

Rhodes Eugene Manlove

Bransford of Rainbow

Range



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PROLOGUE

I

The long fall round-up was over. The wagon, homeward bound, made camp for the last night out at the Sinks of Lost River. Most of the men, worn with threescore night-guards, were buried under their tarps in the deep sleep of the weary; sound as that of the just, and much more common.

By the low campfire a few yet lingered: old-timers, iron men, whose wiry and seasoned strength was toil-proof – and Leo Ballinger, for whom youth, excitement and unsated novelty served in lieu of fitness.

The “firelighters,” working the wide range again from Ancho to Hueco, from the Mal Pais to Glencoe, fell silent now, to mark an unstaled miracle.

The clustered lights of Rainbow’s End shone redly, near and low. Beyond, above, dominant, the black, unbroken bulk of Rainbow Range shut out the east. The clear-cut crest mellowed to luminous curves, feathery with far-off pines; the long skyline thrilled with frosty fire, glowed, sparkled – the cricket’s chirp was stilled; the slow, late moon rose to a hushed and waiting world.

On the sharp crest she paused, irresolute, tiptoe, quivering, rosily aflush. Above floated a web of gossamer. She leaped up, spurning the black rim; glowed, palpitant, through that filmy lace – and all the desert throbbled with vibrant light.

Cool and sweet and fresh, from maiden leagues of clean, brown earth the desert winds made whisper in grass and fragrant shrub; yucca, mesquite and greasewood swayed – so softly, you had not known save as the long shadows courtesied and danced.

Leo flung up his hand. The air was wine to him. A year had left the desert still new and strange. “Gee!” he said eloquently.

Headlight nodded. “You’re dead right on that point, son. If Christopher K. Columbus had only thought to beach his shallops on the sundown side of this here continent he might have made a name for himself. Just think how much different, hysterically, these United States – ”

“*This* United States,” corrected Pringle dispassionately. Their fathers had disagreed on the same grammatical point.

Headlight scowled. “By Jings! ‘That *this* United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States,’” he quoted. “I was goin’ to give you something new to exercise your talons on. You sit here every night, ridin’ broncs and four-footin’ steers, and never grab a horn or waste a loop, not once. Sure things ain’t amusin’. Some variety and doubtful accuracy, now, would develop our guessin’ gifts.”

Aforesaid Smith brandished the end-gate rod. “Them speculations of yours sorter opens up of themselves. If California had been settled first the salmon would now be our national bird instead of the potato. Think of Arizona, mother of Presidents! Seat of government at Milipitas; center of population about Butte; New Jersey howlin’ about Nevada trusts!” He impaled a few beef ribs and held them over the glowing embers.

“Georgia and South Carolina would be infested by cow-persons in décolleté leather panties,” said Jeff Bransford. “New York and Pennsylvania would be fondly turning a credulous ear to the twenty-fourth consecutive solemn promise of Statehood – with the Senator from Walla Walla urging admission of both as one mighty State with Maryland and Virginia thrown in for luck.”

Headlight forgot his pique. “Wouldn’t the railroads sound funny, though? Needles and Eastern, Northern Atlantic, Southern Atlantic, Union, Western, Kansas and Central Atlantic! Earnest and continuous demand for a President from east of the Mississippi. All the prize-fights pulled off at Boston.”

“Columbus done just right,” said Pringle decisively. “You fellers ain’t got no imagination a-tall. If this Western country’d been settled first, the maps would read: ‘Northeast Territory. – Uninhabitable wilderness; region of storm and snow, roaming savages and fierce wild beasts.’ When the intrepid explorer hit the big white weather he’d say, ‘Little old San Diego’s good enough for me!’ Yes, sir!”

“Oh, well, climate alone doesn’t account for the charm of this country – nor scenery,” said Leo. “You feel it, but you don’t know why it is.”

“It sure agrees with your by-laws,” observed Pringle. “You’re a sight changed from the furtive behemoth you was. You’ll make a hand yet. But, even now, your dimensions from east to west is plumb fascinatin’. I’d sure admire to have your picture to put in my cornfield.”

“Very well, Mr. Pringle: I’ll exchange photographs with you,” said Leo artlessly. A smothered laugh followed this remark; uncertainty as to what horrible and unnamed use Leo would make of Pringle’s pictured face appealed to these speculative minds.

“I’ve studied out this charm business,” said Jeff. “See if I’m not right. It’s because there’s no habitually old men here to pattern after, to steady us, to make us ashamed of just staying boys. Now and then you hit an octagonal cuss like Wes here, that on a mere count of years and hairs might be sized up as old by the superficial observer. But if I have ever met that man more addicted with vivid nonchalance as to further continuance of educational facilities than this same Also Ran, his number has now escaped me. Really aged old people stay where they was.”

“I think, myself, that what makes life so easy and congenial in these latigos and longitudes is the dearth of law and the ladies.” Thus Pringle, the cynic.

A fourfold outcry ensued; indignant repudiation of the latter heresy. Their protest rose above the customary subdued and quiet drawl of the out-of-doors man.

“But has the law no defenders?” demanded Leo. “We’ve got to have laws to make us behave.”

“Sure thing! Likewise, ’tis the waves that make the tide come in,” said Jeff. “A good law is as handy as a good pocketbook. But law, as simply such, independent of its merits, rouses no enthusiasm in my manly bosom, no more than a signboard the day after Hallowe’en. If it occurs to me in a moment of emotional sanity that the environments of the special case in hand call for a compound fracture of the statutes made and provided – for some totally different cases that happen to be called by the same name – I fall upon it with my glittering hew-gag, without no special wonder. For,” he declaimed, “I am endowed by nature with certain inalienable rights, among which are the high justice, the middle, and the low!”

“And who’s to be the judge of whether it’s a good law or not? You?”

“Me. Me, every time. Some one must. If I let some other man make up my mind I’ve got to use my judgment – picking the man I follow. By organizing myself into a Permanent Committee of One to do my own thinking I take my one chance of mistakes instead of two.”

“So you believe in doing evil that good may come, do you?”

“Well,” said Jeff judicially, “it seems to be at least as good a proposition as doing good that evil may come of it. Why, Capricorn, there isn’t one thing we call wrong, when other men do it, that hasn’t been lawful, some time or other. When to break a law is to do a wrong, it’s evil. When it’s

doing right to break a law, it's not evil. Got that? It's not wrong to keep a just law – and if it's wrong to break an unjust law I want a new dictionary with pictures of it in the back.”

“But laws is useful and excitin' diversions to break up the monogamy,” said Aforesaid. “And it's a dead easy way to build up a rep. Look at the edge I've got on you fellows. You're just supposed to be honest – but I've been proved honest, frequent!”

“Hark!” said Pringle.

A weird sound reached them – the night wrangler, beguiling his lonely vigil with song.

“Oh, the cuckoo is a pretty bird; she comes in the spring – ”

“What do you s'pose that night-hawk thinks about the majesty of the law?” he said. There was a ringing note in his voice. Smith and Headlight nodded gravely; their lean, brown faces hardened.

“You haven't heard of it? Old John Taylor, daddy to yonder warbler, drifted here from the East. Wife and little girl both puny. Taylor takes up a homestead on the Feliz. He wasn't affluent none. I let him have my old paint pony, Freckles – him being knee-sprung and not up to cow-work. To make out an unparalleled team, he got Ed Poe's Billy Bowlegs, née Gambler, him havin' won a new name by a misunderstanding with a prairie-dog hole. Taylor paid Poe for him in work. He was a willin' old rooster, Taylor, but futile and left-handed all over.

“John, Junior, he was only thirteen. Him and the old man moseyed around like two drunk ants, fixin' up a little log house with rock chimbleys, a horse-pen and shelter, rail-fencin' of the little *vegas* to put to crops, and so on.

“Done you good to drop in and hear 'em plan and figger. They was one happy family. How Sis Em'ly bragged about their hens layin'! In the spring we all held a bee and made their *'cequias* for 'em. Baker, he loaned 'em a plow. They dragged big branches over the ground for a harrow. They could milk anybody's cows they was a mind to tame, and the boys took to carryin' over motherless calves for Mis' Taylor to raise. Taylor, he done odd jobs, and they got along real well with their crops. They went into the second winter peart as squirrels.

“But, come spring, Sis wasn't doin' well. They had the Agency doctor. Too high up and too damp, he said. So the missus and Em'ly they went to Cruces, where Em'ly could go to school.

“That meant right smart of expense – rentin' a house and all. So the Johns they hires out. John, Junior, made his dayboo as wrangler for the Steam Pitchfork, acquirin' the obvious name of Felix.

“The old man he got a job muckin' in Organ mines. Kept his hawses in Jeff Isaack's pasture, and Saturday nights he'd get one and slip down them eighteen miles to Cruces for Sunday with the folks.

“Well, you know, a homesteader can't be off his claim more'n six months at a time.

“I reckon if there was ever a homestead taken up in good faith 'twas the Butterbowl. They knew the land laws from A to Izzard. Even named their hound pup Boney Fido!

“But the old man waited at Organ till the last bell rang, so's to draw down his wages, payday. Then he bundles the folks into his little old wagon and lights out. Campin' at Casimiro's Well, half-way 'cross, that ornery Freckles hawse has a fit of malignant nostalgia and projects off for Butterbowl, afoot, in his hobbles. Next day, Taylor don't overtake him till the middle of the evenin', and what with going back and what with Freckles being hobble-sore, he's two days late in reachin' home. For Lake, of Agua Chiquite, that prosperous person, had been keeping cases. He entered contest on the Butterbowl, allegin' abandonment.

“Now, if it was me – but, then, if 'twas me I could stay away six years and two months without no remonstrances from Lake or his likes. I'm somewhat abandoned myself.

“But poor old Taylor, he's been drug up where they hold biped life unaccountable high. He sits him down resignedly beneath the sky, as the poet says, meek and legal. We all don't abnormally like to precipitate in another man's business, but we makes it up to sorter saunter in on Lake, spontaneous,

and evince our disfavor with a rope. But Taylor says, 'No.' He allows the Land Office won't hold him morally responsible for the sinful idiocy of a homesick spotted hawse that's otherwise reliable.

"He's got one more guess comin'. There ain't no sympathies to machinery. Your intentions may be strictly honorable, but if you get your hand caught in the cogs, off it goes, regardless of how handy it is for flankin' calves, holdin' nails, and such things. 'Absent over six months. Entry canceled. Contestant is allowed thirty days' prior right to file. Next.'

"That's the way that decision'll read. It ain't come yet, but it's due soon.

"This here Felix looks at it just like the old man, only different – though he ain't makin' no statements for publication. He come here young, and having acquired the fixed habit of riskin' his neck, regular, for one dollar per each and every diem, shooin' in the reluctant steer, or a fool hawse pirouettin' across the pinnacles with a nosebag on – or, mebbe, just for fun – why, natural, he don't see why life is so sweet or peace so dear as to put up with any damn foolishness, as Pat Henry used to say when the boys called on him for a few remarks. He's a some serious-minded boy, that night-hawk, and if signs is any indications, he's fixin' to take an appeal under the Winchester Act. I ain't no seventh son of a son-of-a-gun, but my prognostications are that he presently removes Lake to another and, we trust, a better world."

"Good thing, too," grunted Headlight. "This Lake person is sure-lee a muddy pool."

"Shet your fool head," said Pringle amiably. "You may be on the jury. I'm going to seek my virtuous couch. Glad we don't have to bed no cattle, *viva voce*, this night."

"Ain't he the Latin scholar?" said Headlight admiringly. "They blow about that wire Julius Cæsar sent the Associated Press, but old man Pringle done him up for levity and precision when he wrote us the account of his visit to the Denver carnival. Ever hear about it, Sagittarius?"

"No," said Leo. "What did he say?"

"Hic – hock – hike!"

II

Escondido, half-way of the desert, is designed on simple lines. The railroad hauls water in tank-cars from Dog Cañon. There is one depot, one section-house, and one combination post-office-hotel-store-saloon-stage-station, kept by Ma Sanders and Pappy Sanders, in about the order mentioned. Also, one glorious green cottonwood, one pampered rosebush, jointly the pride and delight of Escondido, ownerless, but cherished by loving care and “toted” tribute of waste water.

Hither came Jeff and Leo, white with the dust of twenty starlit leagues, for accumulated mail of Rainbow South. Horse-feeding, breakfast, gossip with jolly, motherly Ma Sanders, reading and answering of mail – then their beauty nap; so missing the day’s event, the passing of the Flyer. When they woke Escondido basked drowsily in the low, westerling sun. The far sunset ranges had put off their workaday homespun brown and gray for chameleon hues of purple and amethyst; their deep, cool shadows, edged with trembling rose, reached out across the desert; the velvet air stirred faintly to the promise of the night.

The agent was putting up his switch-lights; from the kitchen came a cheerful clatter of tinware.

“Now we buy some dry goods and wet,” said Leo. They went into the store.

“That decision’s come!” shrilled Pappy in tremulous excitement. “It’s too darn bad! Registered letters from Land Office for Taylor and Lake, besides another for Lake, not registered.”

“That one from the Land Office, too?” said Jeff.

“Didn’t I jest tell ye? Say, it’s a shame! Why don’t some of you fellers – Gosh! If I was only young!”

“It’s a travesty on justice!” exclaimed Leo indignantly. “There’s really no doubt but that they decided for Lake, I suppose?”

“Not a bit. He’s got the law with him. Then him and the Register is old cronies. Guess this other letter is from him unofficial, likely.”

Jeff seated himself on a box. “How long has this Lake got to do his filing in, Pappy?”

“Thirty days from the time he signs the receipt for this letter – darn him!”

“Some one ought to kidnap him,” said Leo.

“Why, that’s illegal!” Jeff nursed his knee, turned his head to one side and chanted thoughtfully:

“Said the little Eohippus,
‘I’m going to be a horse,
And on my middle fingernails
To run my earthly course’ – ”

He broke off and smiled at Leo indulgently. Leo glanced at him sharply; this was Jeff’s war-song aforetime. But it was to Pappy that Jeff spoke:

“Dad, you’re a better’n any surgeon. Wish you’d go out and look at Leo’s horse. His ankle’s all swelled up. I’ll be mixin’ me up a toddy, if Ma’s got any hot water. I’m feeling kinder squeamish.”

“Hot toddy, this weather? Some folks has queer tastes,” grumbled Pappy. “Ex-cuse me! Me and Leo’ll go look at the Charley-horse. That bottle under the shelf is the best.” He bustled out. But Jeff caught Ballinger by the sleeve.

“Will you hold my garments while I stone Stephen?” he hissed.

“I will,” said Leo, meeting Jeff’s eye. “Hit him once for me.”

“Move the lever to the right, you old retrograde, and get Pappy to gyratin’ on his axis some fifteen or twenty minutes, you listenin’ reverently. Meanwhile, I’ll make the necessary incantations. Git! Don’t look so blamed intelligent, or Pappy’ll be suspicious.”

Bransford hastened to the kitchen. “Ma Sanders, a bronc fell on me yesterday and my poor body is one big stone bruise. Can I borrow some boiling water to mix a small prescription, or maybe seven? One when you first feel like it, and repeat at intervals, the doctor says.”

“Don’t you get full in *my* house, Jeff Bransford, or I’ll feed you to the hawks. You take three doses, and that’ll be a-plenty for you.”

Jeff put the steaming kettle on the rusty store stove, used as a waste-paper basket through the long summer. Touching off the papers with a match, he smashed an empty box and put it in. Then he went into the post-office corner and laid impious hands on the United States Mail.

First he steamed open Lake’s unregistered letter from the Land Office. It was merely a few typewritten lines, having no reference to the Butterbowl: “Enclosing the Plat of TP. 14 E. of First Guide Meridan East Range S. of 3d Standard Parallel South, as per request.”

He paused to consider. His roving eye lit on the wall, where the Annual Report of the Governor of New Mexico hung from a nail. “The very thing,” he said. Pasted in the report was a folded map of the Territory. This he cut out, refolded it till it slipped in the violated envelope, dabbed the flap neatly with Pappy’s mucilage, and returned the letter to its proper pigeonhole.

He replenished the fire with another box, subjected Lake’s registered letter to the steaming process and opened it with delicate caution. It was the decision; it was in Lake’s favor; and it went into the fire. Substituting for it the Plat of TP. 14 and the accompanying letter he resealed it with workmanlike neatness, and then restored it with a final inspection. “The editor sits on the madhouse floor, and pla-ays with the straws in his hair!” he murmured, beaming with complacent pride and reaching for the bottle.

Pappy and Leo found him with his hands to the blaze, shivering. “I feel like I was going to have a chill,” he complained. But with a few remedial measures he recuperated sufficiently to set off for Rainbow after supper.

“Charley’s ankle seems better,” said Leo artlessly.

“Don’t you lay no stress on Charley’s ankle,” said Jeff, in a burst of confidence. “Where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be otherwise. Just let Charley’s ankle slip your memory.”

The following day Bransford drew rein at Wes Pringle’s shack and summoned him forth.

“Mr. John Wesley Also Ran Pringle,” he said impressively, “I have taken a horse-ride over here to put you through your cataclysm. Will you truthfully answer the rebuses I shall now propound to the best of your ability, and govern yourself accordingly till the surface of Hades congeals to glistening bergs, and that with no unseemly curiosity?”

“Is it serious?” asked Pringle anxiously.

“This is straight talk.”

Pringle took a long look and held up his hand. “I will,” he said soberly.

“John Wesley, do you or do you not believe Stephen W. Lake, of Agua Chiquite, to be a low-down, coniferous skunk by birth, inclination and training?”

“I do.”

“John Wesley, do you or do you not possess the full confidence and affection of Felix, the night-hawk, otherwise known and designated as John Taylor, Junior, of Butterbowl, Esquire?”

“I do.”

“Do you, John Wesley Pringle, esteem me, Jeff Bransford, irrespective of color, sex or previous condition of turpitude, to be such a one as may be safely tied to when all the hitching-posts is done pulled up, and will you now promise to love, honor and obey me till the cows come home, or till further orders?”

“I do – I will. And may God have mercy on my soul.”

“Here are your powders, then. Do you go and locate the above-mentioned and described Felix, and impart to him, under the strict seal of secrecy, these tidings, to wit, namely: That you have a presentiment, almost amounting to conviction, that the Butterbowl contest is decided in Lake’s favor,

but that your further presentiments is that said Lake will not use his prior right. If Taylor should get such a decision from the Land Office don't let him or Felix say a word to no one. If Mr. B. Body should ask, tell 'em 'twas a map, or land laws, or something. Moreover, said Felix he is not to stab, cut, pierce or otherwise mutilate said Lake, nor to wickedly, maliciously, feloniously and unlawfully fire at or upon the person of said Lake with any rifle, pistol, musket or gun, the same being then and there loaded with powder and with balls, shots, bullets or slugs of lead or other metal. You see to that, personal. I'd go to him myself, but he don't know me well enough to have confidence in my divinations.

“You promulgate these prophecies as your sole personal device and construction —*sabe?* Then, thirty days after Lake signs a receipt for his decision – and you will take steps to inform yourself of that – you sidle casually down to Roswell with old man Taylor and see that he puts preëmption papers on the Butterbowl. Selah!”

III

The first knowledge Lake had of the state of affairs was when the Steam Pitchfork punchers informally extended to him the right hand of fellowship (hitherto withheld) under the impression that he had generously abstained from pushing home his vantage. When, in the mid-flood of his unaccountable popularity, the situation dawned upon him, he wisely held his peace. He was a victim of the accomplished fact. Taylor had already filed his preëmption. So Lake reaped volunteer harvest of good-will, bearing his honors in graceful silence.

On Lake's next trip to Escondido, Pappy Sanders laid aside his marked official hauteur. Lake stayed several days, praised the rosebush and Ma Sanders' cookery, and indulged in much leisurely converse with Pappy. Thereafter he had a private conference with Stratton, the Register of the Roswell Land Office. His suspicion fell quite naturally on Felix, and on Jeff as accessory during the fact.

So it was that, when Jeff and Leo took in Roswell fair (where Jeff won a near-prize at the roping match), Hobart, the United States Marshal, came to their room. After introducing himself he said:

"Mr. Stratton would like to see you, Mr. Bransford."

"Why, that's all right!" said Jeff genially. "Some of my very great grandfolks was Dacotahs and I've got my name in 'Who's Sioux' – but I'm not proud! Trot him around. Exactly who is Stratton, anyhow?"

"He's the Register of the Land Office – and he wants to see you there on very particular business. I'd go if I was you," said the Marshal significantly.

"Oh, that way!" said Jeff. "Is this an arrest, or do you just give me this *in-vite* semi-officiously?"

"You accuse yourself, sir. Were you expecting arrest? That sounds like a bad conscience."

"Don't you worry about my conscience. 'If I've ever done anything I'm sorry for I'm glad of it.' Now this Stratton party – is he some aged and venerable? 'Cause, if he is, I waive ceremony and seek him in his lair at the witching hour of two this *tarde*. And if not, not."

"He's old enough – even if there were no other reasons."

"Never mind any other reasons. It shall never be said that I fail to reverence gray hairs. I'll be there."

"I guess I'll just wait and see that you go," said the Marshal.

"Have you got any papers for me?" asked Jeff politely.

"No."

"This is my room," said Jeff. "This is my fist. This is me. That is my door. Open it, Leo. Mr. Hobart, you will now make rapid forward motions with your feet, alternately, like a man removing his company from where it is not desired – or I'll go through you like a domesticated cyclone. See you at two, sharp!" Hobart obeyed. He was a good judge of men.

Jeff closed the door. "We went upon the battlefield," he said plaintively, "before us and behind us, and every which-a-way we looked, we seen a roscerhinus.' We went into another field – behind us and before us, and every which-a-way we looked, we seen a rhinusorus. Mr. Lake has been evidently browsin' and pe-rusing around, and poor old Pappy, not being posted, has likely been narratin' about Charley's ankle and how I had a chill. Wough-ough!"

"It looks that way," confessed Leo. "Did you have a chill, Jeff?"

Jeff's eyes crinkled. "Not so nigh as I am now. But shucks! I've been in worse emergencies, and I always emerged. Thanks be, I can always do my best when I have to. Oh, what a tangled web we weave when we don't keep in practice! If I'd just come out straightforward and declared myself to Pappy, he'd 'a' tightened up his drawstrings and forgot all about my chill. But, no, well as I know from long experience that good old human nature's only too willin' to do the right thing and the fair thing – if somebody'll only tip it off to 'em – I must play a lone hand and not even call for my partner's

best. Well, I'm goin' to ramify around and scrutinize this here Stratton's numbers, equipments and disposition. Meet me in the office at the fatal hour!"

The Marshal wore a mocking smile. Stratton, large, florid, well-fed and eminently respectable, turned in his revolving chair with a severe and majestic motion; adjusted his glasses in a prolonged and offensive examination, and frowned portentously.

"Fine large day, isn't it?" observed Jeff affably. "Beautiful little city you have here." He sank into a chair. Smile and attitude were of pleased and sprightly anticipation.

A faint flush showed beneath Stratton's neatly-trimmed mutton-chops. Such jaunty bearing was exasperating to offended virtue. "Ah – who is this other person, Mr. Hobart?"

"Pardon my rudeness!" Jeff sprang up and bowed brisk apology. "Mr. Stratton, allow me to present Mr. Ballinger, a worthy representative of the Yellow Press. Mr. Stratton – Mr. Ballinger!"

"I have a communication to make to you," said the displeased Mr. Stratton, in icy tones, "which, in your own interest, should be extremely private." The Marshal whispered to him; Stratton gave Leo a fiercely intimidating glare.

"Communicate away," said Jeff airily. "Excommunicate, if you want to. Mr. Ballinger, as a citizen, is part owner of this office. If you want to bar him you'll have to change the venue to your private residence. And then I won't come."

"Very well, sir!" Mr. Stratton rose, inflated his chest and threw back his head. His voice took on a steady roll. "Mr. Bransford, you stand under grave displeasure of the law! You are grievously suspected of being cognizant of, if not actually accessory to, the robbery of the United States Mail by John Taylor, Junior, at Escondido, on the eighteenth day of last October. You may not be aware of it, but you have an excellent chance of serving a term in the penitentiary!"

Jeff pressed his hands between his knees and leaned forward. "I'm sure I'd never be satisfied there," he said, with conviction. His white teeth flashed in an ingratiatory smile. "But why suspect young John? – why not old John?" He paused, looking at the Register attentively. "H'm! – you're from Indiana, I believe, Mr. Stratton?" he said.

"The elder Taylor, on the day in question, is fully accounted for," said Hobart. "Young Taylor claims to have passed the night at Willow Springs, alone. But no one saw him from breakfast time the seventeenth till noon on the nineteenth."

"He rarely ever has any one with him when he's alone. That may account for them not seeing him at Willow," suggested Jeff. He did not look at Hobart, but regarded Stratton with an air of deep meditation.

The Register paced the floor slowly, ponderously, with an impressive pause at each turn, tapping his left hand with his eyeglass to score his points. "He had ample time to go to Escondido and return. The envelope in which Mr. Lake's copy of this office's decision in the Lake-Taylor contest was enclosed has been examined. It bears unmistakable signs of having been tampered with." Turning to mark the effect of these tactics, he became aware of his victim's contemplative gaze. It disconcerted him. He resumed his pacing. Jeff followed him with a steady eye.

"In the same mail I sent Mr. Lake another letter. The envelope was unfortunately destroyed, Mr. Lake suspecting nothing. A map had been substituted for its contents, and they, in turn, were substituted for the decision in the registered letter, with the evident intention of depriving Mr. Lake of his prior right to file."

"By George! It sounds probable." Jeff laughed derisively. "So that's it! And here we all thought Lake let it go out of giddy generosity! My stars, but won't he get the horse-smile when the boys find out?"

Stratton controlled himself with an effort. "We have decided not to push the case against you if you will tell what you know," he began.

Jeff lifted his brows. "We? And who's we? You two? I should have thought this was a post-office lay."

“We are investigating the affair,” explained Hobart.

“I see! As private individuals. Yes, yes. Does Lake pay you by the day or by the job?”

Stratton, blazing with anger, smote his palm heavily with his fist. “Young man! Young man! Your insolence is unbearable! We are trying to spare you – as you had no direct interest in the matter and doubtless concealed your guilty knowledge through a mistaken and distorted sense of honor. But you tempt us – you tempt us! You don’t seem to realize the precarious situation in which you stand.”

“What I don’t see,” said Jeff, in puzzled tones, “is why you bother to spare me at all. If you can prove this, why don’t you cinch me and Felix both? Why do you want me to tell you what you already know? And if you can’t prove it – who the hell cares what you suspect?”

“We will arrest you,” said Stratton thickly, “just as soon as we can make out the papers!”

“Turn your wolf loose, you four-flushers! You may make me trouble, but you can’t prove anything. Speaking of trouble – how about you, Mr. Stratton?” As a spring leaps, released from highest tension, face and body and voice flashed from passive indolence to sudden, startling attack. His arm lashed swiftly out as if to deliver the swordsman’s stabbing thrust; the poised body followed up to push the stroke home. “You think your secret safe, don’t you? It’s been some time ago.”

Words only – yet it might have been a very sword’s point past Stratton’s guard. For the Register flinched, staggered, his arrogant face grew mottled, his arm went up. He fell back a step, silent, quivering, leaning heavily on a chair. The Marshal gave him a questioning glance. Jeff kept on.

“You’re prominent in politics, business, society, the church. You’ve a family to think of. It’s up to you, Mr. Stratton. Is it worth while? Had we better drop it with a dull, sickening thud?”

Stratton collapsed into the chair, a shapeless bundle, turning a shriveled, feeble face to the Marshal in voiceless imploring.

Unhesitating, Hobart put a hand on his shoulder. “That’s all right, old man! We won’t give you away. Brace up!” He nodded Jeff to the door. “You win!” he said. Leo followed on tiptoe.

“Why, the poor old duck!” said Jeff remorsefully, in the passage. “Wish I hadn’t come down on him so hard. I overdid it that time. Still, if I hadn’t – ”

At the Hondo Bridge Jeff looked back and waved a hand. “Good-by, old town! Now we go, gallop-trot, gallop, gallop-trot!” He sang, and the ringing hoofs kept time and tune,

“Florence Mehitabel Genevieve Jane,
She came home in the wind an’ the rain,
She came home in the rain an’ the snow;
‘Ain’t a-goin’ to leave my home any mo’!”

“Jeff,” said the mystified Ballinger, spurring up beside him, “what has the gray-haired Register done? Has murder stained his hands with gore?”

Jeff raised his bridle hand.

“Gee! Leo, I don’t know! I just taken a chance!”

CHAPTER I

THE PITCHER THAT WENT TO THE WELL

“When I bend my head low and listen at the ground,
I can hear vague voices that I used to know,
Stirring in dim places, faint and restless sound;
I remember how it was when the grass began to grow.”

– *Song of The Wandering Dust*,
Anna Hempstead Branch.

The pines thinned as she neared Rainbow Rim, the turfy glades grew wider; she had glimpses of open country beyond – until, at last, crossing a little spit of high ground, she came to the fairest spot in all her voyage of exploration and discovery. She sank down on a fallen log with a little sigh of delight.

The steep bank of a little cañon broke away at her feet – a cañon which here marked the frontier of the pines, its farther side overgrown with mahogany bush and chaparral – a cañon that fell in long, sinuous curves from the silent mystery of forest on Rainbow Crest behind her, to widen just below into a rolling land, parked with green-black powderpuffs of juniper and cedar; and so passed on to mystery again, twisting away through the folds of the low and bare gray hills to the westward, ere the last stupendous plunge over the Rim to the low desert, a mile toward the level of the waiting sea.

Facing the explorer, across the little cañon, a clear spring bubbled from the hillside and fell with pleasant murmur and tinkle to a pool below, fringed with lush emerald – a spring massed about with wild grapevine, shining reeds of arrow-weed; a tangle of grateful greenery, jostling eagerly for the life-giving water. Draped in clinging vines, slim acacias struggled up through the jungle; the exquisite fragrance of their purple bells gave a final charm to the fairy chasm.

But the larger vision! The nearer elfin beauty dwindled, was lost, forgotten. Afar, through a narrow cleft in the gray westward hills, the explorer’s eye leaped out over a bottomless gulf to a glimpse of shining leagues midway of the desert greatness – an ever-widening triangle that rose against the peaceful west to long foothill reaches, to a misty mountain parapet, far-beckoning, whispering of secrets, things dreamed of, unseen, beyond the framed and slender arc of vision. A land of enchantment and mystery, decked with strong barbaric colors, blue and red and yellow, brown and green and gray; whose changing ebb and flow, by some potent sorcery of atmosphere, distance and angle, altered, daily, hourly; deepening, fading, combining into new and fantastic lines and shapes, to melt again as swiftly to others yet more bewildering.

The explorer? It may be mentioned in passing that any other would have found that fairest prospect even more wonderful than did the explorer, Miss Ellinor Hoffman. We will attempt no clear description of Miss Ellinor Hoffman. Dusky-beautiful she was; crisp, fresh and sparkling; tall, vigorous, active, strong. Yet she was more than merely beautiful – warm and frank and young; brave and kind and true. Perhaps, even more than soft curves, lips, glory of hair or bewildering eyes, or all together, her chiefest charm was her manner, her frank friendliness. Earth was sweet to her, sweeter for her.

This by way of aside and all to no manner of good. You have no picture of her in your mind. Remember only that she was young —

“The stars to drink from and the sky to dance on”

– young and happy, and therefore beautiful; that the sun was shining in a cloudless sky, the south wind sweet and fresh, buds in the willow.

The peace was rent and shivered by strange sounds, as of a giant falling downstairs. There was a crash of breaking boughs beyond the cañon, a glint of color, a swift black body hurtling madly through the shrubbery. The girl shrank back. There was no time for thought, hardly for alarm. On the farther verge the bushes parted; an apparition hurled arching through the sunshine, down the sheer hill – a glorious and acrobatic horse, his black head low between his flashing feet; red nostrils wide with rage and fear; foam flecks white on the black shoulders; a tossing mane; a rider, straight and tall, superb – to all seeming an integral part of the horse, pitch he never so wildly.

The girl held her breath through the splintered seconds. She thrilled at the shock and storm of them, straining muscles and white hoofs, lurching, stumbling, sliding, lunging, careening in perilous arcs. She saw stones that rolled with them or bounded after; a sombrero whirled above the dust and tumult like a dilatory parachute; a six-shooter jolted up into the air. Through the dust-clouds there were glimpses of a watchful face, hair blown back above it; a broken rein snapped beside it, saddle-strings streamed out behind; a supple body that swung from curve to easy curve against shock and plunge, that swayed and poised and clung, and held its desperate dominion still. The saddle slipped forward; with a motion incredibly swift, as a hat is whipped off in a gust of wind, it whisked over withers and neck and was under the furious feet. Swifter, the rider! Cat-quick, he swerved, lit on his feet, leaped aside.

Alas, oh, rider beyond compare, undefeated champion, Pride of Rainbow! Alas, that such thing should be recorded! He leaped aside to shun the black frantic death at his shoulder; his feet were in the treacherous vines: he toppled, grasped vainly at an acacia, catapulted out and down, head first; so lit, crumpled and fell with a prodigious splash into the waters of the pool! *Ay di mi, Alhama!*

The blankets lay strewn along the hill; but observe that the long lead rope of the hackamore (a “hackamore,” properly *jaquima*, is, for your better understanding, merely a rope halter) was coiled at the saddle-horn, held there by a stout hornstring. As the black reached the level the saddle was at his heels. To kick was obvious, to go away not less so; but this new terror clung to the maddened creature in his frenzied flight – between his legs, in the air, at his heels, his hip, his neck. A low tree leaned from the hillside; the aërial saddle caught in the forks of it, the bronco’s head was jerked round, he was pulled to his haunches, overthrown; but the tough hornstring broke, the freed coil snapped out at him; he scrambled up and bunched his glorious muscles in a vain and furious effort to outrun the rope that dragged at his heels, and so passed from sight beyond the next curve.

Waist-deep in the pool sat the hatless horseman, or perhaps horseless horseman were the juster term, steeped in a profound calm. That last phrase has a familiar sound; Mark Twain’s, doubtless – but, all things considered, steeped is decidedly the word. One gloved hand was in the water, the other in the muddy margin of the pool: he watched the final evolution of his late mount with meditative interest. The saddle was freed at last, but its ex-occupant still sat there, lost in thought. Blood trickled, unnoted, down his forehead.

The last stone followed him into the pool; the echoes died on the hills. The spring resumed its pleasant murmur, but the tinkle of its fall was broken by the mimic waves of the pool. Save for this troubled sloshing against the banks, the slow-settling dust and the contemplative bust of the one-time centaur, no trace was left to mark the late disastrous invasion.

The invader’s dreamy and speculative gaze followed the dust of the trailing rope. He opened his lips twice or thrice, and spoke, after several futile attempts, in a voice mild, but clearly earnest:

“Oh, you little eohippus!”

The spellbound girl rose. Her hand was at her throat; her eyes were big and round, and her astonished lips were drawn to a round, red O.

Sharp ears heard the rustle of her skirts, her soft gasp of amazement. The merman turned his head briskly, his eye met hers. One gloved hand brushed his brow; a broad streak of mud appeared

there, over which the blood meandered uncertainly. He looked up at the maid in silence: in silence the maid looked down at him. He nodded, with a pleasant smile.

“Good-morning!” he said casually.

At this cheerful greeting, the astounded maid was near to tumbling after, like Jill of the song.

“Er – good-morning!” she gasped.

Silence. The merman reclined gently against the bank with a comfortable air of satisfaction. The color came flooding back to her startled face.

“Oh, are you hurt?” she cried.

A puzzled frown struggled through the mud.

“Hurt?” he echoed. “Who, me?.. Why, no – leastwise, I guess not.”

He wiggled his fingers, raised his arms, wagged his head doubtfully and slowly, first sidewise and then up and down; shook himself guardedly, and finally raised tentative boot-tips to the surface. After this painstaking inspection he settled contentedly back again.

“Oh, no, I’m all right,” he reported. “Only I lost a big, black, fine, young, nice horse somehow. You ain’t seen nothing of him, have you?”

“Then why don’t you get out?” she demanded. “I believe you are hurt.”

“Get out? Why, yes, ma’am. Certainly. Why not?” But the girl was already beginning to clamber down, grasping the shrubbery to aid in the descent.

Now the bank was steep and sheer. So the merman rose, tactfully clutching the grapevines behind him as a plausible excuse for turning his back. It followed as a corollary of this generous act that he must needs be lame, which he accordingly became. As this mishap became acute, his quick eyes roved down the cañon, where he saw what gave him pause; and he groaned sincerely under his breath. For the black horse had taken to the parked uplands, the dragging rope had tangled in a snaggy tree-root, and he was tracing weary circles in bootless effort to be free.

Tactful still, the dripping merman hobbled to the nearest shade wherefrom the luckless black horse should be invisible, eclipsed by the intervening ridge, and there sank down in a state of exhaustion, his back to a friendly tree-trunk.

CHAPTER II

FIRST AID

“Oh woman! in our hours of ease
Uncertain, coy and hard to please;
But seen too oft, familiar with thy face
We first endure, then pity, then embrace!”

A moment later the girl was beside him, pity in her eyes.

“Let me see that cut on your head,” she said. She dropped on her knee and parted the hair with a gentle touch.

“Why, you’re real!” breathed the injured near-centaur, beaming with wonder and gratification. She sat down limply and gave way to wild laughter.

“So are you!” she retorted. “Why, that is exactly what I was thinking! I thought maybe I was asleep and having an extraordinary dream. That wound on your head is not serious, if that’s all.” She brushed back a wisp of hair that blew across her eyes.

“I hurt this head just the other day,” observed the bedraggled victim, as one who has an assortment of heads from which to choose. He pulled off his soaked gloves and regarded them ruefully. “Them that go down to deep waters!” That was a regular triumph of matter over mind, wasn’t it?”

“It’s a wonder you’re alive! My! How frightened I was! Aren’t you hurt – truly? Ribs or anything?”

The patient’s elbows made a convulsive movement to guard the threatened ribs.

“Oh, no, ma’am. I ain’t hurt a bit – indeed I ain’t,” he said truthfully; but his eyes had the languid droop of one who says the thing that is not. “Don’t you worry none about me – not one bit. Sorry I frightened you. That black horse now – ” He stopped to consider fully the case of the black horse. “Well, you see, ma’am, that black horse, he ain’t exactly right plumb gentle.” His eyelids drooped again.

The girl considered. She believed him – both that he was not badly hurt and that the black horse was not exactly gentle. And her suspicions were aroused. His slow drawl was getting slower; his cowboyese broader – a mode of speech quite inconsistent with that first sprightly remark about the little eohippus. What manner of cowboy was this, from whose tongue a learned scientific term tripped spontaneously in so stressful a moment – who quoted scraps of the litany unaware? Also, her own eyes were none of the slowest. She had noted that the limping did not begin until he was clear of the pool. Still, that might happen if one were excited; but this one had been singularly calm, “more than usual ca’m,” she mentally quoted... Of course, if he really were badly hurt – which she didn’t believe one bit – a little bruised and jarred, maybe – the only thing for her to do would be to go back to camp and get help... That meant the renewal of Lake’s hateful attentions and – for the other girls, the sharing of her find... She stole another look at her find and thrilled with all the pride of the discoverer... No doubt he was shaken and bruised, after all. He must be suffering. What a splendid rider he was!

“What made you so absurd? Why didn’t you get out of the water, then, if you are not hurt?” she snapped suddenly.

The drooped lids raised; brown eyes looked steadily into brown eyes.

“I didn’t want to wake up,” he said.

The candor of this explanation threw her, for the moment, into a vivid and becoming confusion. The dusky roses leaped to her cheeks; the long, dark lashes quivered and fell. Then she rose to the occasion.

“And how about the little eohippus?” she demanded. “That doesn’t seem to go well with some of your other talk.”

“Oh!” He regarded her with pained but unflinching innocence. “The Latin, you mean? Why, ma’am, that’s most all the Latin I know – that and some more big words in that song. I learned that song off of Frank John, just like a poll-parrot.”

“Sing it! And eohippus isn’t Latin. It’s Greek.”

“Why, ma’am, I can’t, just now – I’m so muddy; but I’ll tell it to you. Maybe I’ll sing it to you some other time.” A sidelong glance accompanied this little suggestion. The girl’s face was blank and non-committal; so he resumed: “It goes like this:

“Said the little Eohippus,
‘I’m going to be a horse,
And on my middle fingernails
To run my earthly course’ —

“No; that wasn’t the first. It begins:

“There was once a little animal
No bigger than a fox,
And on five toes he scampered —

“Of course you know, ma’am – Frank John he told me about it – that horses were little like that, ’way back. And this one he set his silly head that he was going to be a really-truly horse, like the song says. And folks told him he couldn’t – couldn’t possibly be done, nohow. And sure enough he did. It’s a foolish song, really. I only sing parts of it when I feel like that – like it couldn’t be done and I was going to do it, you know. The boys call it my song. Look here, ma’am!” He fished in his vest pocket and produced tobacco and papers, matches – last of all, a tiny turquoise horse, an inch long. “I had a jeweler-man put five toes on his feet once to make him be a little eohippus. Going to make a watch-charm of him sometime. He’s a lucky little eohippus, I think. Peso gave him to me when – never mind when. Peso’s a Mescalero Indian, you know, chief of police at the agency.” He gingerly dropped the little horse into her eager palm.

It was a singularly grotesque and angular little beast, high-stepping, high-headed, with a level stare, at once complacent and haughty. Despite the first unprepossessing rigidity of outline, there was somehow a sprightly air, something endearing, in the stiff, purposed stride, the alert, inquiring ears, the stern and watchful eye. Each tiny hoof was faintly graven to semblance of five tinier toes; there, the work showed fresh.

“The cunning little monster!” Prison grime was on him; she groomed and polished at his dingy sides until the wonderful color shone out triumphant. “What is it that makes him such a dear? Oh, I know. It’s something – well, childlike, you know. Think of the grown-up child that toiled with pride and joy at the making of him – dear me, how many lifetimes since! – and fondly put him by as a complete horse.” She held him up in the sun: the ingrate met her caress with the same obdurate and indomitable glare. She laughed her rapturous delight: “There! How much better you look! Oh, you darling! Aren’t you absurd? Straight-backed, stiff-legged, thick-necked, square-headed – and that ridiculously baleful eye! It’s too high up and too far forward, you know – and your ears are too big – and you have such a malignant look! Never mind; now that you’re all nice and clean, I’m going to reward you.” Her lips just brushed him – the lucky little eohippus.

The owner of the lucky little horse was not able to repress one swift, dismal glance at his own vast dishevelment, nor, as his shrinking hands, entirely of their own volition, crept stealthily to hiding, the slightest upward rolling of a hopeful eye toward the leaping waters of the spring; but, if one might judge from her sedate and matter-of-fact tones, that eloquent glance was wasted on the girl.

“You ought to take better care of him, you know,” she said as she restored the little monster to his owner. Then she laughed. “Hasn’t he a fierce and warlike appearance, though?”

“Sure. That’s resolution. Look at those legs!” said the owner fondly. “He spurns the ground. He’s going somewheres. He’s going to be a horse! And them ears – one cocked forward and the other back, strictly on the *cuidado*! He’ll make it. He’ll certainly do to take along! Yes, ma’am, I’ll take right good care of him.” He regarded the homely beast with awe; he swathed him in cigarette papers with tenderest care. “I’ll leave him at home after this. He might get hurt. I might sometime want to give him to – somebody.”

The girl sprang up.

“Now I must get some water and wash that head,” she announced briskly.

“Oh, no – I can’t let you do that. I can walk. I ain’t hurt a bit, I keep telling you.” In proof of which he walked to the pool with a palpably clever assumption of steadiness. The girl fluttered solicitous at his elbow. Then she ran ahead, climbed up to the spring and extended a firm, cool hand, which he took shamelessly, and so came to the fairy waterfall.

Here he made himself presentable as to face and hands. It is just possible there was a certain expectancy in his eye as he neared the close of these labors; but if there were it passed unnoted. The girl bathed the injured head with her handkerchief, and brushed back his hair with a dainty caressing motion that thrilled him until the color rose beneath the tan. There was a glint of gray in the wavy black hair, she noted.

She stepped back to regard her handiwork. “Now you look better!” she said approvingly. Then, slightly flurried, not without a memory of a previous and not dissimilar remark of hers, she was off up the hill: whence, despite his shocked protest, she brought back the lost gun and hat.

Her eyes were sparkling when she returned, her face glowing. Ignoring his reproachful gaze, she wrung out her handkerchief, led the patient firmly down the hill and to his saddle, made him trim off a saddle-string, and bound the handkerchief to the wound. She fitted the sombrero gently.

“There! Don’t this head feel better now?” she queried gayly, with fine disregard for grammar. “And now what? Won’t you come back to camp with me? Mr. Lake will be glad to put you up or to let you have a horse. Do you live far away? I do hope you are not one of those Rosebud men. Mr. La – ” She bit her speech off midword.

“No men there except this Mr. Lake?” asked the cowboy idly.

“Oh, yes; there’s Mr. Herbert – he’s gone riding with Lettie – and Mr. White; but it was Mr. Lake who got up the camping party. Mother and Aunt Lot, and a crowd of us girls – La Luz girls, you know. Mother and I are visiting Mr. Lake’s sister. He’s going to give us a masquerade ball when we get back, next week.”

The cowboy looked down his nose for consultation, and his nose gave a meditative little tweak.

“What Lake is it? There’s some several Lakes round here. Is it Lake of Aqua Chiquite – wears his hair décolleté; talks like he had a washboard in his throat; tailor-made face; walks like a duck on stilts; general sort of pouter-pigeon effect?”

At this envenomed description, Miss Ellinor Hoffman promptly choked.

“I don’t know anything about your Aqua Chiquite. I never heard of the place before. He is a banker in Arcadia. He keeps a general store there. You must know him, surely.” So far her voice was rather stern and purposely resentful, as became Mr. Lake’s guest; but there were complications, rankling memories of Mr. Lake – of unwelcome attentions persistently forced upon her. She spoiled the rebuke by adding tartly, “But I think he is the man you mean!” and felt her wrongs avenged.

The cowboy’s face cleared.

“Well, I don’t use Arcadia much, you see. I mostly range down Rainbow River. Arcadia folks – why, they’re mostly newcomers, health-seekers and people just living on their incomes – not working folks much, except the railroaders and lumbermen. Now about getting home. You see, ma’am, some of the boys are riding down that way” – he jerked his thumb to indicate the last flight of the imperfectly gentle horse – “and they’re right apt to see my runaway eohippus and sure to see the rope-drag; so they’ll likely amble along the back track to see how much who’s hurt. So I guess I’d better stay here. They may be along most any time. Thank you kindly, just the same. Of course, if they don’t come at all – Is your camp far?”

“Not – not very,” said Ellinor. The mere fact was that Miss Ellinor had set out ostensibly for a sketching expedition with another girl, had turned aside to explore, and exploring had fetched a circuit that had left her much closer to her starting-place than to her goal. He misinterpreted the slight hesitation.

“Well, ma’am, thank you again; but I mustn’t be keeping you longer. I really ought to see you safe back to your camp; but – you’ll understand – under the circumstances – you’ll excuse me?”

He did not want to implicate Mr. Lake, so he took a limping step forward to justify his rudeness.

“And you hardly able to walk? Ridiculous! What I ought to do is to go back to camp and get some one – get Mr. White to help you.” Thus, at once accepting his unspoken explanation, and offering her own apology in turn, she threw aside the air of guarded hostility that had marked the last minutes and threw herself anew into this joyous adventure. “When – or if – your friends find you, won’t it hurt you to ride?” she asked, and smiled deliberate encouragement.

“I can be as modest as anybody when there’s anything to be modest about; but in this case I guess I’ll now declare that I can ride anything that a saddle will stay on... I reckon,” he added reflectively, “the boys’ll have right smart to say about me being throwed.”

“But you weren’t thrown! You rode magnificently!” Her eyes flashed admiration.

“Yes’m. That’s what I hoped you’d say,” said the admired one complacently. “Go on, ma’am. Say it again.”

“It was splendid! The saddle turned – that’s all!”

He slowly surveyed the scene of his late exploit.

“Ye – es, that was some riding – for a while,” he admitted. “But you see, that saddle now, scarred up that way – why, they’ll think the eohippus wasted me and then dragged the saddle off under a tree. Leastways, they’ll say they think so, frequent. Best not to let on and to make no excuses. It’ll be easier that way. We’re great on guying here. That’s most all the fun we have. We sure got this joshing game down fine. Just wondering what all the boys’d say – that was why I didn’t get out of the water at first, before – before I thought I was asleep, you know.”

“So you’ll actually tell a lie to keep from being thought a liar? I’m disappointed in you.”

“Why, ma’am, I won’t say anything. They’ll do the talking.”

“It’ll be deceitful, just the same,” she began, and checked herself suddenly. A small twinge struck her at the thought of poor Maud, really sketching on Thumb Butte, and now disconsolately wondering what had become of lunch and fellow-artist; but she quelled this pang with a sage thought of the greatest good to the greatest number, and clapped her hands in delight. “Oh, what a silly I am, to be sure! I’ve got a lunch basket up there, but I forgot all about it in the excitement. I’m sure there’s plenty for two. Shall I bring it down to you or can you climb up if I help you? There’s water in the canteen – and it’s beautiful up there.”

“I can make it, I guess,” said the invited guest – the consummate and unblushing hypocrite. Make it he did, with her strong hand to aid; and the glen rang to the laughter of them. While behind them, all unnoted, Johnny Dines reined up on the hillside; took one sweeping glance at that joyous progress, the scarred hillside, the saddle and the dejected eohippus in the background; grinned comprehension, and discreetly withdrew.

CHAPTER III

MAXWELTON BRAES

“Oh the song – the song in the blood!
Magic walks the forest; there’s bewitchment on the air —
Spring is at the flood!”

– *The Gypsy Heart.*

“Well, sir, this here feller, he lit a cigarette an’ throwed away the match, an’ it fell in a powder kaig; an’ do you know, more’n half that powder burned up before they could put it out! Yes, sir!”

– *Wildcat Thompson.*

Ellinor opened her basket and spread its tempting wares with pretty hostly care – or is there such a word as hostlessly?

“There! All ready, Mr. – I declare, this is too absurd! We don’t even know each other’s names!” Her conscious eye fell upon the ampleness of the feast – amazing, since it purported to have been put up for one alone; and her face lit up with mischievous delight. She curtsied. “If you please, I’m the Ultimate Consumer!”

He rose, bowing gravely.

“I am the Personal Devil. Glad to meet you.”

“Oh! I’ve heard of you!” remarked the Ultimate Consumer sweetly. She sat down and extended her hand across the spotless linen. “Mr. Lake says – ”

The Personal Devil flushed. It was not because of the proffered hand, which he took unhesitatingly and held rather firmly. The blush was unmistakably caused by anger.

“There is no connection whatever,” he stated, grimly enough, “between the truth and Mr. Lake’s organs of speech.”

“Oh!” cried the Ultimate Consumer triumphantly. “So you’re Mr. Beebe?”

“Bransford – Jeff Bransford,” corrected the Personal Devil crustily. He wilfully relapsed to his former slipshod speech. “Beebe, he’s gone to the Pecos work, him and Ballinger. Mr. John Wesley Also-Ran Pringle’s gone to Old Mexico to bring back another bunch of black, long-horned Chihuahuas. You now behold before you the last remaining Rose of Rosebud. But, why Beebe?”

“Why does Mr. Lake hate all of you so, Mr. Bransford?”

“Because we are infamous scoundrels. Why Beebe?”

“I can’t eat with one hand, Mr. Bransford,” she said demurely. He looked at the prisoned hand with a start and released it grudgingly. “Help yourself,” said his hostess cheerfully. “There’s sandwiches, and roast beef and olives, for a mild beginning.”

“Why Beebe?” he said doggedly.

“Help yourself to the salad and then please pass it over this way. Thank you.”

“Why Beebe?”

“Oh, very well then! Because of the little eohippus, you know – and other things you said.”

“I see!” said the aggrieved Bransford. “Because I’m not from Ohio, like Beebe, I’m not supposed – ”

“Oh, if you’re going to be fussy! I’m from California myself, Mr. Bransford. Out in the country at that. Don’t let’s quarrel, please. We were having such a lovely time. And I’ll tell you a secret. It’s ungrateful of me, and I ought not to; but I don’t care – I don’t like Mr. Lake much since we came

on this trip. And I don't believe – ” She paused, pinkly conscious of the unconventional statement involved in this sudden unbelief.

“ – what Lake says about us?” A much-mollified Bransford finished the sentence for her.

She nodded. Then, to change the subject:

“You do speak cowboy talk one minute – and all booky, polite and proper the next, you know. Why?”

“Bad associations,” said Bransford ambiguously. “Also for 'tis my nature to, as little dogs they do delight to bark and bite. That beef sure tastes like more.”

“And now you may smoke while I pack up,” announced the girl when dessert was over, at long last. “And please, there is something I want to ask you about. Will you tell me truly?”

“Um – you sing?”

“Yes – a little.”

“If you will sing for me afterward?”

“Certainly. With pleasure.”

“All right, then. What's the story about?”

Ellinor gave him her eyes. “Did you rob the post-office at Escondido – really?”

Now it might well be embarrassing to be asked if you had committed a felony; but there was that behind the words of this naïve query – in look, in tone, in mental attitude – an unflinching and implicit faith that, since he had seen fit to do this thing, it must needs have been the right and wise thing to do, which stirred the felon's pulses to a pleasant flutter and caused a certain tough and powerful muscle to thump foolishly at his ribs. The delicious intimacy, the baseless faith, was sweet to him.

“Sure, I did!” he answered lightly. “Lake is one talkative little man, isn't he? Fie, fie! But, shucks! What can you expect? The beast will do after his kind.”

“And you'll tell me about it?”

“After I smoke. Got to study up some plausible excuses, you know.”

She studied him as she packed. It was a good face – lined, strong, expressive, vivid; gay, resolute, confident, alert – reckless, perhaps. There were lines of it disused, fallen to abeyance. What was well with the man had prospered; what was ill with him had faded and dimmed. He was not a young man – thirty-seven, thirty-eight – (she was twenty-four) – but there was an unquenchable boyishness about him, despite the few frosty hairs at his temples. He bore his hard years jauntily: youth danced in his eyes. The explorer nodded to herself, well pleased. He was interesting – different.

The tale suffered from Bransford's telling, as any tale will suffer when marred by the inevitable, barbarous modesty of its hero. It was a long story, cozily confidential; and there were interruptions. The sun was low ere it was done.

“Now the song,” said Jeff, “and then – ” He did not complete the sentence; his face clouded.

“What shall I sing?”

“How can I tell? What you will. What can I know about good songs – or anything else?” responded Bransford in sudden moodiness and dejection – for, after the song, the end of everything! He flinched at the premonition of irrevocable loss.

The girl made no answer. This is what she sang. No; you shall not be told of her voice. Perhaps there is a voice that you remember, that echoes to you through the dusty years. How would you like to describe that?

“Oh, Sandy has monie and Sandy has land,
And Sandy has housen, sae fine and sae grand —
But I'd rather hae Jamie, wi' nocht in his hand,
Than Sandy, wi' all of his housen and land.

“My father looks sulky; my mither looks soor;

They gloom upon Jamie because he is poor.
I lo'e them baith dearly, as a dochter should do;
But I lo'e them not half sae weel, dear Jamie, as you!

“I sit at my cribbie, I spin at my wheel;
I think o' the laddie that lo'es me sae weel.
Oh, he had but a saxpence, he brak it in twa,
And he gied me the half o't ere he gaed awa'!”

“He said: ‘Lo'e me lang, lassie, though I gang awa'!’
He said: ‘Lo'e me lang, lassie, though I gang awa'!’
Bland simmer is cooming; cauld winter's awa',
And I'll wed wi' Jamie in spite o' them a'!”

Jeff's back was to a tree, his hat over his eyes. He pushed it up.

“Thank you,” he said; and then, quite directly: “Are you rich?”

“Not – very,” said Ellinor, a little breathless at the blunt query.

“I'm going to be rich,” said Jeff steadily.

“I'm going to be a horse,” quoth the little eohippus.” The girl retorted saucily, though secretly alarmed at the import of this examination.

“Ex-actly. So that's settled. What is your name?”

“Hoffman.”

“Where do you live, Hoffman?”

“Ellinor,” supplemented the girl.

“Ellinor, then. Where do you live, Ellinor?”

“In New York – just now. Not in town. Upstate. On a farm. You see, grandfather's growing old – and he wanted father to come back.”

“New York's not far,” said Jeff.

A sudden panic seized the girl. What next? In swift, instinctive self-defense she rose and tripped to the tree where lay her neglected sketch-book, bent over – and started back with a little cry of alarm. With a spring and a rush, Jeff was at her side, caught her up and glared watchfully at bush and shrub and tufted grass.

“Mr. Bransford! Put me down!”

“What was it? A rattlesnake?”

“A snake? What an idea! I just noticed how late it was. I must go.”

Crestfallen, sheepishly, Mr. Bransford put her down, thrust his hands into his pockets, tilted his chin and whistled an aggravating little trill from the Rye twostep.

“Mr. Bransford!” said Ellinor haughtily.

Mr. Bransford's face expressed patient attention.

“Are you lame?”

Mr. Bransford's eye estimated the distance covered during the recent snake episode, and then gave to Miss Hoffman a look of profound respect. His shoulders humped up slightly; his head bowed to the stroke: he stood upon one foot and traced the Rainbow brand in the dust with the other.

“I told you all along I wasn't hurt,” he said aggrieved. “Didn't I, now?”

“Are you lame?” she repeated severely, ignoring his truthful saying.

“Not – very.” The quotation marks were clearly audible.

“Are you lame at all?”

“No, ma'am – not what you might call really lame. Uh – no, ma'am.”

“And you deceived me like that!” Indignation checked her. “Oh, I am so disappointed in you! That was a fine, manly thing for you to do!”

“It was such a lovely time,” observed the culprit doggedly. “And such a chance might never happen again. And it isn’t my fault I wasn’t hurt, you know. I’m sure I wish I was.”

She gave him an icy glare.

“Now see what you’ve done! Your men haven’t come and you won’t stay with Mr. Lake. How are you going to get home? Oh, I forgot – you can walk, as you should have done at first.”

The guilty wretch wilted yet further. He shuffled his feet; he writhed; he positively squirmed. He ventured a timid upward glance. It seemed to give him courage. Prompted, doubtless, by the same feeling which drives one to dive headlong into dreaded cold water, he said, in a burst of candor:

“Well, you see, ma’am, that little horse now – he really ain’t got far. He got tangled up over there a ways – ”

The girl wheeled and shot a swift, startled glance at the little eohippus on the hillside, who had long since given over his futile struggles and was now nibbling grass with becoming resignation. She turned back to Bransford. Slowly, scathingly, she looked him over from head to foot and slowly back again. Her expression ran the gamut – wonder, anger, scorn, withering contempt.

“I think I hate you!” she flamed at him.

Amazement triumphed over the other emotions then – a real amazement: the detected impostor had resumed his former debonair bearing and met her scornful eye with a slow and provoking smile.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” he said reassuringly. “On the contrary, you don’t hate me at all!”

“I’m going home, anyhow,” she retorted bitterly. “You may draw your own conclusions.”

Still, she did not go, which possibly had a confusing effect upon his inferences.

“Just one minute, ma’am, if you please. How did you know so pat where the little black horse was? *I* didn’t tell you.”

Little waves of scarlet followed each other to her burning face.

“I’m not going to stay another moment. You’re detestable! And it’s nearly sundown.”

“Oh, you needn’t hurry. It’s not far.”

She followed his gesture. To her intense mortification she saw the blue smoke of her home campfire flaunting up from a gully not half a mile away. It was her turn to droop now. She drooped.

There was a painful silence. Then, in a far-off, hard, judicial tone:

“How long, ma’am, if I may ask, have you known that the little black horse was tangled up?”

Miss Ellinor’s eyes shifted wildly. She broke a twig from a mahogany bush and examined the swelling buds with minutest care.

“Well?” said her ruthless inquisitor sternly.

“Since – since I went for your hat,” she confessed in a half whisper.

“To deceive me so!” Pain, grief, surprise, reproach, were in his words. “Have you anything to say?” he added sadly.

A slender shoe peeped out beneath her denim skirt and tapped on a buried boulder. Ellinor regarded the toetip with interest and curiosity. Then, half-audibly:

“We were having such a good time... And it might never happen again!”

He captured both her hands. She drew back a little – ever so little; she trembled slightly, but her eyes met his frankly and bravely.

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