face still a-blazin'. "Alec's allus tryin' t' run me," she answers, "and I'm gittin' plumb tired of it."

Sewell's mouth come open. "Run you," he says. "Wal, some while back he done all the runnin' he's ever a-goin' t' do in *this* house. And he don't do no more of it. By what right is he a-interferin' now?"

I got to my feet. "*This* right, boss:" I says, "I love Macie."

He begun to kinda swell—gradual. And if a look could 'a' kilt me, I'd 'a' keeled over that second.

"You—love—Macie!" he says slow. "Wal , I'll be darned if you haven't got *cheek!*"

"Sorry you look at it that way, boss."

"And so you got the idear into that peanut haid of yourn"—he was sarcastic now—"that you could marry my gal! Honest, I ain't met a bigger idjit 'n you in ten years."

"No man but Mace's paw could say that t' me safe."

"Why," he goes on, "you could just about be President of the United States as easy as you could be the husband of this gal. M' son, I think I tole you on one occasion that you'd play Cupid just oncet too many."

"That's what you did."

"This is *it*. And, also, I tole you that the smarty who can allus bring other folks t'gether never can hitch hisself."

"You got a good mem'ry, Sewell."

Mace broke in then—feard they'd be trouble, I reckon. "Please let's cut this short," she says. "The only thing I want Alec to remember is that I ain't a-goin' t' be bossed by *no* man."

Sewell patted her on the shoulder. "That's my gal a-talkin'!" he says. "Bully fer you!"

"All right, Mace," I says, "a-all *right*." And I took up my Stetson.

The ole man dropped into a chair and begun t' laugh. (Could laugh now, thinkin' it was all up 'twixt Mace and me.) "Haw! haw! haw!" he started off, slappin' one knee. "Mister Cupid cain't do nothin' fer hisself!" Then he laid back and just *hollered*, slingin' out his laig with ev'ry cackle; and pawin' the air fin'ly, he got so short-winded. "Aw, lawdy!" he yelled; "aw—I'll *bust*. Mister *Cupid!* *Whew!*"

I got hot. “You found a he-he’s aig in a haw-haw’s nest,” I begun. “Wal, I’ll say back to you what you oncet said to me: *Just wait.*” Then I faced Macie. “All right, little gal,” I says to her, “I s’pose you know best. Pack you’ duds and go East—and sing on the stage in Noo York.”

The ole man ’d stopped laughin’ t’ listen. Now he sit up straight, a hand on each arm of the chair, knees spread, mouth wider open ’n ever, eyes plumb crossed. “Go East!” he repeats, “—sing!—stage!—Noo York!”

Mace showed her sand, all right. “Yas,” she answers; “you got it *exac’ly* right, paw—Noo York.”

He riz up, face as white as anythin’ so sunbaked can look. “Git that crazy idear outen you’ brain this *minute!*” he begun. “I won’t allow you t’ stir a *step!* The stage! Lawd a-mighty! Why, *you* ain’t got no voice fer the stage. You can only squawk.”

It was mighty pretty t’ see ’em—father and daughter—standin’ out agin each other. Alike in temper as two peas, y’ savvy. And I knowed somethin’ was shore goin’ to pop.

“Squawk!” repeats Mace. (*That was the finishin’ touch.*) “I’ll just show you! Some day when my voice’s made me famous, you’ll be sorry fer that. And you, too, Alec Lloyd, if you *do* think my voice is all taffy. I’ll show you *both!*”

“Wal,” Sewell come back, “you don’t use none of *my* money fer t’ make you’ show.” He was pretty nigh screechin’.

“Wait till I *ast* you fer it,” she says, pert haid up again. “*Keep* you’ money. I can earn my own. *I* ain’t scairt of work.”

And just like she was, in the little, white dress she used t’ meet me in—she up and walked out!

Now, it was the ole man’s turn t’ walk the floor. “Noo York!” he begun, his eyes dartin’ fire. “Did y’ ever *hear* such a blamed fool proposition! Doc Simpson is *responsible* fer that.”

“It’s been goin’ on fer quite a spell,” I says. “But I didn’t know how far till just afore you come in. Simpson, a-course, is the man.”

That second, *clickety–clickety–clickety–click!*—a hoss was a-passin’ the house on the dead run. We both looked. It was that bald-faced bronc of Macie’s, makin’ fer the gate like a streak of lightnin’. And the little gal was in the saddle.

“She’s goin’, boss,” I says. (The bald-face was haided towards Briggs.)

“Let her go,” says Sewell. “Let her ride off her mad.”

“Boss,” I says, “I’m t’ blame fer this kick-up. Yas, I am.”

And I begun t’ walk the floor.

“Wal, no use bellyachin’ about it,” he answers. “But you’re allus a-stickin’ in that lip of yourn. And—you’ll recall what I oncet said concernin’ the feller that sticks in his lip.” (I could see it made him feel better t’ think he had the bulge on me.)

“She won’t come back,” I goes on. (I felt pretty bad, I can tell y’.) “No, boss, she won’t. I know that gal better’n you do. She’s gone t’ Briggs, and she’ll stay.”

“She’ll be back in a’ hour. Rose cain’t keep her, and—”

But I was outen the room and makin’ fer the bunk-house. When I got there, I begun t’ change my clothes.

Hairoil was inside. (He’d been a-listenin’ to the rumpus, likely.) “Don’t go off half-cocked,” he says to me.

“Cupid’s drunk,” says Monkey Mike. “Somebody’s hit him with a bar-towel.”

But I knowed what I was a-goin’ to do. Two wags of a dawg’s tail, and I was in the house again, facin’ the ole man. “Sewell,” I says, “I want my time.”

“Where you goin’, Cupid?” he ast, reachin’ into his britches-pocket.

I took my little forty dollars and run it into my buckskin sack. “I’m a-goin’ into Briggs,” I says, “t’ see if I can talk some sense into that gal’s haid.”

The ole man give a kinda sour laugh. “Mebbe you think you can bring her home on hossback again,” he says. “Wal, just remember, if she turns loose one of her tantrums, that you poured out this drench you’self. It’s like that there feller in Kansas.” And he give that laugh of hisn again. “Ever heerd about him?”

“No,” I says; “no, what about you’ Kansas feller?”

“Wal,”—the boss pulled out a plug of t’bacca,—“he bought a house and lot fer five hunderd dollars. The lot was guaranteed to raise anythin’, and the house was painted the prettiest kind of a green. Natu’lly, he thought he owned ’em. Wal, things went smooth till one night when he was away from home. Then a blamed cyclone come along. Shore enough, that lot of hisn could raise. It raised plumb into the air, house and all, and the hull business blowed into the neighbourin’ State!

“‘What goes up must come down,’ says the feller. And knowin’ which way that

cyclone travelled, he started in the same *direction*, hotfoot. He goes and goes. Fin'lly he comes to a ranch where they was a new barn goin' up. It was a pinto proposition. Part of it wasn't painted, and some of it was green. He stopped to demand portions of his late residence.

"The man he spoke to quit drivin' nails just long enough to answer. 'When you Kansas folks git up one of them baby cyclones of yourn,' he says, 'fer Heaven's sake have sand enough to accept the hand-out it gives y'.'"

"I savvy what you mean," I says to the ole man, "but you fergit that in this case the moccasin don't fit. Another man's behind this, boss. The little gal has ketched singin'-bugs. And when she gits enough cash—"

"How can *she* git cash?"

"The eatin'-house is short of, help, Sewell. She can git a job easy-passin' fancy Mulligan to the pilgrims that go through."

Say! that knocked all the sarcastic laughin' outen him. A' awful anxious look come into his face. "Why-why, Cupid," he begun. "You don't reckon she'd go do that!"

Just then, *Clickety-clickety-clickety-click* a hoss was comin' along the road. We both got to a winda. It was that bald-faced bronc of Macie's again, haid down and tail out. But the bridle-reins was caught 'round the pommel t' keep 'em from gittin' under foot, and the little gal's saddle—was empty!

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT A LUNGEE DONE

*“Sweet is the vale where the Mohawk gently glides
On its fair, windin’ way to the sea—”*

It was Macie Sewell singin’. Ole Number 201 ’d just pulled outen Briggs City, haided southwest with her freight of tenderfeet, and with Engineer Dave Reynolds stickin’ in his spurs to make up lost time. The passengers ’d had twenty-five minutes fer a good grubbin’-up at the eatin’-house, and now the little gal was help-in’ the balance of the Harvey bunch to clear off the lunch-counter. Whilst she worked, she was chirpin’ away like she’d plumb bust her throat.

I was outside, settin’ on a truck with Up-State. He was watchin’ acrosst the rails, straight afore him, and listenin’, and I could see he was swallerin’ some, and his eyes looked kinda like he’d been ridin’ agin the wind. When I shifted my position, he turned the other way quick, and coughed—that pore little gone-in cough of hisn.

Wal, I felt pretty bad myself; and I seen somethin’ turrible was wrong with Up-State—I couldn’t just make out what. Pretty soon, I put my hand on his arm, and I says, “I don’t want t’ worm anythin’ outen you, ole man; I just want t’ say I’m you’ friend.”

“Cupid,” he whispers back, “it’s The Mohawk Vale.”

(He allus whispered, y’ savvy; couldn’t talk out loud no more, bein’ so turrible shy on lung.)

“Is that a bony fido place?” I ast, “’r just made up a-purpose fer the song?”

“It’s *my* country,” he whispers, slow and husky, and begun gazin’ acrosst to the mesquite again. “And, Cupid, it’s a *beautiful* country!”

“I reckon,” I says. “It’s likely got Oklahomaw skinned t’ death.”

Up-State, he didn’t answer that—too *polite*. Aw, he was a gent, too, same as the parson.

Minute ’r so, Macie struck up again—

*“And dearer by far than all charms on earth byside,
Is that bright, rollin’ river to me.”*

Up-State lent over, elbows on his knees, face in his hands, and begun tremblin’—Why, y’ know, even a *hoss* ’ll git homesick. Now, I brung a flea-bitten mare from down on the lower Cimarron oncet, and blamed if that little son-of-a-gun didn’t hoof it all the way back, straighter ’n a string! Yas, ma’am. And so, a-course, it’s natu’al fer a *man*. Wal, I ketched on to how things was with Up-State, and I moseyed.

I was at the deepot pretty frequent them days—waitin’. Macie hadn’t talked to me none yet, and mebbe she wouldn’t. But I was on hand in case the notion ’d strike her.

Her hangin’ out agin me and her paw tickled them eatin’-house Mamies turrible. They thought her idear of earnin’ her own money, and then goin’ East to be a’ op’ra singer, was just *grand*.

But the rest of the town felt diff’reent. And behind my back all the women folks and the boys that knowed me was sayin’ it was a darned shame. They figgered that a gal gone loco on the stage proposition wouldn’t make *no* kind of a wife fer a cow-punch. “Would *she* camp down in Oklahomaw,” they says, “and cook three meals a day, and wash out blue shirts, when she’s set on gittin’ up afore a passel of highflyers and yelpin’ ‘Marguerite’? *Nixey*.”

Next thing, one day at Silverstein’s, here come the parson to me, lookin’ worried. “Cupid,” he says, “git on the good side of that gal as quick as ever you can—and marry her. The stage is a’ *awful* place fer a decent gal. Keep her offen it if you love her soul. And if I can help, just whistle.”

I said thank y’, but I was feard marryin’ was a long way off.

“But, Alec,” goes on the parson, “that Simpson has gone back t’ Noo York—”

“*What?*”

“Yas. He put all his doctor truck into his gasoline wagon last night and choo-chooed outen town. If *he*’s there, and *she* goes, wal,—I don’t like the looks of it.”

“I don’t neither, parson. He’s crooked as a cow-path, that feller. Have you tole her paw?”

“No, but I will,” says the parson.

I went over to the deepot again. Havin’ done a little thinkin’, I wasn’t so scairt

about Simpson by now. 'Cause why? Wal, y' see, I knowed

Mace didn't have no money; ole Sewell wouldn't give her none; and she wasn't the kind of a gal t' borra. So it was likely she'd be in Briggs fer quite a spell.

I found Up-State settin' outside the eatin'-house. I sit down byside him. Allus, them days, whenever I come in sight of the station, he was a-hangin' 'round, y' savvy. He'd be on a truck, say, 'r mebbe on the edge of the platform. If it was all quiet inside at the lunch-counter, he'd be watchin' the mesquite, and sorta swingin' his shoes. But if Macie was singin', he'd be all scrooched over with his face covered up—and pretty quiet.

When Macie sung, it was The Mohawk Vale ev'ry time. Now, that seemed funny, bein' she was mad at me and that was my fav'rite song. Then, it didn't seem so funny. One of the eatin'-house gals tole me, confidential, that Up-State had lots of little chins with Macie acrosst the lunch-counter, and that The Mohawk Vale was "by request."

I didn't keer. Let Up-State talk to her as much as he wanted to. *He* couldn't make me jealous—not on you' life! I wasn't the finest lookin' man in Oklahomaw, and I wasn't on right good terms with Mace. But Up-State—wal, Up-State was pretty clost t' crossin' the Big Divide.

All this time not a word 'd passed 'twixt Macie and her paw. The ole man was too stiff-necked t' give in and go to her. (He was figgerin' that she'd git tired and come home.) And Macie, she wasn't tired a blamed bit, and she was too stiff-necked t' give in and go t' Sewell.

Wal, when the boss heerd about Up-State and Mace, you never *seen* a man so sore. He said Up-State was aigin' her on, and no white man 'd do *that*.

Y' see, he had some reason fer not goin' shucks on the singin' and actin' breed. We'd had two bunches of op'ra folks in Briggs at diff'rent times. One come down from Wichita, and was called "The Way to Ruin." (Wal, it shore looked its name!) The other was "The Wild West Troupe" from Dallas. This last wasn't West—it was from Noo York *direct*—but you can bet you' boots it was *wild* all right. By thunder! you couldn't 'a' helt nary one of them young ladies with a hoss-hair rope!

But fer a week of Sundays, he didn't say nothin' to Up-State. He just boiled inside, kinda. Then one day—when he'd got enough steam up, I reckon,—why, he opened wide and let her go.

"Up-State," he begun, "I'm sorry fer you, all right, but—"

Up-State looked at him. “Sewell,” he whispers, “I don’t want *no* man’s pity.”

“Listen to me,” says the boss. “Macie’s my little gal—the only child I got left now, and I warn you not to go talkin’ actress to her.”

“Don’t holler ’fore you git hit,” whispers Up-State, smilin’.

The boss got worse mad then. “Look a-here,” he says, “don’t give me none of that. You know you lie—”

Up-State shook his haid. “I’m not a man any more, Sewell,” he whispers. “I’m just what’s left of one. I didn’t used to let *nobody* hand out things that flat to me.”

I stuck in *my* lip. (*One* more time couldn’t hurt.) “Now, Sewell,” I says, “put on the brake.”

He got a holt on hissself then. “This ain’t no josh to me, Cupid,” he says. (He was tremblin’, pore ole cuss!) “What you think I heerd this mornin’? Mace ain’t makin’ enough money passin’ slumgullion to them passenger cattle all day, so she’s a-goin’ over to Silverstein’s ev’ry night after this to fix up his books. I wisht now I’d never sent her t’ business college.”

Just then—

*“Sweet is the vale where the Mohawk gently glides
On its fair, windin’ way to the sea—”*

Up-State lent over, his elbows on his knees, and his face in his hands.

The boss looked at me. I give a jerk of my haid to show him he’d best go. And he walked off, grindin’ his teeth.

It seemed to me I could hear Up-State whisperin’ into his fingers. I stooped over. “What is it, pardner?” I ast.

“It’s full of home,” he says, “—it’s full of home! Cupid! Cupid!” (Darned if I don’t wisht them lungers wouldn’t come down here, anyhow. They plumb give a feller the misery.)

Doc Trowbridge stopped by just then. “How you makin’ it t’-day, Up-State?” he ast.

Up-State got to his feet, slow though, and put a hand on Billy’s shoulder. “The next sandstorm, ole man,” he says; “the next sandstorm.”

“Up-State,” says Billy, “buck up. You got more lives’n a cat.”

“No show,” Up-State whispers back.

He was funny that-a-way. Now, most lungers fool theyselves. Allus “goin’ to git better,” y’ savvy. But Up-State—*he knew*.

“Come over to my tent t’-night,” he goes on to Billy. “I got somethin’ I want to talk to you about.”

“All right,” says Billy. “Two haid is better ’n one, if one *is* a sheep’s haid.”

After supper, I passed Silverstein’s two ’r three times, and about nine o’clock I seen Macie. She was ’way back towards the end of the store, a lamp and a book in front of her; and she was a-workin’ like a steam-thrasher.

Somehow it come over me all to oncet then that she’d meant ev’ry single word she said, and that, sooner ’r later—she was goin’. *Goin’*. And I’d be stayin’ behind. I looked ’round me. Say! Briggs City didn’t show up *much*. “Without *her*,” I says, (they was that red-hot-iron feelin’ inside of me again) “—without her, what is it?—the jumpin’-off place!”

Beyond me, a piece, was Up-State’s tent. A light was burnin’ inside it, too, and Doc Trowbridge was settin’ in the moonlight by the openin’. Behind him, I could see Up-State, writin’.

I trailed home to my bunk. But you can understand I didn’t sleep good. And ’way late, I had a dream. I dreamed the Bar Y herd broke fence and stampeded through Briggs, and after ’em come about a hunderd bull-whackers, all a-layin’ it on to them steers with the flick of they lashes *-zip, zip, zip, zip*.

Next mornin, I woke quick—with a jump, y’ might say. I looked at my nickel turnip. It was five-thirty. I got up. The sun was shinin’, the air was nice and clear and quiet and the larks was just singin’ away. But outside, along the winda-sill, was stretched *a’ inch-wide trickle of sand!*

In no time I was hoofin’ it down the street. When I got to Up-State’s tent, Billy Trowbridge was inside it, movin’ ’round, puttin’ stuff into a trunk, and—wipin’ the sand outen his eyes.

“He was right?” I says, when I goes in, steppin’ soft, and whisperin’—like Up-State ’d allus whispered. Billy turned to me and kinda smiled, fer all he felt so all-fired bad. “Yas, Cupid,” he says, “he was right. One more storm.”

Just then, from the station—

*“Sweet is the vale where the Mohawk gently glides
On its fair, windin’ way to the sea—”*

Billy walked over to the bed and looked down. “Up-State, ole man,” he says, “you’re a-goin’ back to the Mohawk.”

Up-State left two letters behind him—one fer me and one fer Billy. The doc didn’t show hisn; said it wouldn’t be just *profeshnal*—yet. But mine he ast me to read to the boss.

“Dear Cupid,” it run, *“ast Mister Sewell not to come down too hard on me account of what I’m goin’ to do fer Macie. The little gal says she wants a singin’ chanst more’n anythin’ else. Wal, I’m goin’ to give it to her. You’ll find a’ even five hunderd in green-backs over in Silverstein’s safe. It’s hern. Tell her I want she should use it to go to Noo York on and buck the op’ra game.”*

Wal, y’ see, the ole man ’d been right all along—Up-State was sidin’ with Mace. Somehow though, *I* couldn’t feel hard agin him fer it. I knowed that she’d go—help ’r *no* help.

But Sewell, he didn’t think like me, and I never *seen* a man take on the way he done. *Crazy* mad, he was, swore blue blazes, and said things that didn’t sound so nice when a feller remembered that Up-State was face up and flat on his back fer keeps—and goin’ home in the baggage-car.

I tell you, the boys was nice to me that day. “The little gal won’t fergit y’, Cupid,” they says, and “Never you mind, Cupid, it’ll all come out in the wash.”

I thanked ’em, a-course. But with Macie fixed to go (far’s money went), and without makin’ friends with me, neither, what under the shinin’ sun could chirk *me* up? Wal, *nothin’* could.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE BOYS PUT THEY FOOT IN IT

“WAL, Hairoil,” I says, “I shore am a’ unlucky geezer! Why, d’ you know, I don’t hardly dast go from one room to another these days fer fear I’ll git my lip pinched in the door.”

Hairoil, he clawed thoughtful. “You and the boss had a talk oncet on the marryin’ question,” he begun. “It was out at the Bar Y.” (We was settin’ on a truck at the deepot again, same as that other time.) “A-course, I don’t want t’ throw nothin’ up, but—you tole him then that when it come you’ own time, *you* wouldn’t have no trouble. Recollect braggin’ that-a-way?”

“Yas,” I answers, meeker’n Moses. “But Hairoil, that was ’fore I met Macie.”

“So it was,” he says. Then, after a minute, “I s’pose nothin’ could keep her in Briggs much longer.”

I shook my haid. “The ole man won’t let her fetch a dud offen the ranch, and so she’s havin’ a couple of dresses made. I figger that when *they* git done, she’ll—she’ll go.”

“How long from now?”

“About two weeks—accordin’ to what Mollie Brown tole me.”

“Um,” says Hairoil, and went on chawin’ his cud. Fin’lly, he begun again, and kinda like he was feelin’ ’round. “Don’t you think Mace Sewell is took up with the *romance* part of this singin’ proposition?” he ast. “That’s *my* idear. And *I* think that if she was showed that her and you was *also* a *romance*, why, she’d give up goin’ to Noo York. Now, it *might* be possible to—to git her t’ see things right—if they was a little scheme, say.”

I got up. “No, Hairoil,” I says, “no little scheme is a-goin’ t’ be played on *Macie*. A-course, I done it fer Rose and Billy; but Macie,—wal, Macie is diff’rent. I want t’ win her in the open. And I’ll be jiggered if I stand fer any underhand work.”

“It needn’t t’ *be* what you’d call underhand,” answers Hairoil.

“Pardner,” I says, “don’t talk about it no more. You make me plumb nervous,

like crumbs in the bed.”

And so he shut up.

But now when I *recall* that conversation of ourn, and think back on what begun t’ happen right afterwards, it seemed *blamed* funny that I didn’t suspicion somethin’ was wrong. The parson was mixed up in it, y’ savvy, and the sheriff, and Billy Trowbridge—all them three I’d helped out in one way ’r another. And Hairoil was in it, too—and he’d said oncet that he was a-goin’ t’ marry me off. So *why* didn’t I ketch on! Wal, I shore *was* a yap!

Next day, Hairoil didn’t even speak of Mace. I thought he’d clean fergot about her. He was all *excited* over somethin’ else—the ’lection of a sheriff. And ’fore he got done tellin’ me about it, I was some *excited*, too—fer all I was half sick account of my own troubles.

The ’lection of a sheriff, y’ savvy, means a’ awful lot to a passel of cow-punchers. We don’t much keer who’s President of the United States. (We been plumb *covered* with proud flesh these six years, though, ’cause Roos’velt, *he’s* a puncher.) We don’t much keer, neither, who’s Gov’ner of Oklahomaw. But you can bet you’ bottom dollar it makes a *heap* of diff’rence who’s our sheriff. If you git a friend in office, you can breathe easy when you have a little disagreement; if you don’t, why, *you* git ’lected—t’ the calaboose!

Now, what Hairoil come and rep’esented to me was this: That Hank Shackleton, editor of *The Briggs City Eye-Opener*, ’d been lickerin’ up somethin’ *turrible* the last twenty-four hours.

“Hank?” I says to Hairoil, plumb surprised. “Why, I didn’t know he ever took more ’n a glass.”

“A *glass!*” repeats Hairoil disgusted. “He ain’t used no glass *this* time; he used a *funnel*. And you oughta see his paper that come out this mornin’. It’s full on the one side, where a story’s allus printed, but the opp’site page looks like somethin’ ’d hit it—O. K. far’s advertisements go, but the news is as skurse as hen’s teeth, *and not a word about Bergin.*”

“You don’t say! But—what does that matter, Hairoil?”

“What does that *matter!* Why, if Hank gits it into his haid to keep on tankin’ that-a-way (till he plumb spills over, by jingo!) the *Eye-Opener* won’t show up again fer a month of Sundays. Now, we need it, account of this ’lection, and the way Hank is actin’ has come home to roost with ev’ry *one* of us. You been worried, Cupid, and you ain’t noticed how this sheriff sittywaytion is. The Goldstone

Tarantula is behind the Republican candidate, Walker—”

“Walker! That critter up fer sheriff?”

“Yas. And, a-course, Hank’s been behind Bergin t’ git *him* re’lected fer the ’leventh time.”

“I know, and Bergin’s got t’ *win*. Why, Bergin’s the only fit man.”

“Wal, now, if our paper cain’t git in and crow the loudest, and tell how many kinds of a swine the other feller is, *how’s* Bergin goin’ t’ win?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do *I*. (You see how ticklish things is?) Wal, here’s Hank in *no* shape to make any kind of a newspaper fight, but just achin’ t’ use his gun on anybody that comes nigh him. Why, I never *seen* such a change in a man in all my born *life!*”

I was surprised some *more*. I didn’t know Hank *packed* a gun. He was a darned nice cuss, and ev’rybody shore liked him, and he’d never been laid up fer *repairs* account of somethin’ he’d put in his paper. He was square, smart’s a steel-trap, and white clean through. Had a handshake that was hung on a hair-trigger, and a smile so winnin’ that he could coax the little prairie-dawgs right outen they holes.

Hairoil goes on. “I can see Briggs City eatin’ the shucks when it comes ’lection-day,” he says, “and that Goldstone man cabbagin’ the sheriff’s office. Buckshot Milliken tole me this mornin’ that the *Tarantula* called Bergin ‘a slouch’ last week; ‘so low-down he’d eat sheep,’ too, and ‘such a blamed pore shot he couldn’t hit the side of a barn.’”

“That’s goin’ too far.”

“So *I* say. I wanted Bergin t’ go over to Goldstone and give ’em a sample of his gun-play that’d interfere with the printin’ of they one-hoss sheet. But Bergin said it was no use—the *Tarantula* editor is wearin’ a sheet-iron thing-um-a-jig acrosst his back and his front, and has to use a screw-driver t’ take off his clothes.”

“The idear of Hank actin’ like a idjit when the ’lection depends on him!” I says. “Wal, things is outen kilter.”

“Sh-sh-sh!” says Hairoil, lookin’ round quick. “Be awful keerful what you say about Hank. We don’t want no shootin’-scrape *here*.”

But I didn’t give a continental *who* heerd me. I was sore t’ think a reg’lar jay-

hawk 'd been put up agin our man! Say, that Walker didn't know beans when the bag was open. His name shore fit him, 'cause he couldn't ride a hoss fer cold potatoes. And he was the kind that gals think is a looker, and allus stood ace-high at a dance. Lately, he'd been more pop'lar than ever. When we had that little set-to with Spain, Walker hiked out to the Coast; and didn't show up again till after the California boys come home from Manila. Then, he hit town, wearin' a' army hat, and chuck full of all kinds of stories about the Philippines, and how he'd been in *turrible* fights. That got the girls travelin' after him two-forty. Why, at Goldstone, they was *all* a-goin' with him, seems like.

I didn't want *him* fer sheriff, you bet you' boots. He wasn't no friend to us Briggs City boys any more 'n we was to him. And then, none of us believed that soldier hand-out. Y' know, we had a little bunch of fellers from this section that went down t' Cuba with Colonel Roos'velt and chased the Spanish some. Wal, y' never heerd *them* crowin' 'round about what they done. And this Walker, he blowed too much t' be genuwine.

"If he's 'lected sheriff, it's goin' t' be risky business gittin' in to a' argyment with anybody," I says. "He'd just *like* t' git one of us jugged. Say, what's goin' to be did fer Hank?"

"Wal," answers Hairoil, mouth screwed up anxious, "we're in a right serious fix. So they's to be a sorta convention this afternoon, and we're a-goin' t' cut out whisky whilst the session lasts."

"I'll come. *Walker* fer sheriff! *Huh!*"

"Good fer you! So long."

"So long."

We made fer the council-tent at three o'clock—the bunch of us. The depot waitin'-room was choosed, that bein', as the boys put it, "the most *respectable* public place in town that wouldn't want rent." Wal, we worked our jaws a lot, goin' over the sittywaytion from start to finish. "Gents let's hear what you-all got to say," begun Chub Flannagan, standin' up. Doc Trowbridge was next. "*I advise* you to rope Shackleton," he says, "and lemme give him some hoss liniment t' put him on his laigs." (We was agreed that the hull business depended on the *Eye-Opener*.) But the rest of us didn't favour Billy's plan. So we ended by pickin' a 'lection committee. No dues, no by-laws, no chairman. But ev'ry blamed one of us a sergeant-at-arms with orders t' keep Hank Shackleton *outen the saloons*. 'Cause why? If he could buck up, and *stay* straight, and go t' gittin' out the *Eye-Opener*, Bergin 'd shore win out.

“Gents,” says Monkey Mike, “soon as ever Briggs hears of our committee, we’re a-goin’ t’ git pop’lar with the nice people, ’cause we’re tryin’ t’ help Hank. And we’re also goin’ t’ git a black eye with the lickin’ men account of shuttin’ off the Shackleton trade. A-course, us punchers must try t’ make it up t’ the thirst-parlours fer the loss, though I *admit* it ’ll not be a’ easy proposition. But things is *desp’rate*. If Walker gits in, we’ll have a nasty deputy-sheriff sent up here t’ cross us ev’ry time we make a move. We got t’ *work*, gents. You know how *I* feel. By thunder! Bergin treated me square all right over that Andrews fuss.” (Y’ see, Mike’s a grateful little devil, if he *does* ride like a fool Englishman.)

“Wal,” says Buckshot Milliken, “who’ll be the first sergeant? I call fer a volunteer.”

All the fellers just kept quiet—but they looked at each other, worried like.

“Don’t all speak to oncet,” says Buckshot.

I got up. “*I*’m willin’ t’ try my hand,” I says.

“*Thank y’*, Cupid.” It was Buckshot, earnest as the dickens. “But—but we hope you’re goin’ to go slow with Hank. Don’t do nothin’ foolish.”

“What in thunder ’s got *into* you fellers?” I ast, lookin’ at ’em. “Is Hank got the hydrophoby?”

“You ain’t saw him since he begun t’ drink, I reckon,” says Chub.

“No.”

“*Wal*, then.”

By this time, I was so all-fired et up with curiosity t’ git a look at Hank that I couldn’t stand it no more. So I got a move on.

Hank is a turrible tall feller, and thin as a ramrod. He’s got hair you could flag a train with, and a face as speckled as a turkey aig. And when I come on to him that day, here he was, stretched out on the floor of Dutchy’s back room, mouth wide open, and snorin’ like a rip-saw.

I give his shoulder a jerk. “Here, Hank,” I says, “wake up and pay fer you’ keep. What’s got into you, anyhow. My goodness me!”

He opened his eyes—slow. Next, he sit up, and fixed a’ awful ugly look on me. “Wa-a-al?” he says.

“My friend,” I begun, “Briggs City likes you, and in the present case it’s a-tryin’ t’ make ’lowances, and not chalk nothin’ agin y’, but—”

“Blankety blank Briggs City!” growls Hank. “Ish had me shober and ish had me drunk, and neither way don’t shoot.”

“Now, ole man, I reckon you’re wrong,” I says. “But never mind, anyhow. Just try t’ realise that they ’s a ’lection comin’, and that you got t’ help.”

“Walkersh a friend of mine,” says Hank, and laid down again.

Wal, I didn’t want t’ be there all day. I wanted t’ have *some* time to myself, y’ savvy, so ’s I could keep track of Mace. So I grabbed him again.

This whack, he got up, straddlin’ his feet out like a mad tarantula, and kinda clawin’ the air. They wasn’t no gun visible on him, but he was loaded, all right. Had a revolver stuck under his belt in front, so ’s the bottom of his vest hid it.

I jerked it out and kicked it clean acrosst the floor. Then I drug him out and started fer the bunk-house with him. *Gosh!* it was a job!

Wal, the pore cuss didn’t git another swalla of forty-rod that day; and by the next mornin’ he was calm and had a’ appetite. So three of us sergeant-at-arms happened over to see him. Bill Rawson was there a’ready, keepin’ him comp’ny. And first thing y’ know, I was handin’ that editor of ourn great big slathers of straight talk.

“I know what you done fer me, Cupid,” says Hank. “And I’m grateful,—yas, I am. But let me tell you that when I git started drinkin’, I cain’t *stop*—never do till I’m just wored out ’r stone broke. And I git mean, and on the fight, and don’t know what I’m doin’. But,” he *con*-tinues (his face was as long as you’ arm), “if you-all ’ll fergive me, and let this spree pass, why, I’ll go back t’ takin’ water at the railroad tank with the Sante Fee ingines.”

“Hank,” I says, “you needn’t t’ say nothin’ further. But pack no more loads, m’ son, pack no more loads. And *try* t’ git out another *EyeOpener*. Not only is this sheriff matter pressin’, but the lit’rary standin’ of Briggs City is at stake.”

“That’s dead right,” he says. “And I’ll git up a’ issue of the *Opener* pronto—only you boys ’ll have t’ help me out some on the news part. I don’t recollect much that’s been happenin’ lately.”

Wal, things looked cheerfuller. So, ’fore long, I was back at the deepot, settin’ on a truck and watchin’ the eatin’-house windas, and the boys—Bergin and all—was lined up ’longside Dutchy’s bar, celebratin’.

But our work was a long, l-o-n-g way from bein’ done. Hank kept sober just five hours. Then he got loose from Hairoil and made fer a thirst-parlour. And when

Hairoil found him again, he was fuller'n a tick.

"I'm blue as all git out about what's happened," says Hairoil. "But I couldn't help it; it was just rotten luck. And I hear that when the *Tarantula* come out yesterday it had a hull column about that Walker, callin' him a brave ex-soldier and the next sheriff of Woodward County."

"And just ten days 'fore 'lection!" chips in Bill Rawson. "Cupid, it's root hawg 'r die!"

"That's what it is," I says. "Wal, I'll go git after Hank again."

He was in Dutchy's, same as afore. But not so loaded, this time, and a blamed sight uglier. Minute he *seen* me, his back was up! "Here, you snide puncher," he begun, "you tryin' to arrest *me*? Wal, blankety blank blank," (fill it in the worst you can think of—he was beefin' somethin' *awful*) "I'll have you know that I ain't never 'lowed *no* man t' put the bracelets on me." And his hand went down and begun feelin' fer the butt of a gun.

"Look oudt!" whispers Dutchy. "You vill git shooted!"

But I only just walked over and put a' arm 'round Hank. "Now, come on home," I says, like I meant it. "'Cause y' know, day after t'-morra another *Eye-Opener* has *got* to rise t' the top. Hank, think of Bergin!"

He turned on me then, and give me such a push in the chest that I sit down on the floor—right suddent, too. Wal, that rubbed me the wrong way. And the next thing *he* knowed, I had him by the back of the collar, and was a-draggin' him out.

I was plumb wored out by the time I got him home, and so Chub, he stayed t' watch. I went back to the deepot. And I was still a-settin' there, feelin' lonesome, and kinda put out, too, when here come Buckshot Milliken towards me.

"I think Hank oughta be 'shamed of hisself," he says, "fer the way he talks about you. Course, we know why he does it, and that it ain't true—"

"What's he got t' say about me?" I ast, huffy.

"He said you was a ornery hoodlum," answers Buckshot, "and a loafer, and that he's a-goin' t' roast you in his paper. He'd put Oklahomaw on to *you*, he said."

"Huh!"

"And you been *such* a good friend t' Hank," goes on Buckshot. "Wal, don't it go to show!"

"If he puts on single *word* about me in that paper of hisn," I says, gittin' on my

ear good and plenty, “I’ll just natu’ally take him acrosst my knee and give him a spankin’.”

“And he’ll put enough slugs in you t’ make a sinker,” answers Buckshot. “Why, Cupid, Hank Shackleton can fight his weight in wildcats. *You go slow.*”

“But *he* cain’t shoot,” I says.

“He cain’t *shoot!*” repeats Buckshot. “Why, I hear he was a reg’lar gun-fighter oncet, and so blamed fancy with his shootin’ that he could drive a two-penny nail into a plank at twenty yards ev’ry bit as good as a carpenter.”

“Wal,” I says, “I’ll be blasted if that’s got *me* scairt any.”

Buckshot shook his haid. “I’m right sorry t’ see any bad blood ’twixt y’,” he says.

Next thing, it was all over town that Hank was a-lookin’ fer me.

Afterwards, I heerd that it was Hairoil tole Macie about it. “You know,” he says to her, “whenever Hank’s loaded and in hollerin’ distance of a town, you can shore bet some one’s goin’ t’ git hurt.”

Mace, she looked a little bit nervous. But she just said, “I reckon Alec can take keer of hisself.” Then off she goes to pick out a trunk at Silverstein’s.

I reckon, though, that ole Silverstein ’d heerd about the trouble, too. So when Mace come back to the eatin’-house, she sit down and writ me a letter. “*Friend Alec,*” it said, “*I want to see you fer a minute right after supper. Macie Sewell.*”

It was four o’clock then. Supper was a good two hours off. Say! how them two hours drug!

But all good things come to a’ end—as the feller said when he was strung up on a rope. And the hands of my watch loped into they places when they couldn’t hole back no longer. Then, outen the door on the track side of the eatin’-house, here she come!

My little gal! I was hungry t’ talk to her, and git holt of one of her hands. But whilst I watched her walk toward me, I couldn’t move, it seemed like; and they was a lump as big as a baseball right where my Adam’s apple oughta be.

“Macie!”

She stopped and looked straight at me, and I seen she’d been cryin’. “Alec,” she says, “I didn’t mean t’ give in and see you ’fore I went. But they tole me you and Hank ’d had words. And—and I couldn’t stay mad no longer.”

“Aw, honey, thank y’!”

“I ain’t a-goin’ away t’ stay,” she says. “Leastways, I don’t *think* so. But I want a try at singin’, Alec,—a chanst. Paw’s down on me account of that. And he don’t even come in town no more. Wal, I’m sorry. But—*you* understand, Alec, don’t y’?”

“Yas, little gal. Go ahaid. I wouldn’t hole you back. I *want* you should have a chanst.”

“And if I win out, I want you t’ come to Noo York and hear me sing. Will y’, Alec?”

“Ev’ry night, I’ll go out under the cottonwoods, by the ditch, and I’ll say, ‘Gawd, bless my little gal.’”

“I won’t fergit y’, Alec.”

I turned my haid away. Off west they was just a little melon-rind of moon in the sky. As I looked, it begun to dance, kinda, and change shape. “I’ll allus be waitin’,” I says, after a little, “—if it’s five years, ’r fifty, ’r the end of my life.”

“They won’t never be no other man, Alec. Just you—”

“Macie!”

That second, we both heerd hollerin’ acrosst the street. Then here come Hairoil, runnin’, and carryin’ a gun.

“Cupid,” he says, pantin’, “take this.” (He shoved the gun into my hand.) “Miss Macie, git outen the way. It’s Hank!”

Quick as I could, I moved to one side, so’s she wouldn’t be in range.

“*Ye-e-e-ooop!*”

As Hank rounded the corner, he was staggerin’ some, and wavin’ his shootin’-iron. “I’m a Texas bad man,” he yelps; “I’m as ba-a-ad as they make ’em, and tough as bull beef.” Then, he went tearin’ back’ards and for’ards like he’d pull up the station platform. “Hey!” he goes on. “I’ve put a *lot* of fellers t’ sleep with they boots on! Come ahaid if you want t’ git planted in my private graveyard!”

Next, and whilst Mace was standin’ not ten feet back of him, he seen me. He spit on his pistol hand, and started my way.

“You blamed polecat,” he hollered, “*I’ll* learn you t’ shoot off you’ mouth when it ain’t loaded! You’ hands ain’t mates and you’ feet don’t track, and I’m a-goin’ t’ plumb lay you out!”

I just stayed where I was. “What’s in you’ craw, anyhow?” I called back.

He didn’t answer. He let fly!

Wal, sir, I doubled up like a jack-knife, and went down kerflop. The boys got ’round me—say! talk about you’ pale-faces!—and yelled to Hank to stop. He drew another gun, and, just as I got t’ my feet, went backin’ off, coverin’ the crowd all the time, and warnin’ ’em not t’ mix in.

They didn’t. But someone else did—Mace. Quick as a wink, she reached into a buckboard fer a whip. Next, she run straight up to Hank—and give him a *turrible* lick!

He dropped his pistols and put his two arms acrosst his eyes. “Mace! don’t!” he hollered. (It’d sobered him, seemed like.) Then, he turned and took to his heels.

That same second, I heerd a yell—Bergin’s voice. Next, the sheriff come tearin’ ’round the corner and tackled Hank. The two hit the ground like a thousand of brick.

Mace come runnin’ towards me, then. But the boys haided her off, and wouldn’t let her git clost.

“Blood’s runnin’ all down this side of him,” says Monkey Mike.

Shore enough, it was!

“Chub!” yells Buckshot, “git Billy Trowbridge!”

“Don’t you cry, ner nothin’,” says Hairoil t’ Mace. And whilst he helt her back, they packed me acrosst the platform and up-stairs into one of them rooms over the lunch-counter. And then, ’fore I could say Jack Robinson, they hauled my coat off, put a wet towel ’round my forrid, and put me into bed. After that, they pulled down the curtains, and bunched t’gether on either side of my pilla.

“Shucks!” I says. “I’m all right. Let me up, you blamed fools!”

Just then, Monkey Mike come runnin’ in with the parson, and the parson put out a hand t’ make me be still. “My *dear* friend,” he says, “I’m *sorry* this happened.” And he was so darned worried lookin’ that I begun t’ think somethin’ shore was wrong with me, and I laid quiet.

Next, the door opened and in come Mace!

The room was so dark she couldn’t see much at first. So, she stepped closter, walkin’ soft, like she didn’t want to jar nobody. “Alec!” she says tearful.

“Macie!”

She stooped over me.

The boys turned they backs.

Aw, my dear little gal! Her lips was cold, and tremblin’.

Wal, then she turned to the bunch, speakin’ awful anxious. “Is he hurt bad?” she ast, low like.

“Naw,” I begun, “I—”

Monkey Mike edged ’twixt me and her, puttin’ one hand over my mouth so ’s I couldn’t talk. “We don’t know exac’ly,” he answers.

“Boys!” she says, like she was astin’ ’em to fergive her; and, “Alec!”

Buckshot said afterwards that it *shore* was a solemn death-bed scene. The parson was back agin the wall, his chin on his bosom; I was chawin’ the fingers offen Mike, and the rest of the fellers was standin’ t’gether, laughin’ into they hats fit t’ sprain they faces.

Billy come in then. “Doc,” says Macie, “save him!”

“I’ll do all I can,” promises Billy. “Let’s hope he’ll pull through.”

“Aw, Alec!” says Mace, again.

Hairoil went up to her. “Mace,” he says, “they’s one thing you can do that’d be a *mighty* big comfort t’ pore Cupid.”

“What’s that?” she ast, earnest as the devil. “I’ll do *anythin’* fer him.”

“Marry him, Mace,” he says, “and try to nuss him back t’ health again.”

I was plumb amazed. “*Marry!*” I says.

But ’fore I could git any more out, Mike shut off my wind!

Dear little gal! She wasn’t skittish no more: She was so tame she’d ’a’ et right outen my hand. “Parson,” she says, goin’ towards him, “will–will you marry Alec and me–now?”

“Dee-lighted,” says the parson, “–if he is able t’ go through the ceremony.”

“Parson,” I begun, pullin’ my face loose, “I want—”

Mike give me a dig.

I looked at him.

He wunk–*hard*.

And then, I tumbled!

Fer a minute, I just laid back, faint shore enough, thinkin' what a all-fired sucker I was. And whilst I was stretched out that-a-way, Mace come clost and give me her hand. The parson, he took out a little black book.

“*Dearly beloved,*” he begun, “*we are gathered t’gether—*”

It was then I sit up. “Parson, stop!” I says. And to Mace, “Little gal, I ain’t agoin’ t’ let ’em take no advantage of you. I *wasn’t* hit in the side. It’s my arm, and it’s only just creased a little.”

Mace kinda blinked, not knowin’ whether t’ be glad ’r not, I reckon.

“And this hull bsuiness,” I goes on, “is a trick.”

Her haid went up, and her cheeks got plumb white. Then, she begun t’ back—slow. “A trick!” she repeats; “—it’s a trick! Aw, how mean! how *mean!* I didn’t think you was like that!”

“Me, Mace? It wasn’t—”

“A trick!” she goes on. “But I’m glad I found it out—*yas*. This afternoon when I was talkin’ to y’, I wanted t’ stay right here in Briggs—I wanted t’ stay with you. If you’d just said you wisht I would; if you’d just turned over you’ hand, why, I’d ’a’ give up the trip. My heart was achin’ t’ think I was goin’. But now, *now—*” And she choked up.

“Macie!” I says. “Aw, don’t!” Somehow I was beginnin’ t’ feel kinda dizzy and sick.

She faced the parson. “And you was in it, too!—*you!*” she says.

“I’d do anythin’ t’ keep you from goin’ t’ Noo York,” he answers, “and from bein’ a’ actress.”

She looked at Billy next. “The hull *town* was in it!” she went on. “*Ev’rybody* was ready t’ git me fooled; t’ make me the josh of the county!”

“No, *no*, little gal,” I answers, and got to my feet byside the bed. “Not me, honey!”

She only just turned and opened the door. “I don’t wonder the rest of you ain’t got nothin’ t’ say,” she says. “Why, I ain’t never *heerd* of anythin’ so—so low.” And haid down, and sobbin’, she went out.

I tried t’ foller, but my laigs was sorta wobbly. I got just a step ’r two, and put a’ arm on Billy’s shoulder.

The boys went out then, too, not sayin' a word, but lookin' some sneaky.

“Bring her back,” I called after 'em. “Aw, I've hurt my pore little gal!” I started t' walk again, leanin' on the doc. “Boys!—”

Next thing, over I flopped into Billy's arms.

When I come to, a little later on, here was Billy settin' byside me, a' awful sober look on his face.

“Billy,” I says to him, “where is she?”

“Cupid—don't take it hard, ole man—she's—she's gone. Boarded the East-bound not half a' hour ago. But, pardner—”

Gone!

I didn't answer him. I just rolled over onto my face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANOTHER SCHEME, AND HOW IT PANNED OUT

WAL, pore ole Sewell! *I* wasn't feelin' dandy them days, you'd better believe. But, Sewell, he took Macie's goin' *turrible* bad. Whenever he come in town, he was allus just as *qui-i-et*. Not a cheep about the little gal; wouldn't 'a' laughed fer a nickel; and never'd go anywheres nigh the lunch-counter. Then, he begun t' git peakeder'n the dickens, and his eyes looked as big as saucers, and bloodshot. Pore ole boss!

I kept outen his way. He'd heerd all about that Shackleton business, y' savvy, and was awful down on me; helt me *responsible* fer the hull thing, and tole the boys he never wanted t' set eyes on me again. Hairoil went to him and said I'd been jobbed, and was innocenter'n Mary's little lamb. But Sewell wouldn't listen even, and said I'd done him dirt.

A-course, I couldn't go back t' my Bar Y job, then,—and me plumb crazy t' git to work and make enough t' go to Noo York on! But I didn't do no mournin'; I kept a stiff upper lip. “Cupid,” I says to myself, “allus remember that the gal that's hard t' ketch is the best kind when oncet you've got her.” And I sit down and writ the foreman of the Mulhall outfit. (By now, my arm was all healed up fine.)

Wal, when I went over to the post-office a little bit later on, the post-master tole me that Sewell'd just got a letter from Macie!—but it hadn't seemed t' chirp the ole man up any. And they was one fer Mrs. Trowbridge, too, he says; did I want to look at it?

“I don't mind,” I answers.

It was from her—I'd know her little dinky l's *anywheres*. I helt it fer a minute—'twixt my two hands. It was like I had her fingers, kinda. Then, “S'pose they ain't nothin' fer me t'day,” I says.

“No, Cupid,—sorry. Next time, I reckon.”

“Wal,” I goes on “would you mind lettin' me take this over t' Rose?”

“Why, no,—go ahaid.”

I went, quick as ever my laigs could carry me, the letter tucked inside my shirt.

Rose read it out loud t' me, whilst I helt the kid. It wasn't a long letter, but, somehow, I never could recollect afterwards just the exac' words that was in it. I drawed, though, that Mace was havin' a way-up time. She was seein' all the shows, she said, meetin' slathers of folks, and had a room with a nice, sorta middle-aged lady, in a place where a lot of young fellers and gals hung out t' study all kinds of fool business. Some of 'em she liked, and some she didn't. Some took her fer a greeney, and some was fresh. But she was learnin' a pile—and 'd heerd Susy's Band!

"Is that all?" I ast when Rose was done.

"Yas, Cupid."

"Nothin' about me?"

"No."

"Does she give her *address*?"

"Just Gen'ral Deliv'ry."

"Thank y', Rose."

"Stay t' dinner, Cupid. I'm goin' t' have chicken fricassee."

But I didn't feel like eatin'. I put the kid down and come away.

I made towards Dutchy's—pretty blue, I was, a-course. "Cupid," I says, "bad luck runs in you' fambly like the wooden laig."

But, mind y', I wasn't goin' with the idear of boozin' up, *no*, ma'am. *I* figger that if a gal's worth stewin' over any, she's a hull lot *too* good fer a man that gits *drunk*. I went 'cause I knowed the boys was there; and them days the boys was *mighty* nice to me.

Wal, this day, I'm powerful glad I went. If I hadn't, it's likely I'd never 'a' got that bully *po*-sition, 'r played Cupid again (without knowin' it)—and so got the one chanst I was a-prayin' fer.

Now, this is what happened:

I'd just got inside Dutchy's, and was a-standin' behind Buckshot Milliken, watchin' him bluff the station-agent with two little pair, when I heerd Hairoil a-talkin' to hisself, kinda. "Dear me suz!" he says (he was peerin' acrosst the street towards the deepot), "what blamed funny things I see when I ain't got no gun!"

A-course, we all stampeded over and took a squint. "Wal, when did *that* blow in?" says Bill Rawson. And, "Say! ketch me whilst I faint!" goes on one of the

Lazy X boys, making believe as if he was weak in the laigs. The rest of just haw-hawed.

A young feller we'd never seen afore was comin' cater-corners from the station. He was a slim-Jim, sorta salla complected, jaw clean scraped, and he had on a pair of them tony pinchbug spectacles. He was rigged out fit t' kill-grey store clothes, dicer same colour as the suit, sky-blue shirt, socks tatoood green, and gloves. He passed clost, not lookin' our *direction*, and made fer the Arnaz rest'rant.

Just as he got right in front of it, he come short and begun readin' the sign that's over the door—

Meals 25c
Start in and It's a Habit
You cain't Quit.

Then we seen him grin like he was *turrible* tickled, and take out a piece of paper t' set somethin' down. Next, in he slides.

We all dropped back and lined up again.

“Not a sewin'-machine agent, 'r he'd 'a' wore a duster,” says Hairoil.

“And a patent medicine man would 'a' had on a stove-pipe,” adds Bergin.

“Maype he iss a preacher,” puts in Dutchy, lookin' scairt as the dickens.

“Nixey,” I says. “But if he was a drummer, he'd 'a' steered straight fer a thirst-parlour.”

Missed it a mile—the hull of us. Minute, and in run Sam Barnes, face redder'n a danger-signal.

“Boys,” he says, all up in the air, “did y' see It? Wal, what d' you think? It's from Boston, and It writes. I was at the Arnaz feed shop, gassin' Carlota, when It shassayed in. Said It was down here fer the first time in a-a-all Its life, and figgers t' work this town fer book mawterial. Gents, It's a liter'toor sharp!”

“Of all the *gall!*” growls Chub Flannagan, gittin' hot. “Goin' t' take a shy outen us!” And I seen that some of the other boys felt like *he* did.

Buckshot Milliken spit in his hands. “I'll go over,” he says, “and just natu'lly settle that dude's hash. I'd *admire* t' do it.”

I haided him off quick. Then I faced the bunch. “Gents,” I begun, “ain't you just a little bit hasty? Now, don't git in a sweat. *Con*-sider this subject a little 'fore you act. Sam, I thought you *liked* t' read liter'toor books.”

Sam hauled out “Stealthy Steve”—a fav'-rite of hisn. “Shore I do,” he answers. “But, as I tole this Boston feller, no liter'toor's been happenin' in Briggs lately—no killin's, 'r train hole-ups.”

“*That's* right, Sam,” I says, sarcastic; “go and switch him over t' Goldstone,—when they won't be another book writer stray down this way fer a coon's age. Say! You got a haid like a tack!”

Sam dried up. I come back at the boys. “Gents,” I *continues*, “don't you see this is Briggs City's one big chanst?—the chanst t' git put in red letters on the railroad

maps! T' git five square mile of this mesquite staked out into town lots! You all know how we've had t' take the slack of them jay-hawk farmers over Cestos way; and they ain't such a *much*, and cain't raise nothin' but shin-oak and peanuts and chiggers. But they tell how *we* git all the cyclones and rattlesnakes.

"Now, we'll curl they hair. Listen, gents,—Oklahomaw City's got element streets, Guthrie's got a Carniggie lib'rary, and Bliss's got the Hunderd-One Ranch. *And we're a-goin' t' cabbage this book!*"

"Wal, that's a hoss of another colour," admits Chub.

"Yas," says Buckshot, "Cupid's right. We certainly got to attend to this visitor that's come to our enterprisin' city, and give him a fair shake."

"*But*," puts in Sam, "we're up a tree. Where's his mawterial?"

"Mawterial," I says, "—I don't just savvy what he means by that. But, boys, whatever it is, we got t' see that he *gits* it. Now, s'posin' I go find him, and sorta feel 'round a little, and draw him out."

They was agreed, and I split fer the rest'rant. Boston was there, all right, talkin' to ole lady Arnaz (but keepin' a' eye peeled towards Carlota), and pickin' the shucks offen a tamale. I sit down and ast fer flapjacks. And whilst I was waitin' I sized him up.

Clost to, I liked his looks. And from the jump, I seen one thing—they wasn't *no* showin' off to him, and no extra dawg ('r he wouldn't 'a' come to a joint where meals is only two-bits). He was a book-writer, but when he talked he didn't use no ten-dollar-a-dozen words. And, in place of seegars, he smoked cigareets—and rolled 'em hisself with *one* hand, by jingo!

Wal, we had a nice, long parley-voov, me gittin' the hull sittywaytion as regards his book, and tellin' him we'd shore lay ourselves out t' help him—if we didn't, it wouldn't be white; him, settin' down things ev'ry oncet in a while, 'r whittlin' a stick with one of them self-cockin' jackknives.

We chinned fer the best part of a' hour. Then, he made me a proposition. This was it: "Mister Lloyd," he says, "I'd like t' have you with me all the time I'm down here,—that'll be three weeks, anyhow. You could explain things, and—and be a kinda bodyguard."

"Why, my friend," I says, "*you* don't need no bodyguard in Oklahomaw. But I'll be glad t' explain anythin' I can."

"Course, I want t' pay you," he goes on; "'cause I'd be takin' you' time—"

“I couldn’t take no pay,” I breaks in. “And if I was t’ have to go, why any one of the bunch could help you just as good.”

“Let’s talk business,” he says. “I like you, and I don’t *want* you t’ go. Now, what’s you’ time worth?”

“I git forty a month.”

“Wal, that suits me. And you’ job won’t be a hard one.”

“Just as you say.”

So, then, we shook hands. But, a-course, I didn’t swaller that bodyguard story,—I figgered that what he wanted was t’ git in with the boys through me.

Wal, when I got back t’ the thirst-parlour, I acted like I was loco. “Boys! boys! boys!” I hollered, “I got a job!” And I give ’em all a whack on the back, and I done a jig.

Pretty soon, I was calmer. Then, I says, “I ain’t a-goin’ t’ ride fer Mulhall,—not *this* month, anyhow. This liter’toor gent’s hired me as his book foreman. As I understand it, they’s some things he wants, and I’m to help corral ’em. He says that just now most folks seem t’ be takin’ a lot of interest in the West. He don’t reckon the fashion’ll keep up, but, a-course a book-writer has t’ git on to the band-wagon. So, it’s up t’ me, boys, to give him what’s got to be had ’fore the excitement dies down.”

Hairoil come over t’ me. “Cupid,” he says, “the hull kit and boodle of us’ll come in on this. We want t’ help, that’s the reason. We owe it to y’, Cupid.”

“Boys,” I answers, “I appreciate what you mean, and I *accept* you’ offer. Thank y’.”

“What does this feller want?” ast Sam.

“Wal,” I says, “he spoke a good bit about colour—”

“They’s shore colour at the Arnaz feed shop,” puts in Monkey Mike; “—them strings of red peppers that the ole lady keeps hung on the walls. And we can git blue shirts over to Silverstein’s.”

“No, Mike,” I says, “that ain’t the idear. Colour is *Briggs*, and *us*.”

“Aw, punk!” says Sam. “What kind of a book is it goin’ t’ be, anyhow, with us punchers in it!”

“Wait till you hear what I got t’ *do*,” I answers. “To *continue*: He mentioned characters. Course, I had to *admit* we’re kinda shy on *them*.”

“Wisht we had a few Injuns,” says Hairoil. “A scalpin’ makes *mighty* fine readin’. Now, mebbe, ’Pache Sam’d pass,—if he was lickered up proper.”

“Funny,” I says, “but he didn’t bring up Injuns. Reckon they ain’t stylish no more. But he put it plain that he’d got to have a bad man. Said in a Western book you *allus* got t’ have a bad man.”

“Since we strung up them two Foster boys.” says Bergin, “Briggs ain’t had what you’d call a bad man. In view of this writin’ feller comin’, I don’t know, gents, but what we was a little *hasty* in the Foster matter.”

“Wal,” I says, “we got t’ do our best with what’s left. This findin’ mawterial fer a book ain’t no dead open-and-shut proposition. ’Cause Briggs ain’t big, and it ain’t what you’d call bad. That’ll hole us back. But let’s dig in and make up fer what’s lackin’.”

Wal, we rustled ’round. First off, we togged ourselves out the way punchers allus look in magazines. (I knowed that was how he wanted us.) We rounded up all the shaps in town, with orders to wear ’em constant—and made Dutchy keep ’em on, too! Then, guns: Each of us carried six, kinda like a front fringe, y’ savvy. Next, one of the boys loped out t’ the Lazy X and brung in a young college feller that’d come t’ Oklahomaw a while back fer his health. It ’pears that he’d been readin’ a Western book that was writ by a’ Eastern gent somewheres in Noo Jersey. And, say! he was the wildest lookin’ cow-punch that’s ever been saw in these parts!

We’d no more’n got all fixed up nice when, “Ssh!” says Buckshot, “here he comes!”

“Quick, boys!” I says, “we got t’ sing. It’s expected.”

The sheriff, he struck up—

*“Paddy went to the Chinaman with only one shirt.
How’s that?”*

“*That’s tough!*” we hollers, loud enough to lift the shakes.

*“He lost of his ticket, says, ‘Divvil the worse’,
How’s that?”*

“*That’s tough!*”

Mister Boston stopped byside the door. The sheriff goes on—

“Aw, Pat fer his shirt, he begged hard and plead,

*But, 'No tickee, no washee', the Chinaman said.
Now Paddy's in jail, and the Chinaman's dead!
How's that?"*

"That's tough!"

It brung him. He looked in, kinda edged through the door, took a bench, and surveyed them shaps, and them guns till his eyes plumb *protruded*. "Rippin'!" I heerd him say.

"That's tough," repeats Monkey Mike, winkin' to the boys. "Wal, I should remark it was!—to go t' jail just fer pluggin' a Chink. Irish must 'a' felt like two-bits."

Boston lent over towards me. "What's two bits?" he ast.

"What's two bits," says Rawson. "Don't you know? Wal, *one* bit is what you can take outen the other feller's hide at one mouthful. *Two* bits, a-course, is two of 'em."

"And," says that college feller from the Lazy X, "go fer the cheek allus—the best eatin'." (He was smart, all right.)

"Not a Chinaman's cheek—too tough," says the sheriff.

Boston begun to kinda talk to hisself. "Horrible!" he says. "Shy Locks, by Heaven!" Then to me again, speakin' low and pointin' at the sheriff, "Mister Lloyd, what kind of a fambly did that man come from?"

"Don't know a hull lot about him," I answers, "but his mother was a squaw, and his father was found on a doorstep."

"A *squaw*," he says. "That accounts fer it." And he begun to watch the sheriff clost.

"Gents, what you want fer you' supper?" ast the Arnaz boy, comin' our *direction*.

"I feel awful caved in," answers Buckshot. "I'll take a dozen aigs."

"How'll you have 'em?"

"Boil 'em hard, so's I can hole 'em in my fingers. And say, cool 'em off 'fore you dish 'em up. I got blistered *bad* the last time I et aigs."

"Rawson, what'll *you* have?"

Rawson, he kinda cocked one ear. "Wal," he says, easy like, "give me rattlesnake on toast."

Nobody cheeped fer a minute, 'cause the boys was stumped fer somethin' to go on with. But just as I was gittin' nervous that the conversation was peterin' out, Boston speaks up.

“Rattlesnake?” he says; “did he say *rattlesnake*?”

Like a shot, Rawson turned towards him, wrinkl'n his forrid and wigglin' his moustache awful fierce. “*That's* what I said,” he answers, voice plumb down to his number 'levens.

It give me my show. I drug Boston away. “Gee!” I says, “on *this* side of the Mississippi, you got to be *keerful* how you go shoot off you' mouth! And when you *remark* on folks's eatin', you don't want t' look tickled.”

Wal, that was all the colour he got till night, when I had somethin' more prepared. We took up a collection fer winda-glass, and Chub Flannagan, who can roll a gun the *prettiest* you ever seen, walked up and down nigh Boston's stoppin'-place, invitin' the fellers t' come out and “git et up,” makin' one 'r two of us dance the heel-and-toe when we showed ourselves, and shootin' up the town gen'ally.

Then, fer a week, nothin' happened.

It was just about then that Rose got another letter from Macie. And it seemed t' me that the little gal 'd changed her tune some. She said Noo York took a *turrible* lot of money—clothes, and grub, and so forth and so on. Said they was so blamed little oxygen in the town that a lamp wouldn't burn, and they'd got to use 'lectricity. And—that was all fer *this* time, 'cause she had t' write her paw.

“I s'pose,” I says to Rose, “that it'd be wastin' my breath t' ast—”

“Yas, Cupid,” she answers, “but it'll be O. K. when she sees you.”

“I reckon,” I says hopeful. And I hunted up my new boss.

He didn't give me such a lot t' do them days—except t' show up at the feed-shop three times reg'lar. That struck me as kinda funny—'cause he was as flush as a' Osage chief.

“Why don't you grub over to the eatin'-house oncet in a while?” I ast him. “They got all *kinds* of tony things—tomatoes and cucumbers and as-paragrass, and them little toadstool things.”

“And out here in the desert!” says Boston. “I s'pose they bring 'em from other places.”

“Not on you’ life!” I answers. “They grow ’em right here—in flower pots.”

Out come a pencil. “How pictureskew!” Boston says,—and put it down.

End of that first week, when I stopped in at the Arnaz place fer supper, I says to him, “Wal,” I says, “book about done?”

He was layin’ back lazy in a chair,—*as usual*—watchin’ Carlota trot the crock’ry in. He batted his eyes. “Done!” he repeats. “No. Why, I ain’t got only a few notes.”

“Notes?” I says; “notes?” I was *turrible* disappointed. (I reckon I was worryin’ over the book worse’n *he* was.) “Why, say, couldn’t you make nothin’ outen that bad man who was a-paintin’ the town the other night?”

“Just a bad man don’t make a book,” says Boston; “leastways, only a yalla-back. But take a bad man, and a *gal*, and you git a story of *ad-venture*.”

A gal. Yas, you need a gal fer a book. And you need *the* gal if you want t’ be right happy. I knowed that. Pretty soon, I ast, “Have you picked on a gal?”

“Here’s Carlota,” he says. “*She’d* make a figger fer a book.”

Carlota!—the little skeezicks! Y’ see, she’s *aw-ful* pretty. Hair blacker’n a stack of black cats. Black eyes, too,—big and friendly lookin’. (That’s where you git fooled—Carlota’s a blend of tiger-cat and bronc; she can purr ’r pitch—take you’ choice.) Her face is just snow white, with a little bit of pink—now y’ see it, now y’ don’t see it—on her cheeks, and a little spot of blazin’ red fer a mouth.

“But what I’m after most now,” he goes on, “is a plot.”

A plot, y’ savvy, is a story, and I got him the best I could find. This was Buckshot’s:

“Boston, this is a *blamed* enterprisin’ country,—almost *any* ole thing can happen out here. Did you ever hear tell how Nick Erickson got his stone fence? No? You could put *that* in a book. Wal, you know, Erickson lives east of here. Nice hunderd and sixty acres he’s got—level, no stones. Wanted t’ fence it. Couldn’t buy lumber ’r wire. Figgered on haulin’ stone, only stone was so blamed far t’ haul. Then,—Nature was accommodatin’. Come a’ earthquake that shook and shook the ranch. Shook all the stones to the top. Erickson picked ’em up—and built the fence.”

But Boston was hard t’ satisfy. So I tried to tell him about Rose and Billy.

“No,” he says; “if they’s *one* thing them printin’ fellers won’t stand fer it’s a

heroine that's hitched."

So, then, I branched off on to pore Bud Hickok.

"No," says Boston, again; "*that* won't do. It's got to end up happy."

Wal, it looked as if that book was goin' fluey. To make things worse, the boys begun kickin' about havin' t' pack so many guns. And I had to git up a notice, signed by the sheriff, which said that more'n two shootin'-irons on any one man wouldn't be 'lowed no more, and that cityzens was t' "shed forthwith."

I seen somethin' had got t' be done pronto. "Cupid," I says to myself, "you *must* consider that there book of Boston's some more. 'Pears that Boston ain't gittin' all he come after. Nothin' ain't happenin' that he can put into a book. Wal, it's *got* t' happen. Just chaw on *that*."

Next, I hunted up the boys. "Gents," I says to 'em, "help me find a bad man that'll fit into a story with a gal."

"Gal?" they repeats.

"Yas; every book has got t' have a gal."

"I s'pose," says Rawson. "Just like ev'ry herd had got t' have a case of staggers. But—who's the gal?"

The boys all lent towards me, fly-traps wide open.

"Carlota Arnaz," I answers.

Some looked plumb eased in they minds—and some didn't. Carlota, she's ace-high with quite a bunch—all ready t' snub her up and marry her.

"The Senorita'll do," says Rawson. "She gen'ally makes out t' keep *some* man mis'erable."

And fer the bad man, we picked out Pedro Garcia, the cholo that was mixed up in that mete'rite business. Drunk 'r sober, fer a hard-looker Pedro shore fills the bill.

Next, we hunted ev'ry which way fer a plot. "I'll tell y'," says Californy Jim, that ole prospector that hangs 'round here; "if the lit'rary lead has pinched out, why don't you *salt—and pretend to make a strike?*"

Hairoil pricked up his ears. "Wouldn't that be somethin' like a—a scheme?" he ast; "somethin' like that we planned out fer Cupid here?"

"Yas."

The hull bunch got plumb pale. Then they made fer the door.,

“Wait, boys!” I hollered. “*Hole* on! Remember this is a scheme that’s been *ast* fer.”

They stopped.

“And,” I says, “it looks pretty good t’ *me*.”

They turned back—shakin’ they haid, though. “Just as you say, Cupid,” says Rawson. And, “Long’s it’s fer *you*,” adds the sheriff. “But schemes is some dangerous.”

“I’ll tell y’!” begins Sam Barnes. “We’ll hole up the dust wagon from the Little Rattlesnake Mine, all of us got up like Jesse James!”

Bill Rawson jumped nigh four feet. “You go soak you’ haid!” he begun, mad’s a hornet. “Hole up the dust wagon! And whichever of us mule-skinners happens t’ be bringin’ it in’ll git the G. B. from that high-falutin’ gent in the States that owns the shootin’-match. No, *ma’am*! And if *that’s* the kind of plot you-all ’re hankerin’ after, you can just count me *outen* this hawg-tyin’!”

“That’s right—sic ’em, Towser; git t’ fightin’,” I says. “Now, Bill, *work* you’ hole-back straps. I cain’t say as Sam’s plan hit the right spot with me, neither. ’Cause how could *Carlota* figger in that pow-wow? Won’t do.”

Wal, after some more pullin’ and haulin’, we fixed it up this way: Pedro’d grab Carlota and take her away on a hoss whilst Boston and the passel of us was in the Arnaz place. He was t’ hike north, and drop her at the Johnson shack on the edge of town—then go on, takin’ a dummy in her place, and totin’ a brace of guns filled with blanks. We’d foller with plenty of blanks, too—and Boston. How’s that fer high!

If you want to ast me, I think the hull idear was just *O. K.*, and no mistake. Beautiful gal kidnapped—bra-a-ave posse of punchers—hard ride—hot fight—rescue of a pilla stuffed with the best alfalfa on the market. *Procession* files back, all sand and smiles.

“Why,” I says to Bergin, “them Eastern printin’ fellers’ll set ’em up fer Boston so fast that he’ll plumb float.”

And the sheriff agreed.

But it couldn’t happen straight off. Pedro had t’ be tole about it, and give his orders. Carlota, the same. I managed this part of the shindig, the boys gittin’ the blanks, the hosses and the hay lady.

Wal, I rode down to the section-house and ast fer Pedro. He come out, about ten pounds of railroad ballast—more 'r less—spread on to them features of hisn. (*That'd 'a' been colour fer Boston, all right.*) I tole him what we was goin' t' do, *why* we was a-doin' it, and laid out *his* share of the job. Then I tacked on that the gal he'd steal was Carlota.

Now, as I think about it, I *recall* that he looked *mighty* tickled. Grinned all over and said, “Me gusta mucho” more'n a dozen times. But *then* I didn't pay no 'tention to how he acted. I was so glad he'd fall in with me. (The Ole Nick take the greasers! A' out-and-out, low-down lot of sneakin' coyotes, anyhow! And I might 'a' *knowed*—)

“Pedro,” I says, “they's no rush about this. We'll kinda work it up slow. T' make the hull thing seem dead real, you come to town ev'ry evenin' fer a while, and hang 'round the rest'rant. Spend a little spondulix with the ole woman so's she won't kick you out, and shine up t' Carlota when Boston's on the premises. Ketch on?”

Pedro said he did, and I loped back to town t' meet up with Carlota and have it out with her—and that was a job fer a caution!

Carlota was all bronc that day—stubborn, pawin', and takin' the bit. And if I kept up with her, and come out in the lead, it was 'cause I'd had some *experience* with Macie, and I'd learned when t' leave a rambunctious young lady have her haid.

“Carlota,” I says, “us fellers has fixed up a mighty nice scheme t' help out Boston with that book he's goin' to write.”

“So?” She was all awake—quicker'n scat.

“Yas,” I goes on. “Y' know, he's been wantin' somethin' *excitin'* t' put in it. We figger t' give it to him.”

“Como?” she ast.

“With a case of kidnappin'. Man steals gal—we foller with Boston—lots of shootin'—save the gal—”

“What gal?”

“It's a big honour—and we choosed you.”

“So-o-o!”

Say! that hit her right, *I* tell y'! But I had to go put my foot in it, a-course. “Yas, *you*,” I goes on. “Mebbe you noticed Boston's here pretty frequent?”

“Si! si! si! señor!”

“That’s ’cause he’s been studyin’ you—so’s he could use you fer a book character.”

“So!” she said. “*That* is it! *that* is why!” Mad? Golly! Them black eyes of hern just snapped, and she grabbed a hunk of bread and begun knifin’ it.

“Wal,” I says, “you don’t seem t’ ketch on to the fact that you been handed out a blamed big compliment. A person in a *book* is *some potatoes*.”

“No! *no!* señor!”

Pride hurt, I says to myself. “Now, Carlota,” I begun, “don’t cut off you’ nose t’ spite you’ face. Pedro Garcia is turrrible tickled that we ast *him*.”

“Pedro—puf!”

“In the book,” I goes on, “he’s the bad man that loves you so much he cain’t help stealin’ you.”

“I *hate* Pedro,” she says. “He is like that—bad.”

“But we ain’t astin’ you t’ *like* him, and he don’t *git* you. He drops you off at Johnson’s and takes a dummy the rest of the way. We want t’ make Boston *think* they’s danger.”

“So?” All of a suddent, she didn’t seem nigh as mad—and she looked like she’d just thought of somethin’.

I seen my chanst. “That was the way we fixed it up,” I goes on. “A-course, now you don’t want t’ be the *heroine*, I’ll ast one of the eatin’-house gals. I reckon *they* won’t turn me down.” And I moseyed towards the door.

“Cupid,” she calls, “come back. You say, he will think another man loves me so much that he carries me away?”

“You got it,” I answers.

She showed them little nippers of hern. “Good!” she says. “I do it!”

“But, Carlota, listen. Boston ain’t to be next that this is a put-up job. He’s to think it’s genuwine. Savvy? And he’ll git all the feelin’s of a real kidnap. Now, to fool him right, you got to do one thing: Be nice t’ Pedro when Boston’s ’round.”

Little nippers again. “I do it,” she says.

I started t’ go, but she called me back. “He will think another man loves me so

much that he carries me away?" she repeats.

"*Shore*," I says. And she let me go.

Y' know, *flirtin'* was Carlota's strong suit. And that very evenin' I seen her talkin' acrosst the counter to Pedro sweeter'n panocha,—with a takin' smile on the south end of that cute little face of hern. But her eyes wasn't smilin'—and a Spanish gal's eyes don't lie.

But supper was late, and Boston and me was at a table clost by,—him lookin' ugly tempered. So ole lady Arnaz tole Carlota t' jar loose. And pretty soon we was wrastlin' our corn-beef, and Pedro was gone.

Rawson sit down nigh us. "Cupid," he says solemn, "reckon we won't git to play that game of draw t'-night." And he give my foot a kick.

"Why?" I ast.

"Account of Pedro bein' in town. I figger t' stay clost to the bunk-house."

"So 'll I," I says, and begun examinin' my shootin'-iron mighty anxious.

"Who's this Pedro?" ast Boston.

"Didn't y' see him?" I says. "He's a greaser, and a' awful bad cuss t' monkey with. If you happen t' go past him and so much as wiggle a finger, it's like takin' you' life in you' hands. Look at this." And I showed him a piece that me and Hairoil 'd fixed up fer the last *EyeOpener*.

"*Pedro Garcia*," it read, "*was found not guilty by Judge Freeman fer perforatin' Nick Trotmann's sombrero in a street row last Saturday night week. Proved that Nick got into Pedro's way and sassed him. Pedro 'd come to town consider'ble the worse fer booze and, as is allus the case—*" Then they was a inch 'r two without no writin'. Under that was this: "*As a matter of extreme precaution, we have lifted the last half of the above article, havin' got word that Garcia is due in town again. Subscribers will please excuse the gap. I didn't git no time t' fill it in. Editor.*"

"And what's he doin' in *here*?" says Boston, "—talkin' to a young gal!"

"Half cracked about her," puts in Bill. "And if she won't have him, 'r her maw interferes, I'm feared they'll be a tragedy."

"Low ruffian!" says Boston.

Later on, about ten o'clock, say, I was passin' the rest'rant, and I heerd a man singin'—

*“Luz de mi alma!
Luz de mi vida!”*

and that somethin’ was “despedosin’” his heart. (I savvy the lingo pretty good.)

Wal, it was that dog-goned cholo,—under Carlota’s winda, and he had a guitar. Thunderation! that wasn’t in our *program!*

“Say, you!” I hollered.

He shut up and come over, lookin’ kinda as if he’d been ketched stealin’ sheep, but grinnin’ so hard his eyes was plumb closed—the mean, little, wall-eyed, bow-laigged swine!

“Pedro,” I says, “you’ boss likely wants you. Hit the ties.” ’Cause, mebbe Carlota ’d git mad at his yelpin,’ and knock the hull scheme galley-west.

Talk about you’ cheek! Next night, that greaser and his guitar was doin’ business at the ole stand. I let him alone. Carlota seemed t’ like it. Anyhow, she didn’t hand him out no hot soap suds through the winda, ’r no chairs and tables.

I was glad things was goin’ so nice. ’Cause lately I’d had t’ worry about Mace a good deal. Her letters had eased up a hull lot. Seems she’d been under the weather fer a few days.

When she writ again though, she said she was O. K., but a-course Noo York was lonesome when a person was sick. Op’ra prospects? Aw, they was *fine!*

Next thing, I was nervouser’n a cow with the heel-fly. *No* letters come from the little gal!—leastways, none to Rose. And ev’ry day ole man Sewell snooped ’round the post-office, lookin’ more and more down in the mouth.

“How’s Mace?” Rawson ast him oncet.

“Tol’rable,” he answers, glum as all git out.

That kidnappin’ was fixed on fer Saturday. We didn’t tell Carlota that was the day. Her maw might git wind of the job; ’r the gal ’d go dress up, which ’d spoil the real look of the hull thing. Then, on a Saturday, after five, Pedro was free to come in town—and most allus showed up with some more of the cholos, pumpin’ a hand-car.

This Saturday he come, all right, and went over to Sparks’s corral fer a couple of hosses. (Us punchers ’d tied our broncs over in the corral too, so’s we’d have to run fer ’em when Pedro lit out with the gal. And I’d picked that strawberry roan of Sparks’s fer Boston. It was the fastest critter on four laigs in the hull country.

Y' see, I wanted Boston t' lead the posse.)

Six o'clock was the time named. It 'd give us more 'n two hours of day fer the chase, and then they'd be a nice long stretch of dusk—just the kind of light fer circlin' a' outlaw and capturin' him, dead 'r alive!

Wal, just afore the battle, mother, all us cow-punchers happened into the Arnaz place. And a-course, Boston was there. Me and him was settin' 'way back towards the kitchen-end of the room. Pretty soon, we seen Pedro pass the front winda, ridin' a hoss and leadin' another. His loaded quirt was a-hangin' to his one wrist, and on his right laig was the gun filled with blanks that we'd left at Sparks's fer him. He stopped at the far corner of the house, droppin' the bridle over the broncs' haid so they'd stand. Then he came to the side door, opened it about a' inch, peeked in at Carlota,—she was behind the counter—and whistled.

She walked straight over to him, smilin'—the little cut-up!—and outen the door! Fer a minute, no sound. Then, the signal—a screech.

That screech was so blamed genuwine I almost fergot to stick out my laig and trip Boston as he come by me. Down he sprawled, them spectacles of hisn flyin' off and bustin' to smithereens. The boys bunched at the doors t' cut off the Arnaz boy and the ole lady. Past 'em, I could see them two broncs, with Pedro and Carlota aboard, makin' quick tracks up the street.

“Alas! yon villain has stole her!” says Sam Barnes, throwin' up his arms like they do in one of them theayter plays.

“Come,” yells Rawson. “We will foller and sa-a-ave her.” Then he split fer the corral,—us after him.

When we got to it, we found somethin' funny: Our hosses was saddled and bridled all right—*but ev'ry cinch was cut!*

Wal, you could 'a' knocked me down with a feather!

That same minute, up come Hank Shackleton on a dead run. “Boys!” he says, “that greaser was half shot when he hit town. Got six more jolts at Dutchy's.”

Fast as we could, we got some other saddles and clumb on—Bill and Sam and me and Shackleton, Monkey Mike, Buckshot Milliken and the sheriff—and made fer Hairoil's shack.

No Carlota—but that blamed straw feemale, keeled over woeful, and a cow eatin' her hair.

Shiverin' snakes! but we was a sick-lookin' bunch!

But we didn't lose no time. A good way ahaid, some dust was travellin'. We spurred towards it, cussin' ourselves, wonderin' why Carlota didn't turn her hoss, 'r stop, 'r jump, 'r put up one of her tiger-cat fights.

"What's his idear?" says Monkey Mike. "Where's he takin' her?"

"Bee line fer the reservation," says Buckshot.

"Spanish church there. Makin' her elope."

"Wo-o-ow!" It was Sheriff Bergin. We'd got beyond the Bar Y ranch-house, and 'd gone down a slope into a kinda draw, like, and then up the far side. This 'd brung us out on to pretty high ground, and we could see, about a mile off, two hosses gallopin' side by side. "The gal's bronc is lame!" says the sheriff. "And Pedro's lickin' it. We *got* him! Pull you' guns."

Guns. I got weaker'n a cat. And, all at the same time, the other fellers remembered—and *such* a howl. We had guns, *a-course—but they was filled with blanks!*

We slacked a little.

"Is that greaser loaded?" ast Bergin.

"Give him blanks myself," says Bill.

Ahaid again, faster 'n ever. Carlota's hoss was shore givin' out—goin' on three feet, in little jumps like a jackrabbit. Pedro wasn't able t' git her on to *his* bronc, 'r else he was feard the critter wouldn't carry double. Anyhow, he was behind her, everlastin'ly usin' his quirt—and losin' ground.

Pretty soon, we was so nigh we made out t' hear him. And when he looked back, we seen his face was white, fer all he's a greaser. Then, of a suddent, he come short, half wheeled, waited till we was closter, and fired.

Somethin' whistled 'twixt me and the sheriff—*ping-ng-ng!* It was lead, all right!

And just then, whilst he was pullin' t' right and left, scatterin' quick, but shootin' off blanks (we was so *excited*), that strawberry roan of Sparks's come past us like a streak of lightnin'. And on her, with his dicer gone, no glasses, a ca'tridge-belt 'round his neck, and a pistol in one hand, was Boston!

"Hi, you fool," yells the sheriff, "You'll git killed!"

(Tire Pedro out and then draw his fire was the best plan, y' savvy.)

Boston didn't answer—kept right on.

But the run was up. Pedro 'd reached that ole dobe house that Clay Peters lived in oncet, pulled the door open, and makin' Carlota lay flat on her saddle (*she was tied on!*) druv in her hoss. Then, he begun t' lead in hisn—when Boston brung up his hand and let her go—bang.

Say! that greaser got a surprise. He give a yell, and drawed back, lettin' go his hoss. Then, he shut the door to, and we seen his weasel face at the winda.

Boston's gun come up again.

“Look out,” I hollered. “You'll hurt the gal.”

He didn't shoot then, but just kept goin'. Pedro fired and missed. Next minute, Boston was outen range on the side of the house where they wasn't no winda, and offen his hoss; and the cholo was poppin' at us as we come on, and yellin' like he was luny.

But Boston, it seems, could hear Carlota sobbin' and cryin' and prayin'. And it got in to his collar. So darned if he didn't run right 'round to that winda and smash it in!

Pedro shot at him, missed; shot again, still yellin' bloody murder.

Boston wasn't doin' no yellin'. He was actin' like a blamed jack-in-the-box. Stand up, fire through the winda, duck—stand up, duck—

He got it. Stayed up a second too long oncet—then tumbled back'ards, kinda half runnin' as he goes down, and laid quiet.

Pedro didn't lean out t' finish him; didn't even take a shot at us as we pulled up byside him and got off.

But the gal was callin' to us. I picked up Boston's gun and looked in.

Pedro was on the dirt floor, holdin' his right hand with his left. (No more shovelin' fer *him*.)

Wal, we opened the door, led Carlota's hoss out, set the little gal loose, and lifted her down.

At first, she didn't say nothin'—just looked to where Boston was. Then she found her feet and went towards him, totterin' unsteady.

“Querido!” she calls; “querido!”

Boston heerd her, and begun crawlin' t' meet her. “All right, sweetheart,” he says, “—all right. I ain't hurt much.”

Then they kissed—and we got *another* surprise party!

That night, as I was a-settin' on a truck at the deepot, thinkin' to myself, and watchin' across the tracks to the mesquite, here come Boston 'round the corner, and he set down byside me.

“Wal, Cupid?” he says, takin' holt of my arm.

“Boston,” I begun. “I—I reckon *you* don't need me no more.”

“No,” says Boston, “I don't. And I want t' square with y'. Now, the boys say you're plannin' t' go to Noo York later on—t' take the town t' pieces and see what's the matter with it, eh?” And he dug me in the ribs.

“Wal,” I answers, “I've *talked* about it—some.”

“It's a good idear,” he goes on. “But about my bill—I hope you'll think a hunderd and fifty is fair, fer these three weeks.”

“Boston!” I got kinda weak all to oncet. “I cain't take it. It wasn't worth that.”

“I got a plot,” he says, “and colour, and a bad man, and”—smilin' awful happy—“a gal. So you get you' trip right away. And don't you come back *alone*.”

CHAPTER NINE

A ROUND-UP IN CENTRAL PARK

The boys was a-settin' 'long the edge of the freight platform, Bergin at the one end of the line, Hairoil at the other, and all of 'em either a-chawin' 'r a-smokin'. I was down in front, doin' a promynade back'ards and for'ards, (I was itchin' so to git started) and keepin' one eye peeled through the dark towards the southwest—fer the haidlight of ole 202.

“And, Cupid,” Sam Barnes was sayin', “you'll find a quart of tanglefoot in that satchel of yourn. Now, you might go eat somethin' that wouldn't agree with you in one of them Eye-talian rest'rants. Wal, a swaller of that firewater 'll straighten you out pronto.”

“Sam, that shore *is* thoughtful. Use my bronc whenever you want to—she's over in Sparks's corral. Allus speak t' her 'fore you go up to her, though. She's some skittish.”

“And keep you' money in you' boot-laig,” begun the sheriff. “I've heerd that in Noo York they's a hull lot of people that plumb wear theyselves out figgerin' how t' git holt of cash without workin' fer it.”

“We'll miss y' *turrible*, Cupid,” breaks in Hairoil. “I don't hardly know what Briggs 'll do with you gone. Somehow you allus manage t' keep the excitement up.”

“But if things don't go good in Noo York,” adds Hank Shackleton, “why, just holler.”

“Thank y', Hank,—thank y'.”

A little spot was comin' and goin' 'way down the track. The bunch looked that *direction* silent. Pretty soon, we heerd a rumblin', and the spot got bigger, and steady.

The boys got down offen the platform and we moseyed over t' where the end car allus stopped.

Too-oo-oot!

Shackleton reached out fer my hand. “Good-bye, Cupid, you ole son-of-a-gun,” he says almost squeezin’ the paw offen me.

“Take keer of you’self,” says the sheriff.

“Don’t let them fly Noo York dudes git you scairt none” (this was Chub).

“*That ain’t you’ satchel, Cupid, that’s the mail-bag.*”

“Wal, we’d rattle *anybody.*”

“Here’s Boston, *he* wants t’ say good-bye.”

“Wave t’ the eatin’-house gals,—cain’t you see ’em at that upper winda?”

“Cupid,”—it was Hairoil, and he put a’ arm acrosst my shoulder—“*hope* you fergive me fer puttin’ up that shootin’-scrape.”

“Why, a-course, I do.”

Then, whisperin’, “*She* was the gal I tole you about that time, Cupid: The one I *said* I’d marry you off to.”

“You don’t mean it!”

“I do. So—the best *kind* of luck, ole socks!”

“Aw, *thank y’,* Hairoil.”

Next, pushin’ his way through the bunch, I seen Billy Trowbridge, somethin’ white in his hand. “Cupid,” he says,—into my ear, so’s the others couldn’t ketch it—“if the time ever comes when the little gal makes a big success back there in Noo York, ’r if the time comes when she’s thinkin’ some of startin’ home t’ Oklahomaw again, open this. It’s that other letter of Up-State’s.”

“I will, Doc—I will.”

I clumb the steps of the end car and looked round me. On the one side was the mesquite, all black now, and quiet. Say! I hated t’ think it didn’t stretch all the way East! Here, on the other side was the deepot, and Dutchy’s, and the bunk-house, and the feed-shop, and Silverstein’s, and the post-office—

“So long, Cupid!”—it was all-t’gether, gals and fellers, too. Then, “Yee-ee-ee-ooop!”—the ole cow-punch yell.

“So long, boys!” I waved my Stetson.

Next thing, Briggs City begun t’ slip back’ards—slow at first, then faster and faster. The hollerin’ of the bunch got sorta fadey; the deepot lights got littler and

littler. Off t' the right, a new light sprung up—it was the lamp in the sittin'-room at the Bar Y.

“Boss,” I says out loud, “they’s a little, empty rockin’-chair byside yourn t’-night. Wal, I’ll never come back this way no more ’less you’ baby gal is home at the ranch-house again t’ fill it.”

Then, I picked up my satchel and hunted the day-coach.

A-course, when I reached Chicago, the first thing I done was to take a fly at that railroad on stilts. Next, I had t’ go over and turn my lanterns on the lake. Pretty soon I was so all-fired broke-in that I could stand on a street corner without bein’ hitched. But people was a-takin’ me fer Bill Cody, and the kids had a notion to fall in behind when I walked any. So I made myself look cityfied. I got a suit—a nice, kinda brownish-reddish colour. I done my sombrero up in a newspaper and *purchased* a round hat, black and turrible tony. I bought me some sateen shirts,—black, too, with turn-down collars and little bits of white stripes. A white satin tie last of all, and, say! I was fixed!

Wal, after seein’ Chicago, it stands t’ reason that Noo York cain’t git a feller scairt so awful much. Anyhow, it didn’t *me*. The minute I got offen the train at the Grand Central, I got my boots greased and my clothes breshed; then I looked up one of them Fourth of July hitchin’-posts and had my jaw scraped and my mane cut.

“Pardner,” I says t’ the barber feller, “I want t’ rent a cheap room.”

“Look in the papers,” he *advises*.

’Twixt him and me, we located a place afore long, and he showed me how t’ git to it. Wal, sir, I was settled in a jiffy. The room wasn’t bigger ’n a two-spot, and the bed was one of them jack-knife kind. But I liked the looks of the shebang. The lady that run it, she almost fell over when I tole her I was a cow-punch.

“Why!” she says, “are y’ shore? You’re tall enough, but you’re a little thick-set. I thought all cow-boys was very slender.”

“No, ma’am,” I says; “we’re slender in books, I reckon. But out in Oklahomaw we come in all styles.”

“Wal,” she goes on, “they’s something *else* I want to ast. Now, you ain’t a-goin’ to shoot ’round here, are y’? Would you just as lief put you’ pistols away whilst you’re in my house?”

I got serious then. “Ma’am,” I says, “sorry I cain’t oblige y’. But the boys tole

me a gun is plumb needful in Noo York. When it comes to killin' and robbin', the West has got to back outen the lead."

You oughta saw her face!

But I didn't want to look fer no other room, so I pretended t' knuckle. "I promise not to blow out the gas with my forty-five," I says, "and I won't rope no trolley cars—if you'll please tell me where folks go in this town when they want t' ride a hoss?"

"Why, in Central Park," she answers, "on the bridle path."

"Thank y', ma'am," I says, and lit out.

A-course, 'most any person 'd wonder what I'd ast the boardin'-house lady *that* fer. Wal, I ast it 'cause I knowed Macie Sewell good enough to lay my money on *one* thing: She was too all-fired gone on hosses to stay offen a saddle more'n twenty-four hours at a stretch.

I passed a right peaceful afternoon, a-settin' at the bottom of a statue of a man ridin' a big bronc, with a tall lady runnin' ahaid and wavin' a feather. It was at the beginnin' of the park, and I expected t' see Mace come lopin' by any minute. Sev'ral gals *did* show up, and one 'r two of 'em rid off on bob-tailed hosses, follered by gezabas in white pants and doctor's hats. Heerd afterwards they was grooms, and bein' the gals' broncs was bob-tailed, they had to go 'long to keep off the flies.

But Mace, she didn't show up. Next day, I waited same way. Day after, ditto. Seemed t' me ev'ry blamed man, woman and child in the hull city passed me but her. And I didn't know a *one* of 'em. A Chink come by oncet, and when I seen his pig-tail swingin', I felt like I wanted to shake his fist. About that time I begun to git worried, too. "If she ain't ridin'," I says to myself, "how 'm I ever goin' to locate her?"

Another day, when I was settin' amongst the kids, watchin', I seen a feller steerin' my way. "What's this?" I says, 'cause he didn't have the spurs of a decent man.

Wal, when he came clost, he begun to smile kinda sloppy, like he'd just had two 'r three. "Why, hello, ole boy," he says, puttin' out a bread-hooker; "I met you out West, didn't I? How are y'?"

I had the sittywaytion in both gauntlets.

"Why, yas," I answers, "and I'm tickled to sight a familiar face. Fer by jingo!

I'm busted. Can you loan me a dollar?"

He got kinda sick 'round the gills. "Wal, the fact is," he says, swallerin' two 'r three times, "I'm clean broke myself."

Just then a gal with a pink cinch comes walkin' along. She was one of them Butte-belle lookin' ladies, with blazin' cheeks, and hair that's a cross 'twixt molasses candy and the pelt of a kit-fox. She was leadin' a dog that looked plumb ashamed of hisself.

"Pretty gal," says the mealy-mouthed gent, grinnin' some more. "And I know her. Like t' be interdooced?"

"Don't bother," I says. (Her hay was a little too weathered fer *me*.)

"Nice red cheeks," he says, rubbin' his paws t'gether.

"Ya-a-as," I says, "*mighty nice*. But you oughta see the squaws out in Oklahomaw. They varies it with yalla and black."

He give me a kinda keen look. Then he moseyed.

It wasn't more 'n a' hour afterwards when somebody passed that I knowed—in one of them dinky, little buggies that ain't got no cover. Who d' you think it was?—that Doctor Bugs!

I was at his hoss's haid 'fore ever he seen me. "Hole up, Simpson," I says, "I want t' talk to you."

"Why, Alec Lloyd!" he says.

"That's my name."

"How 'd *you* git here?" He stuck out one of them soft paws of hisn.

"Wal, I got turned this way, and then I just follered my nose." (I didn't take his hand. I'd as soon 'a' touched a snake.)

"Wal, I'm glad t' see you." (That was a whopper.) "How's ev'rybody in Briggs?"

"Never you mind about Briggs. I want t' ast *you* somethin': Where's Macie Sewell?"

"I don't know."

"Don't tell me that," I come back. "I know you're lyin'. When you talked that gal into the op'ra business, you had 'a' ax t' grind, yas, you did. Now, *where is she?*"

He looked plumb nervous. “I tell y’, I don’t know,” he answers; “*honest*, I don’t. I’ve saw her just oncet—the day after she got here. I offered t’ do anythin’ I could fer her, but she didn’t seem t’ appreciate my kindness.”

“All right,” I says. “But, Simpson, listen: If you’ve said a word t’ that gal that you oughtn’t to, ’r if you’ve follered ’round after her any when she didn’t want you should, you’ll hear from *me*. Salt *that* down.” And I let him go.

Meetin’ *him* that-a-way, made me feel a heap better. If I could run into the only man I knowed in the city of Noo York, then, sometime, I’d shore come acrosst *her*.

That was the last day I set on the steps of the statue. About sundown, I ast a police feller if anybody could ride in the park without me seein’ ’em from where I was. “Why, yas,” he says, “they’s plenty of entrances, all right. This is just where a few comes in and out. The best way to see the riders is to go ride you’self.”

Don’t know why I didn’t think of that *afore*. But I didn’t lose no time. Next mornin’, I was up turrible early and makin’ fer a barn clost to the park. I found one easy—pretty frequent thereabouts, y’ savvy,—and begun t’ dicker on rentin’ a hoss. Prices was high, but I done my best, and they led out a nag. And what do you think? It had on one of them saddles with no horn,—a shore enough *muley*.

Say! that was a hard proposition. “I ast fer a saddle,” I says, “not a postage stamp.” But the stable-keeper didn’t have no other. So I got on and rode slow. When I struck the timber, I felt better, and I started my bronc up. She was one of them kind that can go all day on a shingle. And her front legs acted plumb funny—jerked up and down. I figgered it was the spring halt. But pretty soon I seen other hosses goin’ the same way. So I swallowed it, like I done the saddle.

But they was one thing about my cayuse made me hot. She wouldn’t lope. No, ma’am, it was trot, trot, trot, trot, till the roots of my hair was loose, and the lights was near shook outen me. You bet I was mighty glad none of the outfit could see me!

But if they’d ’a’ thought *I* was funny, they’d ’a’ had a duck-fit at what I seen. First a passel of men come by, all in bloomers, humpin’ fast,—*up* and down, *up* and down—Monkey Mike, shore’s you live! None of ’em looked joyful, and you could pretty nigh hear they knees squeak! Then ’long come a gal, humpin’ just the same, and hangin’ on to the side of her cayuse fer dear life, lookin’ ev’ry step like she was goin’ to avalanche. And oncet in a while I passed a feller that was runnin’ a cultivator down the trail,—to keep it nice and soft, I reckon, fer the

ladies and gents t' fall on.

But whilst I was gettin' kinda used to things, I didn't stop keepin' a' eye out. I went clean 'round the track twicet. No Macie. I tell y', I begun to feel sorta caved-in. Then, all of a sudden, just as I was toppin' a little rise of ground, I seen her!

She wasn't hangin' on to the side of her hoss, no, ma'am! She was ridin' the prettiest *kind* of a bronc, fat and sassy. And she was settin' a-straddle, straight and graceful, in a spick-and-span new suit, and a three-cornered hat like George Washington.

I let out a yell that would 'a' raised the hair of a reservation Injun. "Macie Sewell!" I says—just like that. I give my blamed little nag a hit that put her into her jerky trot. And I come 'longside, humpin' like Sam Hill.

She pulled her hoss down to a standstill; and them long eye-winkers of hern lifted straight up into the air, she was so surprised. "Alec!" she says.

"Yas, Alec," I answers. "Aw, dear little gal, is y' glad t' see me?"

"Wal, what 're *you* doin' here!" she goes on. "I cain't hardly believe what I see."

I was so blamed flustered, and so happy, and so—so scairt, that I had t' go say the *one* thing that was plumb foolish. "I'm on hand t' take you back home if you're ready," I answers. (Hole on till I give myself another good, ten-hoss-power kick!)

Up till now, her look 'd been all friendly enough. But now of a sudden it got cold and offish. "Take me home!" she begun; "*home!* Wal, I like that! Why, I'm just about t' make a great, big success, *yas*. And I'll thank you not t' spoil my chanst with any more of you' tricks." She swung her bronc round into the trail.

"Macie! Spoil you' chanst!" I answers. "Why, honey, I wouldn't do that. I only want t' be friends—"

Her eyes can give out fire just like her paw's. And when I said that, she give me one turrible mad stare. Then, she throwed up her chin, spurred her bronc, and went trottin' off, a-humpin' the same as the rest of the ladies.

I follered after her as fast as I could. "Macie," I says, "talk ain't goin' t' show you how I feel. And I'll not speak to you again till you want me to. But I'll allus be clost by. And if ever you need me—"

She set her hoss into a run then. So I fell behind—and come nigh pullin' the mouth plumb outen that crow-bait I was on. "Wal, Mister Cupid," I says to

myself, “that Kansas cyclone the boss talked about seems t’ be still a-movin’.”

I wasn’t discouraged, though,—I wasn’t discouraged.

“One of these times,” I says, “she’ll come t’ know that I only want t’ help her.”

Next mornin’, I started my jumpin’-jack business again. And *that* whack, I shore got a rough layout: ’Round and ’round that blamed park, two hunderd and forty-’leven times, without grub, ’r a drink, ’r even water! And me a-hirin’ that hoss *by the hour!*

Just afore sundown, she showed up, and passed me with her eyes fixed on a spot about two miles further on. A little huffy, yet, y’ might say!

I joked to that three-card-monte feller, you recollect, about bein’ busted. Wal, it was beginnin’ t’ look like no joke. ’Cause that very next day I took some stuff acrosst the street to a pawnbroker gent’s, and hocked it. Then I sit down and writ a postal card t’ the boys. “*Pass ’round the hat,*” I says on the postal card, “*and send me the collection. Bar that Mexic. Particulars later on.*”

Wal, fer a week, things run smooth. When Mace seen it was no use to change the time fer her ride, she kept to the mornin’. It saved me a pile. But she wouldn’t so much as look at me. Aw, I felt fewey, just *fewey*.

One thing I didn’t figger on, though—that was the *police*. They’re white, all right (I mean the *police* that ride ’round the park). Pretty soon, they noticed I was allus ridin’ behind Macie. I guess they thought I was tryin’ to bother her. Anyhow, one of ’em stopped me one mornin’. “Young feller,” he says, “you’d better ride along Riverside oncet in a while. Ketch on?”

“Yas, sir,” I says, salutin’.

Wal, I *was* up a stump. If I was to be druv out of the park, how was I ever goin’ to be on hand when Macie ’d take a notion t’ speak.

But I hit on a plan that was somethin’ *won-derful*. I follered her out and found where she stalled her hoss. Next day, I borraed a’ outfit and waited nigh her barn till she come in sight. Then, I fell in behind—*dressed like one of them blamed grooms*.

I thought I was slick, and I *was*—fer a week. But them park *police* is rapid on faces. And the first one that got a good square look at me and my togs knowed me instant. He didn’t say nothin’ to me, but loped off. Pretty soon, another one come back—a moustached gent, a right dudey one, with yalla tucks on his sleeves.

He rides square up to me. "Say," he says, "are you acquainted with that young lady on ahead?"

I tried to look as sad and innocent as a stray maverick. But it was no go. "Wal," I answers, "our hosses nicker to each other."

He pulled at his moustache fer a while. "*You* ain't no groom," he says fin'lly. "Where you from?"

"I'm from the Bar Y Ranch, Oklahomaw."

"That so!" It seemed to plumb relieve him. All of a suddent, he got as friendly as the devil. "Wal, how's the stock business?" he ast. And I says, "Cows is O. K." "And how's the climate down you' way? And how's prospects of the country openin' up fer farmers?"

After that, I shed the groom duds, and not a *police* gent ever more 'n nodded at me. That Bar Y news seemed to make 'em shore easy in they conscience.

But that didn't help me any with *her*. She was just as offish as ever. Why, one day when it rained, and we got under the same bridge, she just talked to her hoss all the time.

I went home desp'rate. The boys 'd sent me some cash, but I was shy again. And I'd been to the pawnbroker feller's so many times that I couldn't look a Jew in the face without takin' out my watch.

That night I mailed postal number two. "Take up a collection," I says again; and added, "Pull that greaser's laig."

I knowed it couldn't allus go on like that. And, by jingo! seems as if things come my way again. Fer one mornin', when I was settin' in a caffy eatin' slap-jacks, I heerd some fellers talkin' about a herd of Texas hosses that had stampeded in the streets the night back. Wal, I ast 'em a question 'r two, and then I lit out fer Sixty-four Street, my eyes plumb sore fer a look at a Western hoss with a' ingrowin' lope.

When I got to the corral, what do you think? Right in front of my eyes, a-lookin' at the herd, and a-pointin' out her pick, was—Macie Sewell!

I didn't let her see me. I just started fer a harness shop, and I bought a pair of spurs. "*Prepare*, m' son," I says to myself; "it'll all be over soon. They's goin' to be trouble, Cupid, trouble, when Mace tries to ride a Texas bronc with a city edication that ain't complete."

She didn't show up in the park that day. I jigged 'round, just the same, workin'

them spurs. But early next mornin', as I done time on my postage stamp, here Mace huv in sight.

Shore enough, she was on a new hoss. It was one of them blue roans, with a long tail, and a roached mane. Gen'ally that breed can go like greased lightnin', and outlast any other critter on four laigs. But this one didn't put up much speed that trip. She'd been car-bound seventeen days.

Clost behind her, I come, practicin' a knee grip.

Nothin' happened that mornin'. Ev'ry time she got where the trail runs 'longside the wagon-road, none of them locoed bull's-eye Simpson vehicles was a-passin'. When she went to go into her stable, Mace slowed her down till the street cars was gone by. The blue roan was meeker 'n a blind purp.

But I knowed it couldn't *last*.

The next afternoon the roan come good and ready. She done a fancy gait into the park. Say! a J. I. C. bit couldn't a' helt her! 'Twixt Fifty-nine and the resservoyer, she lit just *four times*; and ev'ry time she touched, she kicked dirt into the eyes of the stylish *police gent* that was keepin' in handy reach. A little further north, where they's a hotel, she stood on her hind laigs t' look at the scenery.

I begun to git scairt. "Speak 'r *no speak*," I says to myself, "I'm goin' to move up."

That very minute, things come to a haid!

We was all three turned south, when 'long come a goggle-eyed smarty in one of them snortin' Studebakers. The second the smarty seen Mace was pretty, he blowed his horn to make her look at him. Wal! that roan turned tail and come nigh t' doin' a leap-frog over me. The skunk in the buzz-wagon tooted again. And we was off!

We took the return trip short cut. First we hit the brush, Mace's hoss breakin' trail, mine a clost second, the *police gent* number three. Then we hit open country, where they's allus a lot of young fellers and gals battin' balls over fly-nets. The crowd scattered, and we sailed by, takin' them nets like claim-jumpers. I heerd a whistle ahaid oncet, and seen a fat *policeman* runnin' our way, wavin' his arms. Then we went tearin' on,—no stops fer stations—'round the lake, down a road that was thick with keerages,—beatin' ev'rybody in sight—then into timber again.

It was that takin' to the woods the second time that done it. In Central Park is a place where they have ducks and geese (keep the Mayor in aigs, I heerd). Wal,

just to east, like, of that place, is a butte, all rocks and wash-outs. The blue roan made that butte slick as a Rocky Mountain goat. (We'd shook off the *police gent.*) At the top, she pitched plumb over, losin' Mace so neat it didn't more 'n jar her. My hoss got down on his knees, and I come offen *my perch*. Then both broncs went on.

I was winded, so I didn't speak up fer a bit. Fact is, I didn't exac'ly know what to *remark*. Oncet I thought I'd say, "You ridin' a diff'rent hoss t'day, Mace?" 'r "That roan of yourn can lope some." But both bein' kinda personal, I kept still.

But pretty soon, I got a hunch. “I just *knowed* that blamed muley saddle ’d butt me off some day,” I says. “It was shore accomodatin’, though, to let me down right here.”

She didn’t say nothin’. She was settin agin a tree, another of them two-mile looks in her eyes, and she was gazin’ off west.

I lent her way just a little. “What you watchin’, honey?” I ast.

She blushed, awful cute.

I could feel my heart movin’ like a circular saw—two ways fer Sunday. “Honey, what you watchin’?” This time I kinda whispered it.

She reached fer her George Washington, and begun fixin’ to go. “The sky,” she says, some short.

I sighed, and pretended t’ watch the sky, too. It looked yalla, like somebody ’d hit it with a aig.

After while, I couldn’t stand it no longer—I started in again. “Give me a fair shake, Macie,” I says. I was lookin’ at her. Say! they wasn’t no squaw paint on *her* cheeks, and no do-funny, drug-store stuff in that pretty hair of hern. And them grey eyes—!

But she seemed a hull county off from me, and they was a right cold current blowin’ in my *direction*.

“Mace,” I begun again, “since you come t’ Noo York you ain’t got you’self promised, ’r nothin’ like that, have you? If you have, I’ll go back and make that Briggs City bunch look like a lot of colanders.”

She shook her haid.

“Aw, Mace!” I says, turrible eased in my mind. “And—and, little gal, has that bug doc been a-holdin’ down a chair at you’ house of Sunday nights?”

“No,—he come just oncet.”

“Why just oncet, honey?”

“I didn’t want him t’ come no more.”

“He said somethin’ insultin.’ *I* know. And when I see him again—”

She looked at me square then, and I seen a shine in them sweet eyes. “Alec,” she says, “you ast me oncet t’ cut that man out. Wal, when I got here, it was the only thing I could do fer—fer you.”

“My little gal!—and nobody else ain’t been visitin’ you. Aw! I’m a jealous critter!”

“Nobody else. People ain’t very sociable here.” Her lip kinda trembled.

That hurt me, and I run outen talk, fer all I had a heap t’ say. They was a lot of twitterin’ goin’ on overhaid, and she was peekin’ up and ’round, showing a chin that was enough t’ coop the little birds right outen the trees.

I lent closter. “Say, Mace,” I begun again, “ain’t this park O. K. fer green grass? I reckon the Bar Y cows ’d like to be turned loose here.”

She smiled a little, awful tender. “Bar Y!” she says, pullin’ at her gauntlets.

It give me spunk. “Mace,” I says again, “if I’d ’a’ been mean, I’d ’a’ let the parson go on marryin’ us, wouldn’t I? Did you ever think of that, little gal?”

She looked down, blinkin’.

I reached over and got holt of one of her hands. I was breathin’ like pore Up-State. “Honey,” I says, “honey, dear.”

She looked square at me. “Alec,” she says, “you didn’t understand me. I ain’t the kind of a gal that can be roped and hobbled and led on a hackamore.”

“And you ain’t the kind t’ dance with greasers,” I says, “—if you’re thinkin’ back to our first little fuss. *No*, you *ain’t*. You’re too darned nice fer such cattle.”

By then, I was shakin’ like I had the buck-fever. “Macie,” I goes on, “ain’t you goin’ t’ let me come and see you?”

“Wal—wal—”

I got holt of her other hand. “Aw, little gal,” I says, “nobody wants you t’ win out more ’n I do. *I’m* no dawg-in-the-manger, Macie. You got a’ *awful* fine voice. Go ahaid—and be the biggest singer in Amuricaw. But, honey,—that needn’t t’ keep you from likin’ me—from likin’ ole Alec, that cain’t live without his dear little gal—”

“*I do* like y’! And didn’t I allus say you was t’ come on when I made a success?”

She come into my arms then. And, aw! I knowed *just* how lonesome she’d been, pore little sweetheart! by the way she clung t’ me.

“Alec!—my Alec!”

“Never mind! honey dear, never mind! I’m here t’ take keer of y’.”

Pretty soon, I says, “Macie, I bought somethin’ fer you a while back.” (I felt in

my vest pocket.) “Here it is. Will you look at it?”

She looked. And her pretty face got all smiles and blushes, and her eyes tearful. “Alec!” she whispered. “Aint it *beautiful!*” And she reached out her left hand t’ me.

I took it in both of mine—clost, fer a second. Then I sorted out that slim third finger of hern,—and slipped on my little brandin’-iron.

CHAPTER TEN

MACIE AND THE OP'RA GAME

THE street Mace lived on was turrible narra. Why, if a long-horn had 'a' been druv through it, he could 'a' just give a wiggle of his haid and busted all the windas in the block. And her house! It was nigh as dark as the inside of a cow, and I *judged* they was a last-year's cabbage a-wanderin' 'round somewheres. Wal, never mind. Two shakes of a lamb's tail, and I'd clumb about a hunderd steps and—

“How are y', little gal?”

“Alive and kickin', Alec.”

She ast me in. A kinda ole lady was over to one side, cookin'. At a table was two gents, the one young, with a complexion like the bottom-side of a watermelon; the other about fifty, with a long coat, a vest all over coffee, and no more chin'n a gopher.

“Mrs. Whipple,” says Macie, “Mister Lloyd.”

“Ma'am, I'm tickled t' death.”

“Hair Von” (somethin'-r'-other), “Mister Lloyd.” (Don't wonder she called him “*Hair*.” By thunder! he had a mane two feet long!) “And Mister Jones.” (I ketched *that* name O. K.)

“Mister Lloyd,” says the ole lady, “will you have some breakfast?”

I felt like sayin' they 'd likely be blamed little fer *me*, 'cause them two gezabas was just a-*hoppin'* it in to 'em. But I only answers, “Thank y', I just et in one of them bong-tong rest'rants that's down in a cellar, and so, ma'am, my breadbasket's plumb full.”

I sit down on a trunk (it had a tidy over it, but I knowed it was a *trunk* all right), and Macie, she sit down byside me.

“Alec,” she begun,—say! she looked mighty sweet!—“t'-night is a' awful important night in my life. I been a-studyin' with Hair Von” (you know), “and now I'm a-goin' to have a *recital*. And what d' you think? Seenyer” (I fergit who,

this minute), “the grea-a-at impressyroa, is comin’ to hear me. And he’s goin’ to put me into grand op’ra.”

“You don’t say!”

“Yas,” says Long-hair, swellin’ up. “The Seenyer is my friend, and any favour—”

I turned and looked clost at Macie. Her face was all alive, she was so happy, and her eyes was dancin’. “You’re a-goin’ t’ make you’ big stab t’-night,” I says. “Wal, I shore wish you luck.”

Then I took another look at that Perfessor—and of a suddent I begun to wonder *if all the cards was on the table*. ’Cause he was too oily to be genuwine. And I’d saw his stripe afore—“even up on the red and white, five to one on the blue, and ten to one on the numbers.”

“She’ll be a second Patty,” he says, puttin’ out a bread-hooker fer more feed.

“I’ll take another slice of toast,” says Melon-face, “and a’ aig and a third cup—it’s so good, Miss Sewell, I’m really *ashamed*, yas, I *am*.”

After that, I didn’t say much—just plumb petryfied watchin’ them two gents shovel. Talk about you’ grizzly in the springtime! And you bet they was no gittin’ shet of ’em till they couldn’t hole no more.

But, fin’lly, they moseyed, and me and Macie and the ole lady had a chin. It come out that Long-hair (*and his friend*) showed up ev’ry mornin’.

“And allus gits his breakfast,” I says.

“Wal, in Noo York, folks drop ’round that—a-way,” she answers. “It’s Bohemia.”

“Bohemia—you mean a kinda free hand-out.”

“Alec! *No!* Bohemians divvy with each other.”

“Seem’s t’ me Macie Sewell does *most* of the divvyin’.”

“You don’t understand,” she says. “People with artistic temper’ments don’t think about such—such common things.”

“No? Just the same, that artistic team of yourn was shore stuck on boiled aigs.”

That ruffled her up some. “Alec,” she says, “you mustn’t run down the Perfessor. He’s a big musician.”

“Wal,” I answers, “if hair makes a big musician, ’Pache Sam oughta lead the band.”

“And he’s been awful good to me. Why, he’s let go dozens and *dozens* of rich pupils to come here ev’ry day and give me my lesson.”

“Fer how much?”

“What?” She got red.

“Fer how much?” I ast again.

“Five dollars,” she answers.

I snickered.

“But he charges all the others *ten*,” she puts in quick. “He come down in the price ’cause he was so wrapped up in my *career*.”

“Money lastin’?” I ast, and looked at the ole lady.

She give me the high sign.

But Macie answered cheerful. “It’s carried me good so far,” she says; “and after t’-night I can stand on my own feet.”

“Reckon you won’t mind my comin’ t’ hear you,” I says. (’Cause I’d got a’ idear what I was goin’ to do.) She said come ahaid. Then I skun out.

First off, I hunted one of them sun-bonnet keeriges. The feller that owned it was h’isted ’way up on top, and he had a face like a cured ham. I tole him who I was goin’ t’ visit, and ast him what ’d be the damage if he carted me that far. He said a two spot ’d do the trick, so I clumb in, he give his broomtail a lick, and we was off in a bunch.

Wal, fer the balance of that day, you can bet I didn’t let no grass sprout under *my* moccasins. And when I turned up, ’twixt eight and nine o’clock at that *recital*, I was a-smilin’ like Teddy—and loaded fer bear!

It was at Long-Hair’s shebang. He took me into a big room where they was about a dozen ladies and gents. But I couldn’t hardly see ’em. They was plenty of gas fixin’s, only he had ’em turned ’way down, and little red parasol-jiggers over ’em. And they was some punk-sticks a-burnin’ in a corner.

If you want t’ ast *me*, I think I hit the funny spot of that bunch right good and hard. The women kinda giggled at each other, and the men cocked they eyes at the ceilin’ and put they hands to they mouths. But I wasn’t nigh as big a freak to them as they was t’ *me*!

“Say!” I says to Macie, ’way low, “where ’d you round up this passel of what-is-its?”

“Ssh!” she whispers back. “They’ll hear you! Most of ’em is big artists.”

“No!” I got turrible solemn. “Have they brought they temper’ments with ’em?”

She laughed.

“Now, don’t devil me, Alec,” she says. “But honest, ain’t this Bohemian atmosphere just grand?”

“Wal,” I says, sniffin’ it, “it reminds *me* of a Chinee wash-house.”

That wasn’t the worst of it. The men was tankin’ up like the Ole Harry—right in front of the women! And on beer! What d’ you think! *Beer!*

And the ladies—say! if they was t’ wear them kind of dresses out our way (not more’n a pocket-handkerchief of cloth in the waist, that’s straight), why, they ’d git run in to the cooler *shore*. And, by thunder! some of ’em was smokin’! *Smokin’!* And they wasn’t a greaser gal amongst ’em, neither.

“What kind of a place I got in to?” I ast Macie. Gee! I felt turrible.

“Ssh! Long-hair is goin’ to play a pyano piece he made up a-a-all by hisself.”

And he done it. First, he goes soft, fingerin’ up and down, and movin’ from side t’ side like his chair was hot. Then, he took a runnin’ jump at hisself and worked harder. But they wasn’t the sign of a tune—just jiggles. Next, by jingo! it was help you’self to the gravy! He everlastin’ly lambasted them keys, and knocked the lights plumb outen that pore instrument.

Jumpin’ buffalo! I got t’ laughin’ so I kinda tipped over again a’ iron thing that was set clost to the wall, and come blamed nigh burnin’ the hand offen me.

When I come to, he was done and down, and a bleached lady, so whitewashed and painted she was plumb disguised, was settin’ afore the pyano. Then up gits a tall gal, skinny, long neck, forrid like a fish, hair that hadn’t been curried since week a-fore last.

She begun t’ sing like a dyin’ calf—eyes shut, and makin’ faces. But pretty soon, she took a *new* holt, and got to goin’ uphill and down, faster ’n Sam Hill; then ’round and ’round, like a dawg after its tail; then hiccupin’; then—she kinda shook herself—and let out a last whoppin’ beller.

“Macie,” I says, “do you have t’ herd with this outfit *reg’lar*? Why, say, *all* the wild Injuns ain’t out West.”

She didn’t say nothin’. Pore little gal, she was watchin’ the door. And Mister Long-hair? He was wanderin’ ’round, lookin’ powerful oneasy. (He’d ’a’ better,

the scale-haid!) 'Fore long, he goes outside.

Up gits a short, stumpy feller with a fiddle. All the rest begun t' holler and clap. Stumpy, he bowed and flopped his ears, and then he went at that little, ole fiddle of hisn like he'd snatch it bald-haided. Wal, *that was bully!*

And now it was Macie they wanted.

"But *he ain't* here yet," she says.

Long-hair come back just then. "I *regret* to say, Miss Sewell," he begun, "that Seenyer" (the impressyroa) "cain't run over t'-night. But he'll be to my next little *recital* a month from now."

"A *month*," repeats Macie. Her face fell a mile, and she got as white as chalk-rock.

"It's all right," says the Perfessor, rubbin' his hands. "Go ahaid and sing anyhow."

So she stood up, tremblin' a little. Long-hair sit down to the pyano, and this was it!

"Oh,
oh,
oh,
sweet
sing bird,
Oh,
oh,
sweet
sing bird,
ety
plump plump—"
plump
plump
Plump

It was a shame. But Macie done her best. When she ended up, they hollered fer more, and Long-hair like to break hissself in two, bowin'.

She just stood there—like she'd been run to ground. The Perfessor waved his hand. "The Jew's song from Fowst," he calls out.

I couldn't stand it no longer. I lent towards her. "The Mohawk Vale," I says;

“*please* sing The Mohawk Vale.”

The crowd giggled. The Perfessor, he started to laugh, too—but ketched my eye, and coughed.

Macie turned towards him. “A’ ole friend; I’d like to,” she says. And sit down to play fer herself.

“*Sweet is the vale where the Mohawk gently glides
On its fair, windin’ way to the sea—*”

She helt herself straight, and tried t’ stick it out. But she couldn’t. I seen her shake a little, her voice got husky,—and she bent ’way over, her face in her hands.

“Why, Miss Sewell!” they exclaims, “why, what’s the *matter*?”

Then, I gits up. “Excuse me,” I says, “fer puttin’ a kibosh on you’ party. But I just want to say that this Bohemia-artistic-temper’ment fandango stands *adjourned*. Ev’rybody please vamose—’ceptin’ the Perfessor.”

My goodness! the pow-wow! But they skedaddled just the same. Then I turned to Long-hair.

“You’ little game is over,” I begun. “You don’t flimflam this gal another minute. You don’t bum offen her fer another meal. You don’t give her no more of that Patty song-and-dance.”

Macie come at me. “Alec! that’s insultin’,” she says.

The Perfessor starts a-gabblin’.

“Hole you’ hosses,” I says. “You knowed *all* the time that the impressyroa wasn’t goin’ to show up.”

“Miss Sewell, this is *too* much,” says Long-hair, clawin’ at his mane.

“They’s more a-comin’,” I says. “Macie, I was shore somethin’ was skew-gee about this mealy-mouth here, so I had a talk with that Seenyer this afternoon.”

That give Long-hair a jolt. “Impossible!” he yells; “the secretaries—”

“They *was* about eight, not to mention some office kids,” I says; “but when I give ’em some straight ole Oklahomaw, I went in O. K.”

Long-hair backed off, plumb kaflummuxed.

“The Seenyer said he’d heerd of this gent,” I goes on, “and wouldn’t let him learn a cow of hisn to sing. Friend? any little favour? come here? *Nixey*.”

I walks over to him. “Acknowledge the corn, you polecat,” I says.

He seen the jig was up. But he made his bluff.

“Miss Sewell, this coarse feller—”

Macie cut in. “It’s all so,” she says. “You’ve put me off and *put* me off. All my money’s gone. I’d banked on t’-night. And now—what am I goin’ to do!” She dropped on to a chair, her face in her hands again.

“My pore little gal!”

She sit up. “No, Alec,” she says, “I *ain’t* pore. I’ve got you, and the best paw a gal ever had, and my home—aw, the *dear* ole Bar Y! And, Alec, I’m goin’.”

“Goin’ where, little gal?”

She come over and stood in front of me, and put her two hands on my arm. “Alec,” she says, tears and smiles all to oncet, “I’m goin’ t’ start home to Oklahomaw.”

“Start home to Oklahomaw”—them words made me think, of a suddent, about what Billy ’d said t’ me at the train. I reached into my inside coat-pocket. “Wait, little gal,” I says, “we must read *this* first. It’s that other letter of Up-State’s.”

She opened it, her fingers all thumbs, she was so excited. And standin’ there byside me, with the Perfessor a-watchin’ us from a corner, she begun:

“*Dear Alec Lloyd—*’Why, it ain’t fer *me*, Alec.”

“Go right on, honey.”

“Dear Alec Lloyd, you’ll git this after Macie’s gone to Noo York. Alec, you know now the trip was needful. Do you think you could ’a’ helt her if she didn’t have her try? Mebbe. But you wouldn’t ’a’ been happy. All her life she ’d ’a’ felt sore about that career she give up, and been longin’ and longin’.

“And, Macie, ’cause you’ll read this, too—now you know they was somethin’ else you wanted more ’n a singin’ chanst, and you won’t hole it agin me fer sayin’ I knowed you wouldn’t make no go of it. The op’ra game at its best is a five-hundred-to-one shot. A turrible big herd plays it, the foreigners git the main prizes, and the hull thing’s fixed crooked by all kinds of inside pull.

“Sides, you’ voice don’t match with crowded streets and sapped-out air. It fits the open desert. Mebbe so many won’t listen to it out here, but they’ll even things up by the way they’ll feel. And this letter is to tell you how I thank y’ fer singin’ The Mohawk Vale. Gawd bless y’, little gal!

“And, Alec, all kinds of good luck to you. What’s in this letter ain’t much, but it’ll be a nest-aig.”

Mace peeked inside the envelope. “Why, here’s a bill!” she says. “Alec!” And she drewed it out.

“A bill?” I turned it over. “Why–why, it’s fer five hunderd dollars! Macie!”

Long-Hair got up and started our way, grinnin’.

“But *you* don’t git a cent of it,” I says, turnin’ on him quick.

He dodged.

“You’d *better* be keerful,” I says. Then, to Macie, “Honey, here’s another chanst t’ make a try. You can git a *good* teacher, *this* time–yas, that’s what I said, Perfessor, *a good teacher*–and you’ll be the biggest singer in Amuricaw *yet*.” And I helt the bill out to her.

The only answer she give was t’ run to the door and pull at one of them round thing-um-a-jigs that brings a telegraph kid. Next, she come back to a table, found a piece of paper and writ somethin’ on it.

“Here, Alec,” she says, “here. Read this.”

It said:

“Manager Harvey Eatin’-House, Briggs City, Oklahomaw. Please telephone paw that I’m comin’ home, and Alec wants back his job.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A BOOM THAT BUSTED

SAY! wouldn't you 'a' figgered, after I'd brung Mace back t' the ole Bar Y, and made her paw so happy that the hull ranch couldn't hole him, and he had t' go streak up t' town and telephone Kansas City fer a grand pyano and a talkin'-machine—now *wouldn't* you 'a' figgered that he'd 'a' treated me A1 when I come to ast him fer the little gal?

Wal,—listen t' this!

'Fore ever I spoke to him, I says to myself, "It ain't no use, when you want to start up a mule, to git behind and push 'r git in front and pull. No, ma'am. The only way is to hunt a pan of feed 'r a pick-axe.

"Now, Sewell's shore one of them long-eared critters—hardmouthed, and goin' ahaid like blazes whenever you wanted him to come short; then, again, balkin' till it's a case of grandfather's clock, and you git to thinkin' that 'fore he'll move on he'll plumb drop in his tracks. So no drivin'. Coaxin' is good enough fer you' friend Cupid."

The first time I got a good chanst, I took in my belt, spit on my hands, shassayed up to the ole man, and sailed in—dead centre.

"Boss," I begun, "some fellers marry 'cause they git plumb sick and tired of fastenin' they suspenders with a nail, and some fellers marry—"

"Wal? wal? wal?" breaks in Sewell, offish all of a suddent, and them little eyes of hisn lookin' like two burnt holes in a blanket. "What you drivin' at? Git it out. Time's skurse."

"Puttin' it flat-footed, then," I says, "I come to speak to you about my marryin' Macie."

He throwed up his haid—same as a long-horn'll do when she's scairt—and wrinkled his forrid. Next, he begun to jingle his cash (*ba-a-ad* sign). "So *that's* what?" (He'd guessed as much a'ready, I reckon.) "Wal,—I'm a-listenin'."

Then I got a *turrible* rush of words to the mouth, and put the case up to him right strong. Said they was no question how I felt about Mace, and that this shore was

a life-sentence fer me, 'cause I wasn't the kind of a man to want to ever slip my matreemonal hobbles. And I tacked on that the little gal reckoned *she* knowed her own mind.

"No gal ever *lived* that knowed her own mind," puts in Sewell, snappy as the dickens, and actin' powerful oneasy.

"But Mace ain't the usual brand," I says. "She's got a good haid—a *fine* haid. She's like *you*, Sewell."

"You can keep you' compliments to home," says the boss. Then, after a little bit, "S'pose you been plannin' a'ready where you'd settle." (This sorta inquirin'.)

"Ya-a-as," I says, "we've talked some of that little house in Briggs City which Doc Trowbridge lets—the one over to the left of the tracks."

That second, I seen a look come over his face that made me plumb goose-flesh. It was the sorta look that a' ole bear gives you when you've got him hurt and into a corner—some appealin', y' savvy, and a hull lot mad.

"Gosh!" I says to myself, "I put my foot in it when I brung up Billy's name. Sewell recollects the time I stuck in my lip."

"You plan t' live in Briggs," he says. He squz his lips t'gether, and turned his face towards the ranch-house. Mace was inside, goin' back'ards and for'ards 'twixt the dinin'-room and the kitchen. She looked awful cute and pretty from where we was, and was callin' sassy things to the Chinaman. Sewell watched her and watched her, and I recalled later on (when I wasn't so all-fired anxious and excited), that the ole man's face was some white, and he was kinda all lent over.

"Ya-a-as," I continues (some trembley, though), "that place of Billy's 'd suit."

Two seconds, and Sewell come round on me like as if he'd chaw me into bits. "What you goin' to rent on?" he ast. "What you goin' to live on?"

"Wal," I answers, sorta took back, "I got about three hunderd dollars left of the money Up-State give me. Wal, that's my nest-aig. And I can make my little forty a month—and grub—*any* ole day in the week."

Sewell drawed his breath in, deep. (Look out when a man takes up air that-away: Somethin's shore a-comin'!) "Forty a month!" he says. "Forty a month! That just about keeps you in ca'tridges! Forty a month!—and you without a square foot of land, 'r a single, solitary horned critter, 'r more'n a' Injun's soogin' 'twixt you and the floor! Do y' think you can take that little baby gal of mine into a blank shack that ain't got a stick of anythin' in it, and turn her loose

of a Monday, like a Chink, to do the wash?”

“Now, ease up, boss,” I says. “I reckon I think *almost* as much of Mace as you do. And I’m figgerin’ to make her life just as happy as I *can*.”

Wal, then he walked up and down, up and down (this all happened out by the calf-coral), and blowed and blowed and blowed. Said that him and his daughters had allus made the Bar Y ranch-house seem like home to the Sewell punchers, and they was men in the outfit just low-down mean enough to take advantage of it. Said he’d raised his gal like a lady—and now she was goin’ to be treated like a squaw.

If it’d ’a’ been any other ole man but Mace’s, I’d ’a’ made him swaller ev’ry one of them words ’fore ever he got ’em out. As it stood, a-course, I couldn’t. So I just helt my lip till he was over his holler. (By now, y’ savvy, I’d went through enough—from sayin’ the wrong thing back when Paw Sewell ’r his daughter was a-talkin’—t’ learn me that the best *I* could do was just t’ keep my blamed mouth shut.)

Pretty soon, I says, “You spoke of land, Mister Sewell,” I says, politer’n pie, and as cool as if I had the hull of Oklahomaw up my sleeve. (Been a beefsteak, y’ savvy, fer him to git the idear he had me anxious any.) “Wal, how much land do you figger out that you’ next son-in-law oughta have?”

He looked oneasy again, got red some, and begun workin’ his nose up and down like a rabbit. “Aw, thunder!” he says, “what you astin’ *that* fer? A man—*any* man—when he marries, oughta have a place big enough so’s his chickens can kick up the dirt ’round his house without its fallin’ into somebody else’s yard. Out here, where the hull blamed country’s land—just land fer miles—a man oughta have a piece, say—wal, as big as—as that Andrews chunk of mine.” (When Billy married Rose, Sewell bought over the Andrews’ ranch, y’ savvy. Wanted it ’cause it laid ’twixt hisn and town, and had a fine water-hole fer the stock. But a good share of the hunderd acres in it wasn’t much to brag on—just crick-bottom.)

“The Andrews place?” I says, smooth and easy. “Wal, Sewell, I’ll keep that in mind. And, now, you spoke of cows—”

“Fifty ’r so,” puts in the ole man, quick, like as if he was ’shamed of hisself. (His ranges is plumb *alive* with cattle.) “A start, Cupid,—just a start.”

Wal, a-course, whatever he said went with *me*. If he’d ’a’ *advised* walkin’ on my hands as far as Albuquerque, you’d ’a’ saw me a-startin’, spurs in the air!

“So long,” I says then, and walked off. When I turned round, a little bit later,

Sewell was standin' there yet, haid down, shoulders hunched over, arms a-hangin' loose at his sides, and all his fingers twitchin'. As I clumb on to that pinto bronc of mine and steered her outen the gate, I couldn't help but think that, all of a suddent, seems like, the boss looked a mighty lot *older*.

"Maud," I says, as I loped fer town, "Maud, I'm shore feazed! I been believin', since I got back from Noo York, that it was settled I was to marry Mace. And here, if I don't watch out, that Injun-giver'll take her back. I was a blamed idjit to give him any love-talk. The only thing he cares fer is money—money!" Wal, some men 're like that—and tighter'n a wood-tick. When they go to pay out a dollar, they hole on to it so hard they plumb pull it outen shape, yas, ma'am. Why, I can recollect seein' dollars that looked like the handle of a jack-knife.

But if I was brash in front of Sewell, I caved in all right when I got to Briggs City. Say! did you ever have the blues—so bad you didn't want to eat, and you didn't want to talk, and you didn't want to drink, but just wanted to lay, nose in the pilla, and think and think and think? Wal, fer three days, that was me!

And I was still sullin' when Sheriff Bergin come stompin' in with a copy of the Goldstone *Tarantula*. "Here's bum luck!" he growls. "A-course *Briggs* couldn't hump herself none; but that jay town down the line has to go have a boom."

"A boom?" I says, settin' up.

"Reg'lar rip-snorter of a Kansas boom. Some Chicago fellers with a lot of cash has turned up and is a-buyin' in all the sand. Wouldn't it make y' sick?"

I reached fer that paper with both fists. Yas, there it was—a piece about so long. "*Goldstone offers the chanst of a lifetime,*" it read. "*Now is when a little money'll make a pile. Land is cheap t'-day, but later on it'll bring a big price.*"

I got on to my feet. They was about a quarter of a' inch of stubble on my face, and I was as shaky as a quakin' asp. But I had my spunk up again. "Ain't I got a little money," I says, "—that nest-aig? Wal, I'll just drop down to Goldstone, and, if that boom is bony fido, and growin', *I'll git in on it.*"

Next mornin', I went over to the deepot, borraed some paper from the agent, and writ Mace a note. "*Little gal,*" I says in the letter, "*don't you go back on me. I'm prepared to work my fingers down to the first knuckle fer you, and it's only right you' paw should want you took care of good.*"

Then Number 201 come in and I hopped abroad. "It's land 'r no lady," I says to myself, puttin' my little post-card photo of Macie into my pocket as the train pulled out; "—land 'r no lady."

But when I hit Goldstone, I plumb got the heart-disease. The same ole long street was facin' the track; the same scatterin' houses was standin' to the north and south; and the same bunch of dobe shacks was over towards the east, where the greasers lived. The town wasn't changed none!

Another minute, and I felt more chipper. West of town, two 'r three fellers was walkin' 'round, stakin' out the mesquite. And nigh the station, 'twixt them and me, was a brand-new, hip-roofed shanty with a long black-and-white sign acrosst it. The sign said "Real Estate." Wal, *that* looked like *business!*

I bulged in. They was a ' awful dudey feller inside, settin' at a table and makin' chicken-tracks on a big sheet of blue paper. "Howdy," I says, "you must be one of them Chicago gents?"

He jumped up and shook hands. "Yas, I am," he says; "but only a land-agent, y' savvy. They's three others in town that's got *capital*. The one that lives over yonder at the hotel is a millionaire. Then they's a doctor (left a *fine* practice to come), and a preacher. But the preacher ain't just one of you' *ord'nary* pulpit pounders."

I stooped over to git a look at that sheet of blue paper. It had lines all criss-cross on it, same as a checker-board, and little, square, white spots showin' now and again.

"Excuse me fer astin'," I says, "but what's this?"

"This is the new map of Goldstone," he says, "and drawed two mile square. Here"—pointin' to a white spot—"ll be the Normal College, and here"—pointin' to another—"the Merchants' *Exchange*. Then, a-course, the Pavilion fer Indus'tral Exhibitions—"

"Pardner," I broke in, "if Goldstone was in the middle 'r east part of Oklahomaw, where crops is allus fine, this boom wouldn't surprise me a *little* bit. But out *this* way, where they's only a show fer cattle, I cain't just understand it. Now, they must be some *reason*."

The real estate agent, he smiled awful sly like, and wunk. "Mebbe," he says.

Later on, I seen the gent that was stoppin' at the hotel. He was tonier'n the other. Wore one of them knee coats that's got a wedge outen it, right in front, and two buttons fastened in the small of the back. He was walkin' up and down the porch and smokin' a seegar. Rich? Wal, I guess! Had the finest room in the house, and et three six-bit meals a day! About fifty, he was, and kinda porky; not a tub, y' savvy, but plenty fat.

That same day, a new *Tarantula* come out. In it was a piece haided “*More Capital Fer Goldstone.*” It went on like this: “*Our City has lately acquired four new citizens whose confidence and belief in her future ’d put some of the old hangers-on and whiners to the blush if they faces wasn’t made of brass, and didn’t know how to blush. Wake up,*” goes on the *Tarantula*, “*wake up, Goldstone, and shake you’self. And gents, here’s a hearty welcome! Give us you’ paw!*”

Goldstone was woke up, all right, all right. She was as lively and excited as a chicken with its haid cut off. That real-estate feller ’d bought up two big tracts just north of town, gittin’ ’em cheap a-course; *awful* cheap, in fact, ’cause no one ’d smelt a boom when he first showed up. (Wal, *first* come, *first served.*) Porky ’d bought, too, and owned some lots ’twixt them tracts and the post-office. To the east, right where the nicest houses is, the parson was plannin’ to import his fambly. More’n that, them four gun-shy gents stood ready to buy all the time. And Goldstone fellers that would ’a’ swapped they lots fer a yalla dawg, and then shot the dawg, was holdin’ out fer fifty plunks.

Wal, I had that three hunderd. But I helt back. What I wanted to know was *the why behind the boom.*

I just kinda happened past that real-estate corn-crib. The land-agent was to home, and I ast him to come over and have one with me. He said O. K., that suited *him*. So we greased our hollers a few times. And, when he was feelin’ so good that he could make out to talk, I drewed from him that Goldstone was likely to stand ’way up yonder at the haid of her class account of “natu’al developments.”

“Natu’al developments,” I says. “Wal, pardner, when it comes to them big, dictionary words, I shore am a slouch. And you got me all twisted up in my picket-rope.”

But I had to spend another dollar ’fore he’d talk some more. Then he begun, *turrible* confidential: “I been sayin’ nothin’ and sawin’ wood, Lloyd. I ain’t let *no* man git information outen *me*. But I like you, Lloyd, and, say! I’m a-goin’ to tell you. Natu’al developments is *coal* and *oil* and *gas.*”

Same as the Tusla country! Wal, I was plumb crazy. “Blamed if it ain’t *likely,*” I says to myself. “Wal, that settles things fer *me.*”

I got shet of that real-estate feller quick as I could (didn’t want him to remember that he’d talked in his sleep), and hunted up the post-master. The postmaster was one of the china-eyed, corn-silk Swedes, and he owned quite a bit of Goldstone.

I tole him I wanted to buy a couple of lots 'cause I was goin' to be married, and figgered to build. (That wasn't no lie, neither.) Said I didn't want to live in the part of town where the greasers was fer the reason that I'd rather settle down in a Sioux Camp in August *any* day than amongst a crowd of blamed *cholos*.

The postmaster wasn't anxious to sell. Said he didn't have more'n a block left, and he wanted a big price fer that. "'Cause this boom is *solid*,"—he kinda half whispered it. "How do I know? Wal, I pumped one of them suspender-cityzens this mornin'."

That showed me I'd got to hump myself. If that real-estate feller blabbed any more, I wouldn't be able to buy. The station-agent owned some lots. I hiked fer the deepot.

When I looked into the ticket-office through the little winda, I seen that agent—one hand on the tick-machine, other holdin' his haid—with his mouth wide open, like a hungry wall-eye.

"Lloyd," he says, pantin' hard, "I ain't got no right to tell, but I can't hole it in. Them Chicago fellers, Lloyd, are a Standard Oil bunch. Look a-here!" And he pushed out a telegram.

I wouldn't 'a' believed it if I hadn't saw it writ down in black and white. But there it was, haided Chicago, addressed to Porky, and as plain as day: "*Buy up all that's possible. Price no object. Rockafeller.*"

Say! I come nigh lettin' out a yell. Then, knowin' they was no use to ast the agent to sell, I split fer the liv'ry-stable. And when I got back into town late that night, I'd been down to a ranch below Goldstone and handed over my nest-aig fer a quarter-section just south of town.

Next mornin', they was a nice pile of stakes throwed out on to that sand patch of mine, all them stakes white on the one end and sharp on the other. And they was a big sign onloaded, too. Yas, ma'am. It said, "The Lloyd Addition."

And that *same* noon, Number 201 brung me a letter from little Macie!

I didn't cut up my quarter into lots straight off. Made up my mind it'd be best to see that real-estate feller first, ast his *advice*, and see if he'd handle the property. So I made fer his office in a *turrible* sweat.

Heerd awful loud talkin' as I come nigh, and seen they was a big crowd 'round the door. And here was Porky and the parson, just *havin'* it—up and down!

"The idear!" the parson was sayin', "—the idear of you' thinkin' you can go stick

a pavilion where licker'll be sold right next to the Cathedral!" (He was madder 'n all git out!)

Porky shrug his shoulders. "My dear *sir*," he says, "I got to use my own *land* in my own *way*."

"Aw!" answers the parson, solemn, "—aw! my friend, give you' heart a housecleanin'. Think not so muchly about worldly *possessions*, but *seecure* a lot in the New Jerusalem!"

Then Porky flew up. Said the parson 'd insulted him. "And," he almost yelled, "this is how it stands. Either you got to buy the block where the pavilion's goin' to be, 'r I'll buy the Cathedral property."

"I ain't got you' means at my command," says the parson.

"Never mind. I'll take the church lots. Name you' figger."

"Three thousand."

Porky pulled out his check-book and begun to scribble with one of them squirt-gun pens. "The matter is settled," he says.

Say! the feller who'd sole that property to the parson fer a hunderd—we had to prop him up!

Just afterwards, I had my chin with the real-estate dude, and I tell you it made me pretty blue. "Sorry, Lloyd," he says; "you know *I* never tole you to buy *south* of town. And I don't keer to bother with you' Addition. 'Cause Goldstone is goin' to grow to the north and east."

Porky was there, and he said the very same thing. And a few minutes later on, when the doc come in, I couldn't git him to even *consider* lookin' over my buy. But fer a lot on the north side, belongin' to the parson, he put down the good, hard *coin*.

North and east was the hull talk now, and them Goldstone fellers who'd sole out cheap in that end of town felt some pale. But the Chicago gents was as pert as prairie-dawgs, and doin' a thunderin' lot of buyin'. Now, the doc owned sev'ral lots east of Porky's tract. "New drug-store here," he says, "and a fine town hall over it. I'll put ten thousand into the buildin'." And the parson bought next to the site fer the Normal College. "The city," he says, "'ll want a spot fer its High School."

All the time this was goin' on, I was livin' on nothin', you might say, and not even spendin' a cent fer a shave. My haid had a crop of hay on it that would 'a'

filled a pilla; I had a Santy Claus beard, and if I couldn't afford to grub at the hotel, I wasn't mean enough to use they soap. So, far as looks goes, I was some changed.

Then—the *Tarantula* showed up with the hull story about coal and oil and gas! Say! the cat was outen the bag. And Goldstone come nigh havin' a fit and fallin' in. Here it'd been over a gold-mine, and didn't know it! And here it'd gone and sole itself out to a passel of strange ducks!

“Feller citizens,” says the paper, *“this beautiful city of yourn is destined to rival South McAlester and Colgate.”*

That was on a Thursday, if I recollect right. Wal, say! fer the next two days, more things happened in that there town than'd ever happened in the hull *county* afore. Ev'rybody that could rake, scrape, beg 'r borra was a-doin' it—so's they could buy. Friday, the postmaster got a big block from the real-estate gent; same day, kinda as a favour, the doc sold the ticket-agent two 'r three lots. I felt blamed sore 'cause *I* didn't have no money to git in on some good deals. But I hung on to the “Lloyd Addition”—I wouldn't let *that* git outen my hands. Aw, I ain't a-goin' to lie—I had the boom-fever bad as *anybody*. Fact is, I had it *worse*. And who wouldn't—when gettin' that little gal depended on it?

Saturday, Goldstone went plumb crazy. They was buyin' and sellin' back'ards and for'ards, this way and that way, in circles and cater-corners. From sun-up on, that real-estate shanty had half a dozen fellers in it all the time; more was over to the hotel, dickerin' with Porky; and a lot of others trailed up the parson and the doc. Nobody et 'cause they was too blamed *excited*. Nobody drunk 'cause they wouldn't spare the cash. The sun went down, and they kept on a-buyin'. And at midnight, the town went to bed—*rich!*

The day afterwards was Sunday. And I hope I may die if I ever fergit that Sunday!

When the sun come up, as a story-book'd put it, Goldstone lay as calm and peaceful as a babe, 'cept where some poor devil of a cow-punch was gittin' along towards his bunk when he oughta been comin' outen it. But all else was O. K. Weather fine, ev'rybody well, thank y', and land so high it's a wonder the temper'ture wasn't gittin' low.

But ain't it funny how quick things can change?

First off, some of us boys went over to that real-estate hogan—and found the door open and the place stripped. Yas, ma'am; duds gone, pictures gone. Only the

bench and the table left.

“What struck *him*?” ast the postmaster, who was comin’ by.

“I guess,” says a feller, careless, “–I guess he’s moved into a better office, mebbe.”

“I reckon,” agrees the postmaster. Then, his voice gittin’ holler, like, “But ain’t that the map of Goldstone, with a rip in it?”

It was–tore clean in two!

We wasn’t anxious any. Just the same, we drifted over to the hotel. When we got to the door, we met the clerk comin’ out. “Where’s you’ millionaire friend this mornin’?” we ast him.

“Started fer Chicago last night.”

“What–what’s that?”

“Gone to raise more capital, I guess,” says the clerk. “’Cause he didn’t settle–is comin’ back right off.”

Without nobody sayin’ nothin’ more, we all made up the street to the doctor’s, the crowd growin’ as we went along. Even after bein’ knocked plumb flat with a sledge-hammer, we didn’t know *yet* what’d bit us. But they was another whopper a-comin’–the *doc* wasn’t to be found.

“I think,” says the postmaster, swallerin’ hard, “that if we ast the parson—”

Up pipes a kid. “The parson wasn’t to Sunday school this mornin’.”

Fer a spell, we all just looked at each other. Then, the *procession* formed and moved east–towards the parson’s.

A square table was inside. On it was a lot of bottles and glasses and a pack of cards–nothin’ more.

Ole sin-killer, too!

I spoke up: “They’s gone, boys,–but what about they *land*?”

“Wal,” answers one feller, “I don’t think the doc *had* none. ’Cause I bought the Merchants’ *Exchange* site offen him yesterday.”

“And I bought the Normal School block offen the parson,” says Number Two.

“And what I got from the real-estate feller last night,” adds the hotel clerk, “must ’a’ come nigh to cleanin’ *him* out.”

Another spell of quiet. Then—

“I wonder,” remarks the station-agent, “if that Rockafeller telegram was *genuwine*.”

The postmaster throwed up his hands. “We’re it!” he says. “We sole our sand fer a song, and we bought it back at a steep figger.”

“With all that money,” adds the hotel clerk, “they must ’a’ had to walk bow-laigged.”

“My friends,” says the station-agent, “the drinks is on us!”

And me? Wal, I wandered ’round fer a while—like I was plumb loco. When I landed up at last, I seen somethin’ white in front of me. It was a sign, and it said, “The Lloyd Addition.”

I sit down on my little pile of stakes, and pulled out the last letter I’d got from Macie.

“Dear Alec,” it begun, “I’m so glad you got you’ land—”

I didn’t read no further. I looked off acrosst the mesquite in the *direction* of Briggs City. “The land ain’t no good,” I says. “And all my money’s gone.” And I laid my haid down on my arms.

Just then, outen a bunch of grass not far off, I heerd the spunky little song of a lark!

I riz up.

“Anyhow,” I says, “I’m goin’ home. Mebbe I look like a bum; but I’m goin’ back where I got some friends! I’m goin’ back where they call me Cupid!”

CHAPTER TWELVE AND A BOOM AT BRIGGS

I GOT back all right. It takes two dollars and six-bits to git from Goldstone to Briggs City on the Local. But if you happen to have a little flat bottle in you' back pocket, you ride in the freight caboose fer nothin'. I *had* a flat bottle. I swapped "The Lloyd Addition" fer it.

When I hit ole Briggs City, she looked all right t' *me*, I can tell y'. And so did the boys. And by noon I was plumb wored out, I'd gassed so much.

Wal, I went over and sit down on the edge of Silverstein's porch to rest my face and hands. Pretty soon, I heerd a hoss a-comin' up the street—*clickety, clickety, clickety, click*. It stopped at the post-office, right next me. I looked up—and here was Macie!

Say! I felt turrible, 'cause I hadn't slicked up any yet. But she didn't seem to notice. She knowed they was somethin' gone wrong though, 'fore ever I said a word. She just helt out one soft little hand. "Never you mind, Alec," she says; "never you mind."

My little gal!

"It means punchin' cows fer four years at forty per, Macie," I says to her.

"I'll wait fer you, Alec," she answers.

She'd gone, and I was turnin' back towards Silverstein's, when—I'm a son-of-a-gun if I didn't see, a-comin' acrosst from the deepot, one of them land-sharks! It was Porky, with that wedge-coat of hisn, and a seegar as big as a corn-cob!

Say! I duv under the porch so quick that I clean scairt the life outen six razorbacks and seventeen hens that was diggin' 'round under it. And when I come out where the back door is, I skun fer Hairoil Johnson's shack to borra a dif-f'rent suit of clothes offen the parson. Next, I had my Santy Claus mowed at the barber-shop.

But, when I looked in the glass, I wasn't satisfied, 'cause I wasn't changed enough. "What'll I *do*?" I ast the barber.

“Wash,” he says.

Wal, I’ll be dog-goned!—the *disguise* was complete!

Just then, in come Hank Shackleton. “Hank,” I says, “what do y’ think?—that fat Chicago millionaire I was a-tellin’ you of is *here!*”

“You don’t say so!” he answers, beginnin’ to grin. “That shore *is* luck!”

“How so?” ast the barber.

“Why,” I says, “just think what we can *do* to him!”

Hank just lent back and haw-hawed like he’d bust his buttons off. “Aw, *don’t* make me laugh,” he says; “my lip’s cracked!”

They ain’t no use talkin’—we fixed up a proposition that was a *daisy*.

“And it’ll work like yeast,” says Shackleton. “A-course, whatever *I* make outen it, Cupid, you git a draw-down on—yas, you do.”

“Nobody from Goldstone’ll speak up and spoil the fun, neither,” I says. “Not by a jugful! That passel of yaps down there is jealous of Briggs, and ’d just *like* to see her done. What’s more, they got a heap of little, mean pride, and ’d never own up *they* been sold.”

It was shore funny, but from that *very* minute, and all by *itself* kinda, Briggs City begun to boom! Billy Trowbridge put a barb-wire fence ’round a couple of vacant lots next his house. Bergin dug a big hole behind that ole vacant shack of hisn, and buried about a ton of tin cans. Hairoil turned some shoats into a rock patch he owned and cleaned out the rattlesnakes. And all over town, sand got five times as high as it’d ever been afore.

So when my dudey friend, the real-estate feller, struck our flourishin’ city, and hired a’ empty shanty fer his office, he didn’t find no one anxious to sell him a slice of land. “Say! property’s up here,” he *remarked*, whilst he put down the stiff price that Bill Rawson ’d ast fer a lot. He seemed sorta bothered in his mind. (But he had to have land—to start his game on.)

“And *climbin’*,” says Bill, pocketin’ the spondulix. (Later on, Bill says to *me*, “I ain’t a-goin’ to do another lick of hard work this year!”)

Same day, here was Sam Barnes, walkin’ up and down on that acre of hisn and holdin’ to a forked stick. Wouldn’t tell Porky *why*, though he hinted that whenever a forked stick dipped *three* times, *it meant somethin’ more ’n water*.

“But I ain’t got the cash to do no investigatin’,” says Sam, sad-like.

Porky got turrrible interested. “Say,” he says t’ Shackleton, “what you think of that land of Barnes’s?”

“Wal,” answers Hank, “I’ll tell y’: Oncet I seen another strip that looked *just* like hisn on top. And it was rich in gold. It was so blamed rich in the colour that when the feller who owned it (he was as lazy as a government mule)—when that feller wanted more t’bacca, ’r some spuds, ’r a piece of pig, why, he’d just go out into the yard and roll. Then he’d hike to town, and when he’d get into the bank, he’d shake hissself—good—pick up what fell to the floor, git it weighed, and the payin’-teller would hand him out what was comin’ t’ him.”

Porky peeled his eyes. (It was plain he didn’t swaller it all.) But, after talkin’ with that real-estate feller, he hunted up Sam and bought ev’ry square inch he had. “’Cause it’s dollars to doughnuts,” he says, “that Briggs City’ll grow this way.”

“Wal, I don’t know,” says Sam. “Bergin is powerful strong in pollytics, and he figgers to git the Court House erected on the other side of town—where his wife’s got some land.”

The new parson and the doc showed up that same afternoon. And I reckon they liked that Court House idear, ’cause they took the north half of the Starvation Gap property straight off.

“The City Park,” they says, “should allus be next the public buildin’s.”

“The City Park,” says Buckshot Milliken, “will likely be further north, right agin the University. I *know*—fer the reason that they was a meetin’ of the University *directors* last night. Then, the Farmers’ and Merchants’ Bank is goin’ to be located facin’ the Park, and so is the Grand Op’ra House.”

Porky gave Buckshot a’ awful sharp look. But Buckshot’s a’ Injun when it comes to actin’ innocenter’n a kitten. So then the millionaire gent looked *tickled* (’cause, just think!—if we was *excited* a’ready about a boom, what a pile of trouble it’d save him and his pardners!) Wal, he waddled off and hunted ’em up. And that night they *purchased* ’most all of them north lots—payin’ good.

It was the next mornin’ that they got holt of ole man Sewell and bought the Andrews place. Sewell wasn’t *on*—he hadn’t been into town since I come from Goldstone. But the real-estate gent was used to puttin’ up a good figger by now, and the boss made a fair haul.

Right off, the Andrews chunk was laid out in fifty-foot lots. It was just rows and rows of white stakes, and when the West-bound was stopped at the deepot fer

grub, I seen Bill Rawson pointin' them stakes out to two poor ole white-haired women. "Ladies," he says, "that's the battlefield where Crook fit the Kiowas. Ev'ry stake's a stiff."

As the train pulled out, she was tipped all to one side kinda, and runnin' on her off wheels, 'cause the pass'ngers was herded along the west side of the cars, lookin' at that big graveyard.

When Hank's next *Eye-Opener* come out, one hull side of it was covered with a map of Briggs City—drawed three mile square, so's to take in what Mrs. Bergin had left. Under the map it said, "*The left-hand cross marks the position of the West Oklahomaw Observatory, which is to be built on top of Rogers's Butte, and the cross in the Andrews Addition marks the spot where the great Sanatarium'll stand.*" (Say! it was gittin' to be a cold day in Briggs when somebody didn't start a grand, new institootion!) "Why," goes on Shackleton, in that piece of hisn, "*breathin' that fine crick-bottom air, and on a plain diet—say, of bread and clabbered milk, a sick person oughta git cured up easy, and a healthy person oughta live more'n a hunderd years.*" (Wal, as far as I'm concerned, if I had to eat clabbered milk a hunderd years, I'd ruther *die!*)

Next thing, two 'r three of the boys got into a reg'lar jawin'-match over some property. Chub Flannagan wanted to start a new paper called the *Rip-Saw*. Shackleton, a-course, didn't want he should. Right in front of that real-estate feller's, Chub drawed a gun on Hank. And Monkey Mike had to interfere 'twixt them.

"I got a right to do what I please on my own land," yells Chub.

"Wal, I'll buy you' blamed lots," says Shackleton, "but I don't stand fer compytition. Here, agent, what's Chub's block worth?"

The dude reckoned it was worth five hunderd. And Shackleton dug down like a man!

The rest of us done a turrible lot of buyin' and sellin' right after that—one to the other. The sheriff sold to Sam Barnes (fer a chaw of t'bacca); Bill Rawson, he sold to me (on tick); Hairoil Johnson to Dutchy, and so forth. 'R, it'd be like this: "Bet you a lot I can jump the furth'est." "Bet you cain't." Then real estate 'd change hands, and the *Tarantula* 'd talk about "a lively market."

A-course, the dude and Porky, and the doc and the new parson was doin' some buyin', too. 'Fore long, they owned all Bergin had, and Shackleton's, and Chub's, and Rawson's, and Johnson's, and mine. And they picked out a place fer

the Deef, Dumb, and Blind Asylum; and named ole man Sewell fer President of the Briggs City Pott'ry works.

"I'll buy you blamed lots, but I don't stand fer compytition"

Pretty soon, havin' all the land they wanted, they begun, steady by jerks, to sell each other, notice of them sales appearin' in the *Eye-Opener* at two-bits apiece. Next, they got to sellin' faster. Then, it was dawg eat dawg. Lickin' things into a' excitin' pass, them lots of them flew back'ards and for'ards till the air was plumb full of sand. When the sun went down that never-to-be-fergot evenin' (as the speaker allus says at a *political pow-wow*), ole Briggs City was the colour of mesquite. But the pockets of the punchers was so chuck full that, as the hours drug by, our growin' city got redder 'n a section-house, 'cause the boys was busy paintin' it. (But count *me* out—I had my draw-down, and I was a-hangin' *on* to it.) Whilst over at the real-estate shack, them gun-shy gents was havin' a quiet, little business talk, gittin' ready fer they onloadin' campaign next day.

About ten o'clock, I stopped by they shebang and knocked. When the door was opened, here they all sit, makin' out more deeds 'n you could shake a stick at. I didn't go in. I figgered I'd be gittin' married soon; and no feller wants his face spotted up like a Sioux chief's on his weddin' day.

"Gents," I says, "the boys sent me over to thank you all fer *purchasin'* property hereabouts in such a blamed gen'rous way. And it's shore too bad that *they* feel they cain't invest. But they plan to wait a year, and buy in what you got fer taxes."

Fer as long as you could count ten, not a' one of 'em said a word. Then the doc stood up. "Who in thunder are *you*?" he ast, voice like a frog.

"Why," I answers, "don't you recollect *me*? I'm Cupid here; but, down at Goldstone, I was the owner of the Lloyd Addition."

They jumped like they'd been stuck with a pin. "The Lloyd Addition!" they kinda hisses.

"Yas," I goes on. "So I reckon you realise that it wouldn't be no use fer Mister Real-Estate Agent, here, to git three-sheets-in-the-wind, and then let out his grand natu'al development secret; 'r fer our millionaire friend to go send hisself a telegram from Rockafeller. Gent's you' little Briggs City boom is busted."

Say! next minute the hull quartette of 'em was a-swearin' to oncet, so's it sounded like a tune—nigger chords and all.

Next, Porky begun a solo. Said if they hadn't all been plumb crazy, they'd 'a' knowed they was a screw loose in Briggs. And now here they was stripped cleaner'n a whistle by a set of ornery cow-punchers—

I cut him short. “We know how to cure a dawg of suckin' aigs,” I says. “We give him all he wants of 'em—red hot. Wal, you gents had the boom disease, and you had it bad. But I reckon now you've got just about all the land you can hole.”

They nodded they haids. It was a show-down, and no mistake, and they was plumb offen they high hoss. Blamed if I didn't come nigh feelin' sorry fer 'em! But I goes on, “I'm feard you-all're *just* a little bit ongrateful to me—*consider-in'* that I come here t'-night to help y'.”

“Help?” they says. (Quartette again.)

“Why, yas. Don't you think, about this time, that Chicago 'd look pretty good to you?”

“Chicago!” says Porky, low and wistful, like he didn't never expect to see the place again.

“And hittin' the ties, fer two dudes like the agent, here, and the parson—”

“Parson be hanged!” says the last named gent, ugly as the dickens.

“I hope not,” I goes on, “but you never can tell what the boys'll do.”

The doc was standin' up. As I said that, he come down kerplunk onto a bench, like as if a spring 'd give way in his laigs.

“Lloyd,” he says, “we—we—we're willin' to go, but we ain't got no money.”

“You're what I'd call land-poor,” I says.

“You need four tickets—wal, now, you own that Andrews chunk, don't y'?”

“Lloyd,” says the real-estate feller, “you've got the dead wood on us, ole man.” He picked up one of them deeds from the table. “Git us the tickets,” he says, “and here's the Andrews property.”

“A up-freight goes by in twenty minutes,” I says. And started fer the station.

“Lloyd!” calls Porky after me, “think you could spare us a' extra twenty fer grub?—*you* don't want us to starve, Lloyd. And—and mebbe you could use the rest of these deeds.”

I come back.

“Twenty?” I says; “I'll make it fifty fer luck.”

They was tears in that fake parson's eyes. "Lloyd," he says, "if I really was a preacher, I'd pick you fer a saved man."

Later on, when I walked into Dutchy's thirst-parlour, the boys was on hand, waitin' patient. As they ketched sight of me, they hollered some.

"My friends," I says, "this is where I stand treat. But it ain't lickin' this tune, *no*, ma'am; I'm presentin' hunderd-foot lots." So out I drew my little bunch of deeds and handed one to each feller. Bergin got the Observatory site and the City Park; Rawson, the University grounds; Hairoil, the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank block; Chub, the Court House; Sam Barnes, the spot fer the Grand Op'ra House, and Billy Trowbridge, the land fer the Deef, Dumb and Blind Asylum. Then I slid.

Ten minutes, and my pinto bronc was a-kitin' fer the Bar Y ranch-house. Turnin' in at the gate, I seen a light in the sittin'-room winda. I dropped the reins over Maud's haid and hoofed it up onto the porch. And inside, there was Macie, a-settin' in her rocker in front of the fire. On the other side was the President of the Briggs City Pott'ry Works.

"Boss," I says, as I shook hands with him, "Boss, I've come fer you' little gal." Say! it took him quick, like a stitch in the side. "Fer my gal?" he kinda stammers.

"Why—why, Alec,—" she whispers to me.

"Sewell," I goes on, "when I ast you fer her, a while back, you said, 'Git a piece of land as big as the Andrews chunk.' Wal," (I handed out my deed) "would you mind lookin' at this?"

"It's yourn!" The ole man put his hands to his haid.

"Also," I says, rattlin' the little stack of twenties in my right-hand britches pocket, "I'm fixed t' git some cows; fifty 'r so—a start, boss, just a start."

"How'd you do it! Why, I'm plumb knocked silly!"

"But you' ain't the man to go back on you' word, Sewell. I can take good keer of Mace now—and I want to be friends with the man that's goin' to be my paw."

He begun to look at me, awful steady and sober, and he looked and he looked—like as if he hadn't just savvied. Next, he sorta talked to hisself. "My little Macie," he kept sayin'; "my little Macie."

She put her arms 'round him then, and he clean broke down. "Aw, I *cain't* lose my little gal," he says. "I don't keer anythin' about land 'r cattle. But Macie—"

she's all I got left. *Don't* take her away from me!"

So *that* was it! (And I'd said that all Sewell keered fer was money.) "Boss," I says, "you mean you'd like us to live here—with you?"

He come over to me, tremblin' like he had the ague. "Would y', Cupid?" he ast. "I'd never interfere with you two none. *Would y'?*"

"Aw, daddy!" says Mace, holdin' to him tight.

"Why, bless you' heart, Sewell," I answers, "what do I want to live any *other* place fer? *Mace* is what I want—just Mace. And, say! you take back you' little ole crick-bottom."

"Got more land'n I want *now*."

"Boss,"—I helt out my hand—"here's where you git a new son-in-law, and a foreman fer keeps on cow-punch pay. Shake!"

He give one hand to Mace, and he give me the other. "Not by a long shot, Cupid!" he says. "Here's where I git a half-*pardner*."

So here I am—settled down at the ole Bar Y. And it'd take a twenty-mule team t' pull me offen it. Of a evenin', like this, the boss, he sits on the east porch, smokin'; the boys 're strung along the side of the bunk-house t' rest and gass and laugh; and, out yonder, is the cottonwoods, same as ever, and the ditch, and the mesquite, leveler'n a floor; and—up over it all—the moon, white and smilin'.

Then, outen the door nigh where the sun-flowers 're growin', mebbe she'll come—a slim, little figger in white. And, if it's plenty warm, and not too late, why, she'll be totin' the smartest, cutest—

Listen! y' hear that?

*"Sweet is the vale where the Mohawk gently glides
On its fair, windin' way to the sea—"*

That's my little wife,—that's Macie, now—a-singin' to the kid!

THE END

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