Bat Wing Bowles

by Dane Coolidge, 1873-1940

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Illustrations

Illustration:
"Why, hello there, cowboy!" she challenged bluntly.

Chapter I

Mr. Bowles.

It was a fine windy morning in March and Dixie Lee, of Chula Vista, Arizona, was leaving staid New York at the gate marked "Western Limited." A slight difference with the gatekeeper, who seemed to doubt every word she said, cast no cloud upon her spirits, and she was cheerfully searching for her ticket when a gentleman came up from behind. At sight of the trim figure at the wicket, he too became suddenly happy, and it looked as if the effete East was losing two of its merriest citizens.

"Oh, good-morning, Miss Lee!" he said, bowing and smiling radiantly as she glanced in his direction. "Are you going out on this train?"

"Why—yes," she replied, gazing into her handbag with a preoccupied frown. "That is, if I can find my ticket!"

She found it on the instant, but the frown did not depart. She had forgotten the young man's name. It was queer how those New York names slipped her memory—but she remembered his face distinctly. She had met him at some highbrow affair—it was a reception or some such social maelstrom—and, yes, his name was Bowles!

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Bowles," she exclaimed as he gallantly took her bag; but a furtive glance at his face left her suddenly transfixed with doubts. Not that his expression changed—far from that—but a fleeting twinkle in his eyes suggested some hidden joke.

"Oh, isn't your name Bowles?" she stammered. "I met you at the Wordsworth Club, you know, and——"

"Oh, yes—quite right!" he assured her politely. "You have a wonderful memory for names, Miss Lee. Shall we go on down to your car?"

Dixie Lee regarded the young man questioningly and with a certain Western disfavor. He was one of those trim and proper creatures that seemed to haunt Wordsworth societies, welfare meetings, and other culture areas known only to the cognoscente and stern-eyed Eastern aunts. In fact, he seemed to personify all those qualities of breeding and education which a long winter of compulsory "finishing" had taught her to despise; and yet—well, if it were not for his clothes and manners and the way he dropped his "r's" he might almost pass for human. But she knew his name wasn't Bowles.

There had been a person there by the name of Bowles, but the hostess had mumbled when she presented this one—and they had talked quite a little, too. She glanced at him again and a question trembled on her lips; but names were nothing out where she came from, and she let it go for Bowles.

The hypothetical Mr. Bowles was a tall and slender young man, of a type that ordinarily maddened her beyond all reason and prompted her to say cruel things which she was never sorry for afterward. He had a clear complexion, a Cupid's bow mouth, and eyes as innocent as a girl's. They were of a deep violet hue, very soft and soulful, and had a truly cultured way of changing—when he talked—to mirror a thousand shades of interest, courtesy and concern; but the way they had flickered when he took over the name of Bowles suggested a real man behind the veil. His manners, of course, were irreproachable; and not even a haberdasher could take exception to his clothes. He was, in fact, attired strictly according to the mode, in a close-fitting suit of striped gray, with four-inch cuffs above his box-toed

shoes, narrow shoulders, and a low-crowned derby hat, now all the rage but affected for many years only by Dutch comedians.

When he removed this hat, which he did whenever he stood in her presence, he revealed a very fine head of hair which had been brushed straight back from his forehead until each strand knew its separate place; and yet, far from being pleased at this final evidence of conscientious endeavor, Dixie May received him almost with a sniff.

"And are you really on your way to Arizona, Miss Lee?" he inquired, carefully leaving the "r" out of "are" and putting the English on "really." "Why, how fortunate! I am going West myself! Perhaps we can renew our acquaintance on the way. Those were jolly stories you were telling me at the Wordsworth Club—very improperly, to be sure, but all the more interesting on that account. About the round-up cook, you know, and the man who couldn't say 'No.' Nothing like that in California, I suppose. I'm off for Los Angeles, myself."

"All right," answered Dixie Lee, waving California airily aside; "Arizona is good enough for me! Say, I'm going to ask this man where my section is."

She fished out her Pullman ticket and showed it to a waiting porter, who motioned her down the train.

"The fourth car, lady," he said. "Car Number Four!"

"Car Four!" cried Bowles, setting down the suitcase with quite a dramatic start. "Why—why, isn't this remarkable, Miss Lee? To think that we should take the same train—on the same day—and then have the very same car! But, don't you know, you never finished that last story you were telling me—about the cowboy who went to the picnic—and now I shall demand the end of it. Really, Miss Lee, I enjoyed your tales immensely—but don't let me keep you waiting!"

He hurried on, still commenting upon the remarkable coincidence; and as a memory of the reception came back to her and she recalled the avid way in which this same young man had hung upon her words, a sudden doubt, a shrewd questioning, came over the mind of Dixie Lee. Back in Arizona, now, a man with any git-up-and-git to him might—but, pshaw, this was not Arizona! And he was not that kind of man! No, indeed! The idea of one of these New York Willies doing the sleuth act and tagging her to the train!

At the same time Dixie Lee had her misgivings about this correct young man, because she knew his name was not Bowles. More than that, his language displeased her, reminding her as it did of her long winter's penance among the culturines. Three days more of highbrow conversation would just about finish her off—she must be stern, very stern, if she would avert the impending disaster! So she stabbed her neatly-trimmed little sombrero with a hatpin and waited for Mr. Bowles.

"Lovely weather we've been having, isn't it?" he purled as he made bold to sit down beside her.

"Yes, indeed," she answered, showing her white teeth in a simpering smile. "Simply heavenly. Don't you know, it reminds me of those lines in Wordsworth—you remember—I think it was in his 'Idiot Boy.' Oh, how do they go?"

She knitted her brows and Mr. Bowles regarded her thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it was in his 'Lines Written in Early Spring,'" he suggested guardedly.

"No," she insisted. "It was in 'The Idiot Boy'—either that or in 'Lines Written to the Same Dog.' I forget which. Anyway, it told all about the rain, you know, and the clouds—and all that. Don't you remember? I thought you were full of Wordsworth."

This last, was thrown out for a bait, to get Mr. Bowles to extend himself, but it failed of its effect. A somber smile took the place of the expected frenzy and he muttered half to himself as he gazed out of the window.

"What's that you say?" she questioned sharply.

"Oh, pardon me," he exclaimed, recovering himself with a sudden access of manner; "I was talking to myself, don't you know? But, really, I am pretty full of Wordsworth; so, if you don't mind, we'll talk about something else. My aunt, you know, is a great devotee of all the nature poets, and I attend the meetings to please her. It's an awful bore sometimes, too, I assure you; that's why your face was so welcome to me when I chanced to see you at the club-rooms. That lecturer was such a conceited ass and those women were so besotted in their admiration of him that I looked around to see if there was a single sane and reasonable creature in the room—and there you were, as stern and uncompromising as an angel and—oh, well, I formed a different conception of angels, right there. You were so delightfully humorous too, when Mrs. Melvine introduced us—and, well, really, Miss Lee, you are partly responsible for my leaving New York. I never fully realized before what our Western country must be like; I never dreamed that there was a place to flee to when the conventions of society grew irksome; but when you told me of your ranch, and the cowboys, and all the wonderful happenings of that wild and carefree life I—I made up my mind to chuck the whole thing, don't you know, and strike out for myself."

"Oho!" breathed Dixie Lee, squinting down her eyes and regarding him with a shrewd smile. "So you're running away to be a cowboy, eh? Going West to fight the Indians! Well, well! But let me ask you one question, Mr. Bowles—if that's your name—I trust you don't plan to begin your depredations in my part of the country; because if you do——"

"Oh, my dear Miss Lee," protested Mr. Bowles, "you have quite a mistaken idea, I assure you. Really, now, I hope you give me credit for more discretion than that. The fact is, I have an old college friend on a ranch in California and, though I have not taken my aunt entirely into confidence, I am really going out to make him a visit. It's all very well, you know, to read about sunsets in Wordsworth, but why not go out into the Far West and see the sun set indeed? That's what I say, but of course I would not offend her—she simply thinks my health is failing and I need a Western trip."

"Oh!" said Dixie Lee quietly. "So you've got an aunt, too, eh? What did you say her name was?"

"Why, Mrs.—er—Bowles!"

"But why Mrs. Er-Bowles?" queried Dixie May, relentlessly. "Why not Mrs. Bowles straight? Now, you know, Mr. Bowles, it looks very much to me as if——"

"Her former name was Earl," interposed Mr. Bowles suavely, and carefully leaving out the "r." "My father's brother married a very dear friend of ours, a Mrs. Earl, and I sometimes call her so still—inadvertently, you know. I am an orphan now and Mrs. Earl—ah, Bowles—has taken me as a son. But you can readily

understand how a young man of my age and disposition might not always fall in with a somewhat elderly lady's views of life, especially in regard to cultural influences, and while I love her very dearly and wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world——"

"Yes, it's too bad about you!" observed Dixie Lee heartlessly; and then for quite a while she looked out of the car window as drab and dirty tenements slipped by and the train plunged into a tunnel.

"How far West are you going?" she inquired, waking up suddenly from her reverie. "Lemme see your ticket. Um-m! Well, we travel together as far as Albuquerque, New Mex, and there we say 'Good-by.' I reckon California is about your size, Mr. Bowles, but don't you make any mistake and drop off in Arizona or the cowboys will scare you up some. As for the rest of it, I don't care what name a man goes by, but I see you are down on your ticket here as 'Houghton.'"

There was a challenge in her voice; but Bowles was not dismayed.

"Now, really, Miss Lee," he began, "why quibble over the accident of a name? Whether my name is Houghton, as I have signed it here, or Bowles, has nothing to do with the case. The fact is, I am suffering from an excess of aunts and Wordsworth, much in the same way that you are, perhaps, and my heart has gone out to the West. Be a good fellow now and help me out. Tell me about the country and what I would better do; and, though it is a small return, you shall have one more devoted slave to worship at your feet."

A fleeting smile came into his eyes as he delivered himself of this last, and the queen of the Bat Wing Ranch paused suddenly to make sure there was no mistake. It would be hard indeed to find oneself laughed at by a suède New Yorker, and yet—well, he seemed to mean it, too.

"Rise up, then, Sir Knight," she said, tapping him lightly with her sombrero; "and be mighty particular to change cars when we get to Albuquerque—otherwise the Chula Vista cowboys will make you hard to catch."

Chapter II

The Far West.

Three days is a short time in which to post a man on the Far West, but if you don't care what you say, and say it quick, you can give him a pretty good fill. Dixie Lee was almost sorry when the Limited rolled into Albuquerque, and Mr. Bowles was fairly tearful in his adieus.

"Really, Miss Lee," he said, holding her hand with just a shade more than the proper pressure, "really, I shall never forget your kindness. The days have passed like a dream and I feel myself quite a Westerner already. Yes, I am sure I shall love the West—it is so big, and free—but what I like about it most is its splendid spirit of equality, its camaraderie. I can feel it everywhere—it is in the air—these great, rough-looking men, greeting perfect strangers in the smokers and on the platforms and saying: 'Say, pardner, gimme a match'—or a smoke, even! Oh, it is glorious!

I—but, really, I must be going! So sorry our ways should part here. Well, good-by, Miss Lee—so glad we should happen to meet. I hope you have a pleasant journey. Thank you! Oh, don't mention it—good-by!"

He raised his Dutch comedian hat once more, a trace of romantic mistiness came into his violet eyes, and then he hurried back to his luxurious quarters on the Limited while Dixie May sat and waited for the southbound to take her to Deming. It was not a cheerful journey to contemplate, for New Mexico and Arizona way trains are slow and dusty, and given to making poor connections and unseemly arrivals; but by ten o'clock that evening Dixie Lee hoped to get as far as Deming and then, if the Overland happened to be late too, she could catch a westbound passenger and get to Chula Vista before the hotel closed. The Western Limited pulled out as her train still stood on its track and she glanced at the rear-end of the observation car for a fluttering handkerchief; but Mr. Bowles' emotions seemed to have overcome him, for he was lacking in this last attention. She watched for him with a broad grin; then, when she was sure he was really gone, Dixie May threw herself back in her seat and laughed until she was silly.

She was in good humor all the way to Deming, where the westbound was reported two hours late; but as she was pacing up and down the platform at midnight her face came suddenly straight. The westbound was standing on the track waiting for orders and she was walking along up toward the front when suddenly, through the smoking-car window, she beheld Sir Knight Bowles in eager converse with a grizzled old-timer! If it wasn't he, it was his twin brother—for there was the hard-boiled hat as large as life. The window was a little murky and the air was thick inside, but Dixie May was sure she had seen him—or was she having dreams?

It seemed, somehow, as if she couldn't get that droll creature out of her mind. All the way down from Albuquerque she had been hearing his talk in her ears and laughing at the way he broadened his "a's" and purred and purled over his "r's." At times she had burst into inextinguishable laughter, insomuch that several of the male passengers had regarded her with curious glances and the train boy had tried to get gay with her; but Dixie Lee knew how to settle that kind of folks. A peanut butcher was a peanut butcher to her, and nothing more; and if he neglected to hawk his wares in order to drape himself over the back of her seat she could put him in his place. It was Mr. Bowles that she was thinking of—Mr. Bowles—and when she remembered the innocent look on his face as she filled him up with Indian atrocities and cattle-war stories she just simply had to laugh. But now to find him following her—to discover him on the same train when he was ticketed west out of Albuquerque—well, that was a different thing entirely!

Dixie Lee retired to the sleeper to snatch a few hours of repose and when the dead-eyed porter set her down at Chula Vista she had entirely forgotten her knight. It was five o'clock on a cold March morning and the wind came in from across the prairie with a sweep that chilled the blood. It was so cold that the ticket-agent had ducked back into his inner sanctum before she could so much as hail him—and it was a quarter of a mile up to the hotel! Dixie May took a long look about her; she tried the waiting-room door; then, with a deep-drawn shudder, she turned to go it alone, when lo, a tall and masculine figure stepped out from behind the warehouse and she recognized Mr. Bowles!

"Pardon me, madam," he said, doffing his comedian hat and addressing her as if she were a stranger; "I see you are all alone—can I be of any service to you?"

It was dark, all right, but the idea of Mr. Bowles expecting to conceal his identity by mere starlight! She knew him, of course, the minute she saw his hat, but—well, what was the use of getting haughty about it? Why not do a little play-acting, too, until they got up to the hotel?

"Why—why, yes," she faltered, simulating an appealing weakness. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure. I—I expected my father to meet me here, but——"

"Ah, yes—very unfortunate," put in Bowles promptly. "Is there any hotel near? Just lead the way then, and I'll follow with your luggage. You might put on my overcoat if you're suffering from the cold. Rather not? Very well, then; let's hurry along to the hotel."

They hurried, Bowles struggling with the baggage, of which he had three pieces, and Dixie Lee preparing her valedictory. Yes, much as she regretted it, she would have to bid him farewell—otherwise he might come tagging after her out to the ranch and set the whole country to talking. It was all very well back in New York, or on the train, but in the Tortugas—never! She would have to make her final effort cutting, but she hoped he would not take it too hard—and meanwhile, as a penance for his presumption, he could break his back packing her suitcases up from the station.

"Ah, just a moment!" entreated Mr. Bowles, setting down the suitcases and working his tortured hands. "Oh, no, not heavy at all—perhaps I can fasten them together with this strap."

He unbuckled the shoulder-strap from his alligator-skin bag and looped it through the handles of the suitcases.

"Hah! Just the thing!" he exclaimed, slinging the two suitcases over his shoulder; and then, with a long, free stride, he swung along beside her, as tireless as an Indian—and as silent.

A sudden sense of respect, almost of awe, came over Dixie Lee as she contemplated his masterful repose, but the hotel door was near and she nerved herself for the assault.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" she snapped. "Following along after me this way! Just because I happened to be a little friendly——"

"Now, really, Miss Lee," broke in Bowles with admirable calm, "I hope you will not be too hard on me. I assure you, if it had not been for your distressing situation—which no gentleman could overlook—you would never have been aware of my presence. But you have known me long enough, I am sure, to know that I would never presume to force my society upon any lady, more particularly upon one for whom——"

"Well, what are you tagging along for then?" demanded Dixie Lee wrathfully. "When I said good-by to you up at Albuquerque you had a through ticket to California. Now here you are down at Chula Vista. What are you up to—that's what I want to know!"

"To be sure!" agreed Mr. Bowles. "Under the circumstances, you have a perfect right to an explanation. I may as well confess then, Miss Lee, that your stories told on the train have fired me with a desire to see the real West, not the pseudo or imitation article, but the real thing with the hair on, as you so aptly phrased it.

But here was my difficulty—I had no one to direct me. The hotel-keepers, the ticket-agents, even my Eastern friends in the West, might send me astray and I be none the wiser. I admit it was hardly a gentlemanly thing to do, but rather than lose my last chance to see the great West of which you spoke I followed after you; but without the slightest intention, I assure you, of making myself obnoxious. Is this the hotel ahead?"

"Yes," said Dixie Lee, "it is. And while I wish to congratulate you upon your explanation I want to inform you, Mr. Bowles, that right here is where we part. You're looking for the Wild West, and here she is with her hair down. If you are hunting experiences these Chula Vista boys will certainly accommodate you; but from this time on, Mr. Bowles, we are strangers. We don't know each other, do you understand? If what you say is true, you followed me simply to find the Far West. This is it. We're quits, then; and I shall have to ask you, as a gentleman, not to annoy me further. You may be all right—back in New York—but out here it's different and I don't want to have the folks joshing me about you. So I'll bid you farewell, Mr. Bowles, and thank you kindly for carrying up my baggage—but don't you dare come around the Bat Wing Ranch, or I'll tell the boys to kill you!"

She grabbed up her baggage as she spoke and hurried ahead, and when Mr. Bowles stepped into the hotel some minutes later she was as distant as an ivory goddess. Or a bronze goddess, to be exact, for the sun and wind had caressed the fair cheeks of Dixie May until they were as brown and ruddy as a berry, and even the steam heat of a New York apartment could only reduce their coloring. She seemed a goddess indeed to Bowles as she lingered beside the stove, her smooth, capable hands bared to the glow of the flames, and her body buoyant with the grace of youth; but the laughing brown eyes which had become the mirrors of his life were turned away now and all the world was changed.

The bottle-nosed proprietor came shuffling in from the bar and silently handed him a pen; then, without looking at the name that was signed, he wrote a number after it and handed his guest a key.

"Baggage?" he inquired as Mr. Bowles stood helplessly to one side.

"Oh, yes!" said Bowles, recovering himself with an effort. "Here are the checks. My trunks will be in on a later train. Have them sent up, won't you?"

"Sample room?" queried the hotel-keeper brusquely.

"Beg pardon?"

"D'ye want 'em put in the sample room?" snarled the proprietor, outraged at having to bandy words with the despised Easterner.

"The sample room?" repeated Mr. Bowles, now thoroughly mystified. "Why, no—why should I?"

At this final evidence of imbecility a mighty spasm of rage came over the proprietor, and as he struggled to regain his calm Dixie Lee suddenly clapped a handkerchief to her mouth and made a dash for the dining-room. The paroxysm passed and with an air of wearied indulgence the proprietor explained and disappeared.

"All right!" he grumbled. "Guess you know your own business. Thought you was a travelin' man."

He stepped back through the door marked "Bar" and Mr. Bowles was left to gasp alone. A traveling man! They took him for a traveling man! It was quite a shock,

and Bowles was still brooding over it by the stove when the door from the bar was thrust open and a tall cowboy, booted and spurred and shapped and pistoled, came stalking into the room. His broad sombrero was shoved far back on his head, showing a tremendous stand of tumbled hair, and his keen hazel eyes roved about with the steady intentness of a hunting animal's; but only for the fraction of a second did he condescend to notice Bowles. He swayed a little as he walked and the aroma of whisky came with him, but otherwise he seemed perfectly sober.

"Say!" he called, turning and kicking the bar door open again, "did Dix come in on that train? She did? Well, here's where I git hell—I was supposed to go down and meet 'er!"

He came over and stood by the stove, apparently oblivious of the man before him, and while he waited he cursed himself in a cynical, impersonal sort of way that made a great impression on Bowles.

"Well, where is she?" he demanded, as the proprietor hurried in behind him. "I ain't had a wink of sleep, but we'll have to hit the road anyway."

"Dixie's in getting a cup of coffee," answered the proprietor. "Better have a seltzer first," he wheedled, taking him by the arm and drawing him toward the barroom.

"You're dead right there too, old sport!" responded the cowboy heartily. "My head is as big as a balloon, and them grays will shore drag me over the dashboard if I don't kill some of this whisky."

He tottered out as he spoke and Mr. Bowles half rose from his chair. Dixie Lee was in danger; she was in imminent peril of death! He must warn her—he must help her—he must try to save her life! He was in a fever of excitement when the dining-room door finally swept open and Dixie May entered the room; but she was calm, very calm, and something about her bade him hold his hand. Then the barroom door swung in again and the cowboy appeared, walking head up with a masterful stride—and a look in his eyes that Bowles knew all too well.

"Why, hello, Dix!" he cried, hurrying over and striking hands with her. "Well, well, how're you comin'? What, don't I draw nothin'?"

"No, you don't!" responded Dixie Lee, stepping back as he impudently offered to kiss her. "Not unless it's a good slap for not meeting me down at the train! How's Maw and Paw and all the boys? Have you gentled that colt for me yet?"

And so, with many laughing sallies, they passed out into the cold dawn, leaving Bowles to sit by the fire and stare. But in her last glance he had read a challenge, and he did not let it pass.

Chapter III

The Bat Wing Ranch.

A week passed by while Mr. Bowles prepared for his great emprise, and then one evening as the sun set behind the purple peaks of the Tortugas and lighted up the white walls of the big house on the hill a stranger might have been seen riding up

toward the Bat Wing gate. In fact, he was seen, and the round-up cook, who was washing supper dishes at the rear of the chuck-wagon, delivered himself of a heartfelt curse.

"What's the matter, Gus?" inquired a lounging cowboy who was hovering over the fire. "Drop yore dishrag?"

"No; and I don't need to around this ranch!" commented Gus with bitter emphasis. "It's a common remark or sayin' that when you drop yore dishrag it means a visitor is comin'—or, as some say, it means bad luck. Now jest look at that ornery feller comin' up the road! Can't let his hawse out none—can't whip up a little and git in by supper-time—has to come draggin' in jest as I'm finishin' my work!"

The cowboy raised himself up slowly from crouching on his heels and regarded the stranger intently.

"Say, who is that?" he said at last. "Looks like he was ridin' that little bald-faced sorrel that Lon Morrell traded to Jim Scrimsher last summer. Yes, sir, it's the very same hawse—that's somebody from down Chula Vista way!"

"Well, I don't care where he comes from," grumbled the cook, "as long as he comes a-runnin'! I sure will be one happy man when the wagon gits away from this ranch and I git shut of these no-'count, worthless chuck-riders. Well, biscuits and coffee is all he gits now, I don't care if he's a cattle-buyer!"

He wiped his hands carefully on a clean towel he kept hid for that purpose, pulled out his long gray mustaches and regarded the stranger with a baleful stare.

"Hoo!" he sneered. "Look at them shaps, will you? Ain't them the fancy pants though! Right new, too—and git on to that great big six-shooter! Must be a forest ranger!"

"Shut up!" said the cowboy as the stranger dropped off at the gate. "He might hear ye!"

"Don't give a rip if he did!" snorted Gus, to whom Uncle Sam's gay young forest-savers were intimately associated with an extra plate; and, grumbling and slamming down dishes, he returned to his manifold duties.

But the stranger was evidently not a common chuck-rider; in fact, so gloriously was he appareled that the moment his rigging became apparent the idling cowboy made a swift sneak to the bunk-house, where the boys were wrangling over a pitch game, and turned in a general alarm.

"Come out, fellers," he whispered hoarsely, "and see the new tenderfoot! Hurry up, he's goin' over to the big house! Say, he's a forest ranger all right!"

"Nothin' of the kind!" asserted a burly cow-puncher, thrusting his head out the door. "Movin' picture cowboy, I'll bet a hat!"

The stranger remounted gracefully as they gazed out at him; then he touched his jaded sorrel with the spur and trotted over to the big house gate—and as he trotted he rose rhythmically in his stirrups, while all cowboy-land stood aghast!

"English!" they gasped in a chorus, and burst into fervid curses as they stared at the uncouth sight. A grown man, a white man, and hopping up and down like that! Holy, jumping Jerusalem! They beat each other on the back in an agony of despair—and yet it was no more than Mr. Bowles, dropping back into his old Central Park habits. To be sure, the man who coached him at Chula Vista had

warned him against it repeatedly, but the customs of a lifetime are not wiped out in a minute, and to that extent Mr. Bowles was still an Easterner.

The big white house in which Henry Lee made his home was a landmark in southeast Arizona. Some people merely referred to it as "The White House," and though it was forty miles from the railroad it was as well known in its way as the abiding place of Presidents in Washington. The White House was a big, square, adobe building, set boldly on the top of a low hill and surrounded by a broad wooden gallery, from behind whose clambering honeysuckles and gnarled rose-bushes Mrs. Lee and Dixie May looked down upon the envious world below. To be invited up to the big house, to sit on the flower-scented porch and listen to the soft voices of the women—that was a dream to which every cow-puncher's heart aspired, although in the realization many a bold, adventurous man lost face and weakened. But to Bowles the big house was the natural place to go, and he unlatched the gate and mounted to the gallery without a tremor.

Upon the edge of the porch, smoking his pipe and gazing out over his domain, sat Henry Lee, the pioneer cattleman of the Tortugas Valley, and a man who had fought Indians to get his start. He was a great man—old Henry Lee—but to Bowles chiefly distinguished by being the father of Dixie May.

"Ah, good-evening!" he began, bringing his heels together and bowing. "Are you Mr. Lee?"

The cattleman looked at him a moment with a calm, appraising eye. He was a small, rather slight man, but square-shouldered and far from decrepit—also, he had seen the procession go by for quite a while, and he could judge most men by their faces.

"That's my name," he said, rising quietly from his place. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Bowles," said that gentleman, following the procedure he thought most fitting in one seeking employment. "Mr. Scrimsher, of Chula Vista, has referred me to you in regard to a position as cowboy. I should like very much to get such a place."

"Sorry, Mr. Bowles," answered Mr. Lee, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, "but I'm not taking on any hands at present."

"Oh, indeed!" murmured the would-be cowboy, not at all dismayed. "Perhaps there will be an opening for me later?"

"No; I'm afraid not. I generally take on about the same boys every year, or men that know the country, and there won't be any place for you."

There was something very final about the way that this was said, and Bowles paused to meditate.

"Turn your horse into the pasture and git some supper at the wagon," added the old man, with a friendly gesture; but supper was not what Bowles had come for. He had come to get a job where he could be near the queen of his heart, and perhaps win her by some deed of prowess and daring. So he ignored this tacit dismissal and returned again to the charge.

"I can readily understand, Mr. Lee," he began, "why you hesitate to employ a stranger, and especially a man who has newly come from the East, but if you would give me a trial for a few days I am sure you would find me a very willing worker. I have come out here in order to learn the cattle business, and the

compensation is of no importance to me at first; in fact, I should be glad to work without pay until you found my services of value. Perhaps now——"

"Nope," interposed the cattleman, shaking his head regretfully. "I've tried that before, and it don't work. Cow-punching is a business by itself, and it can't be learned in a minute; in fact, a good puncher is the scarcest thing on the range, and I either pay the top price or I don't take a man on at all. I can't stop to monkey with green hands."

Now, this was pretty direct, and it was calculated to put the ordinary tenderfoot in his place; but Mr. Bowles came from a self-selected class of people who are accustomed to having their own way, and he would not acknowledge himself beaten.

"Now, really, Mr. Lee," he protested, "I don't think you are quite fair to me in this. As I understand it, your round-up is just beginning, and I am sure I could be of some service—for a few days, at least."

The old man glanced at his fancy new outfit, and thought he saw another way out.

"Can you ride?" he inquired, asking that first fatal question before which so many punchers go down.

"Yes, sir," answered Bowles politely.

"You mean you can ride a gentle horse," corrected Lee. "I've got some pretty wild ones in my bunch, and of course a new hand couldn't expect to get the best. Can you rope?"

"No, I mean any horse," retorted Bowles, avoiding the subject of roping. "Any horse you have."

"Hmm!" observed Mr. Lee, laying down his pipe and regarding his man with interest. "Did you ever ride any bad horses?"

"Yes, sir," lied Bowles; "several of them."

"And you think you can ride any horse I've got, eh?" mused Lee. "Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Bowles," he continued, speaking very deliberately; "I've got a horse in my remuda that killed a man last fall—if you'll ride him I'll take you on for a puncher."

"Very well, sir," responded Bowles. "And thank you very much. It's very kind of you, I'm sure."

He turned to go but the cattleman stopped him in his second stride. His bluff had been called, for it would never do to go to a show-down—not unless he wanted a man's blood on his hands.

"Here! Wait a minute!" he cried impatiently. "I don't want to get you killed, so what's the use of talking? The only way for you to get to be a cow-puncher is to work up to it, the way everybody does. I'll give you a job as flunky at twenty a month and found, and if you make good I'll put you on for horse wrangler. How does that strike you?"

"Ah—what are the duties of a flunky?" inquired Bowles, cautiously and without enthusiasm. "You know, I'm quite content with your first proposal."

"Very likely," answered Mr. Lee dryly. "But wait till you see the horse. All a flunky has to do is to help the cook, wash the dishes, drag up a little wood, and drive the bed-wagon."

"It's very kind of you, I'm sure," murmured Mr. Bowles; "but I think I prefer the other."

"The other what?"

"Why, the other position—the job of cow-puncher."

"You don't think I'll let you ride that horse, do you?" demanded Mr. Lee sternly.

"Why—so I understood you."

The old cattleman snorted and muttered to himself. He had talked too much and that was all there was to it. Now he would have to make some concessions to pay for it.

"Listen to me, young man," he said, rising and tapping him on the shoulder. "The horse that killed Dunbar is the worst man-eater in the country—I ought to have shot the brute long ago—and if you try to ride him he'll throw you before you git your stirrup. More'n that, he'll kick you before you hit the ground, and jump on you before you bounce. My twister, Hardy Atkins, won't go near 'im, and he's one of the best riders in Arizona; so what's the use of talking about it? Now, you're a stranger here, and I'll make an exception of you—how about that flunky job?"

"Why—really——" Mr. Bowles hesitated a moment. "Perhaps it's only in the name, but I'd rather not accept such a menial position. Of course, it's very kind of you to offer me the alternative, but——"

"Now, here!" cried the cattleman fiercely. "I'll make you assistant horse wrangler, at thirty dollars a month, and if you don't accept I'll tell Hardy to catch up the old man-killer and put you in the hospital! I was a fool to talk to you the way I did; but don't you crowd me too far, young man, or you'll find Henry Lee a man of his word! Now, will you wrangle horses, or will we have to ship you East?"

Bowles stared at him for a moment, and then he drew himself up proudly.

"If the choice lies between a menial position——" he began; and old Henry brought his teeth together with a click.

"You poor, dam', ignorant tenderfoot!" he raved. "You don't know when you're being treated white! You ain't worth a cent to me, sir—no, not a cent! And now I'm going to learn you something! I'll ask my twister to put the saddle on old Dunbar in the morning, and you'll have to ride him, sir, or own yourself a coward!"

"Very well, sir," answered Bowles, with military stiffness. "Very well! I will see you in the morning, then."

He bowed and strode off down the path, his new shaps flapping ponderously as he walked; and the old cattleman brushed his eyes to drive the mad thought away.

Chapter IV

Brigham.

If his strategic victory over Henry Lee had given Bowles, the pseudo cowboy, any swelled-up ideas about taking the Bat Wing outfit by storm, he was promptly undeceived when he went up against Gloomy Gus, the cook. Gus had set the sour dough for men old enough to be Mr. Bowles' grandfather; men who were, so he averred, the superiors of any punchers now living and conspicuously prompt at their meals. In striking contrast to these great souls, Bowles had lingered entirely

too long up at the big house; and when, after tying up his horse and feeding him some of Mr. Lee's long-treasured hay, he came dragging up to the chuck-wagon, the hour of grace had passed. Gloomy Gus was reclining beside his fire in converse with a red-headed cowboy, and neither of them looked up.

"Ah, pardon me," began Mr. Bowles, with perhaps a trace of condescension in his voice; "can you tell me where I will find the cook?"

The red-headed cowboy sat like a graven image, with his eyes fixed on the fire, and finally the cook replied.

"You'll find him right here, Mister," he said, "from four o'clock in the mornin' till sundown—and then, by grab, he quits!"

The injured emphasis with which this last was enunciated left no doubt as to the identity of the speaker, and Bowles murmured polite regrets; but, coming as he did from a land where cooks are not kings, he continued with the matter in hand.

"So sorry," he purled, "if I am a little late; but Mr. Lee told me to come down here and ask you to give me some dinner."

"Huh!" grunted the cook. "Did you hear that, Brigham?"

The cowboy nodded gravely and squinched his humorous eyes at the fire. He was a burly young man, dressed for business in overalls and jumper, but sporting a big black hat and a fine pair of alligator-topped boots; and from the way his fat cheeks wrinkled up it was evident he was expecting some fun.

The cook regarded Bowles for a minute with evident disapproval; then he raised himself on one elbow and delivered his ultimatum.

"Well, Mr. Man," he rasped, making his manner as offensive as possible, "you go back and tell Mr. Lee that I won't give you no dinner. Savvy? Ef you'd come round when you first rode in I might've throwed you out somethin', but now you can rustle yore own grub."

At these revolutionary remarks, Mr. Bowles started, and for a moment he almost forgot his breeding; then he withdrew into himself, and let the gaucherie pass with the contempt which it deserved. But it is hard to be dignified when you are hungry, and after several minutes of silence he addressed himself to the cowboy.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is there any other place nearby where I could buy a little food?"

"W'y, no, stranger," returned the cowboy amiably; "I don't reckon there is. Why don't you pick up a little around here? They's some coffee in that pot."

He nodded toward a large black coffee-pot that stood simmering by the fire, and Bowles cast a questioning glance at the cook.

"Hop to it!" exclaimed that dignitary, not a little awed by the stranger's proud reserve. "They's some bread in that can up there."

But still Bowles was helpless.

"Er—where do you eat?" he inquired, looking about for some sign of a table, or even of a plate and cup.

"Anywhere!" answered the cook, with a large motion of the hand. Then, as his guest still stood staring, he wearily rose to his feet. Without a word, he reached down into a greasy box and grabbed out a tin plate and cup; from another compartment he fished forth a knife, fork and spoon; with a pot-hook he lifted the

cover of an immense Dutch oven, thumped an oil-can half-full of cooked beans, and slopped a little coffee out of the pot. Then he let down the hinged door to his chuck-box, spread a clean white flour sack on it, laid out the dishes with elaborate solicitude, and slumped down again by the fire. Nothing said—and the cowboy sat nerveless in his place—but Mr. Bowles felt rebuked. He was a tenderfoot—an Easterner masquerading as a cowboy—and every movement of the sardonic pot-tender was calculated to rub it in and leave him, as it did, in a welter of rage and shame.

From the oil-can be dipped out some beans; he poured coffee and ate in silence, not daring to ask for butter or sugar lest he should still further reveal his ignorance; and when he had finished his meal he slipped away and went out to look at his horse. A piano was tinkling up at the big house, and the stars were very bright, but neither stars nor music could soothe his wounds, and at last he went back to the fire. The cook was gone now, and the cowboy also; the big noise was in the long, low building from which so many heads had appeared when he rode in from Chula Vista. He paused at the doorway, and listened; then, bracing himself for the hazing which was his due, he knocked.

"Come in!" yelled a raucous voice in an aside to the general uproar. "Come in here——No, by thunder, you played a seven! Well, where is it, then? Show me, pardner; I'm from Missou'. If you played the jack, where is it?"

Bowles pushed open the door, that scraped and sagged as he shoved it, and stepped into a room that was exactly posed for one of those old-fashioned pictures labeled "Evil Associates; or The First Step Toward Destruction." At a long table, upon which burned a smoky lamp, a group of roughly dressed men were wrangling over a game of cards, while other evil-doers looked over their shoulders and added to the general blasphemy. A growth of beard, ranging anywhere from three days' to a week's, served to give them all a ferocious, cave-dweller appearance; and so intent were they on their quarrel that not a man looked up. If Bowles had expected to be the center of the stage, it was from an exaggerated sense of his own importance, for so lightly was he held that no one so much as glanced at him—with the single exception of the red-headed cowboy, who was playing a mouth-organ in the corner—until the missing jack was produced.

A wooden bunk, built against the wall, was weighed down with a sprawling mass of long-limbed men; on the floor the canvas-covered beds of the cowboys were either thrown flat or still doubled up in rolls; and the only other furniture in sight was the two benches by the table and a hot stove that did yeoman service as a cuspidor. The air was thick with the smoke of cigarettes, and those who did not happen to be smoking were chewing plug tobacco, but the thing which struck Bowles as most remarkable was the accuracy with which they expectorated. A half oil-can filled with ashes served as a mark on the farther side; and the big, bull-voiced puncher who had so casually bid him come in was spitting through a distant knot-hole, which was rapidly becoming the center of a "Texas Flag."

Really, it was astounding to Bowles, even after all he had read and seen enacted on the films, to observe the rude abandon of these Western characters, and particularly in their speech. Somehow the Western tales he had read had entirely failed to catch the startling imagery of their vernacular—or perhaps the editors had cut it out. The well-known tendency toward personal violence, however, was

ever present, and as Bowles made bold to overlook the game a controversy sprang up which threatened to result in bloodshed.

The bull-voiced man—a burly, hook-nosed Texan, who answered to the name of Buck—was playing partners with a tall, slim, quiet-spoken puncher who centered all his thoughts on the cards; and against them were ranged a good-natured youth called Happy Jack and the presumptuous cowboy who had offered to kiss Dixie Lee. The game was fast, proceeding by signs and grunts and mysterious knocks on the table, and as it neared its close and each man threw down his cards with a greater vehemence, Happy Jack flipped out three final cards and made a grab for the matches. But this did not suit the ideas of the bull moose and his partner, and they rose from their seats with a roar.

"What you claim?" demanded Buck, laying a firm hand on the stakes.

"High, low, and the game!" answered Happy Jack wrathfully.

"You ain't got no game," put in the quiet puncher. "Why don't you play yore hand out instead of makin' a grab?"

"Here now!" spoke up Dixie Lee's miscreant friend, leaning half-way across the table. "You-all quit jumpin' on Happy or I'll bust you on the cabezon!"

"Yes, you will!" sneered Buck, shoving his big head closer, as if to dare the blow. "You don't look bad to me, Hardy Atkins, and never did; and don't you never think for a moment that you can run it over me and Bill, because you cain't! Now you better pull in that ornery face of yourn while it's all together—and we're goin' to count them cards, by this-and-that, if it's the last act!"

So they raged and wrangled, apparently on the very verge of a personal conflict; but as the play wore on Bowles became increasingly aware of a contemptuous twinkle that dwelt in the eyes of the man called Hardy Atkins. Then it came over him suddenly that other eyes were upon him; and instantly the typical Western scene was wrecked, and he saw himself made the fool. No burst of ruffianly laughter gave point to the well-planned jest—it passed over as subtly as a crisis in high society—but as he turned away from the game Bowles found himself in possession of a man-sized passion. Back where he came from an open, personal hatred was considered a little outré; but the spirit of the wilds had touched him already, and Hardy Atkins, the green-eyed, familiar friend of Dixie Lee, was the man that he hoped would choke.

As interest in the pitch game languished and a scuffle made the bunk untenable, stray cowboys began to drift outside again, some to seek out their beds beneath the wagon-sheds and others to foregather about the fire. First among these was the red-headed man called Brigham; and when Bowles, after sitting solitary for a while, followed after them, he found Brigham the center of attraction. Perched upon an upturned box, and with one freckled hand held out to keep the firelight from his eyes, he was holding forth with a long story which had everybody listening.

"And I says to this circus feller," he was saying, "'Well, I ain't never done no bareback work, but if you cain't git no one else to jump through them hoops I'll guarantee to take the pretty outer one of 'em. But you be mighty p'ticular to pop that whip of yourn, pardner,' I says to the ring-master, 'or that ol' rockin'-hawse will git away from me.'"

He cocked one eye up to see if Bowles was listening, and then indulged in a reminiscent chuckle.

"Well, I climbed up on that ol' rockin'-hawse—I was dressed like a clown, of course—and after the regular people had gone round the ring I come rackin' along out of the side-tent, a-bowin' to all the ladies and whistlin' to all the dogs, until you'd think I was goin' to do wonders. But all the kids was on, and they begin to laugh and throw peanuts, because they knowed the clown was bound to git busted—that's what the rascal is paid fer. Well, we went canterin' around the ring, me and that old white hawse that had been doin' it for fifteen years, and every time we come to a hoop I'd make my jump—the ring-master would pop his whip—and when I come squanderin' out the other side the old hawse would be right there to ketch me. Trick he had—he'd slow down and kinder wait fer me—but that dogged ring-master put up a job on me—he shore did; but the scoundrel tried to lie out of it afterwards.

"You see, them people that come out to Coney they expect somethin' fer their money, and bein' as I was only the fill-in man and the other feller was comin' back anyway, the management decided to ditch me. So when I made a jump at my last hoop the ring-master forgot to pop his whip—or so he said—and I come down on my head and like to killed me. Well, sir, the way them people hollered you'd think the king had come, an' when a couple of fool clowns come runnin' out and carried me off on a shutter they laughed till they was pretty nigh sick. That's the way it is at Coney Island—unless somebody is gittin' killed, them tight-wads won't spend a cent."

The red-headed raconteur laughed a little to himself, and, seeing his audience still attentive, he launched out into another.

"Yes, sir!" he began. "That's a great place—old Coney. You boys that's never been off the range don't know what it is you've missed. There's side shows, and circuses, and shoot-the-chutes, and whirley-go-rounds, and Egyptian seeresses, and hot-dog joints, and—well, say, speakin' of hot-dog reminds me of the time I took the job of spieler fer Go-Go, the dog-faced boy. This here Go-Go was a yaller nigger that they had rigged up like a cannibal and put in a big box along with a lot of dehorned rattlesnakes, Gila monsters, and sech. It was my job to stand up over the box, while the ballyhoo man outside was pullin' 'em in, and pop a whip over this snake-eatin' cannibal, and let on like he was tryin' to escape. I had a little old pistol that I'd shoot off, and then Go-Go would rattle his chain and yell 'Owww-wah!' like he was sure eatin' 'em alive.

"That was the barker's cue, and he'd holler out: 'Listen to the wild thing! He howls, and howls, and howls! Go-Go, the wild boy, the snake-eatin' Igorotte from the Philippines! Step right in, ladies and gentlemen! The price is ten cents, one dime, the tenth part of a dollar——' and all that kind of stuff, until the place was filled up. Then it was my turn to spiel, and I'd git up on the box, with a blacksnake in one hand and that little old pistol in the other, and say:

"'La-adies and gentle-men, before our performance begins I wish to say a few words relatin' to Echigogo Cabagan, the wild boy of Luzon. This strange creature was captured by Lieutenant Crawford, of the Seventy-ninth Heavy Artillery, in the wilds of the Igorotte country in the Philippines. At the time of his recovery he was livin' in the tropical jungles, never havin' seen a human face, an' subsistin' entirely

upon poisonous reptyles, which was his only pets and companions. So frequently was he bit by these venomous reptyles that Professor Swope, of the Philadelphia Academy, after a careful analysis of his blood, figgers out that it contains seven fluid ounces of the deadly poison, or enough to kill a thousand men.

"'On account of the requests of the humane society, the mayor, and several prominent ladies now present in the audience, we will do our best to prevent Go-Go from eatin' his snakes alive but——' and right there was the nigger's cue to come in.

"'Oww-wah!' he'd yell, shakin' his chain and tearin' around in his box, 'Ow-woo-wah!' And then he'd grab up them pore, sufferin' rattlesnakes and sech, and quile 'em around his neck, and snap his teeth like he was bitin' heads off—and me, I'd pop my whip and shoot off my pistol, and scare them fool people most to death.

"Well, that was the kind of an outfit it was, and one day when the nigger was quieted down between acts and playin' with a rag-doll we had give him in order to make him look simple-minded-like, a big, buck Injun from the Wild West Show come in with the bunch and looked at Go-Go kinder scary-like. You know——"

A noise of scuffling feet made the story-teller pause, and then the gang of card players came tumbling out of the bunk-house.

"Let's roast some ribs," said one.

"No, I want some bread and lick," answered another.

"What's the matter with aigs?" broke in a third.

"Say, you fellers shut up, will you?" shouted a man by the fire. "Old Brig's tellin' us a story!"

"Oh, git 'im a chin-strap," retorted the bull-voiced Buck. "I want some ribs!"

"Well, keep still, can't ye?" appealed the anxious listener; but silence was not on the cards. The chuck-box was broken open and ransacked for a butcher-knife; then as Buck went off to trim away the ribs of the cook's beef, Hardy Atkins and his friends made merry with the quiet company.

"Ridin' 'em again, are you, Brigham?" inquired Happy Jack with a grin.

"No, he's divin' off'n that hundred-foot pole!" observed Poker-faced Bill sardonically.

"And never been outside the Territory!" commented Hardy Atkins sotto voce.

Something about this last remark seemed to touch the loquacious Brigham, for he answered it with spirit:

"Well, that's more than some folks can say," he retorted. "I sure never run no hawse race with the sheriff out of Texas!"

"No, you pore, ignorant Jack Mormon," jeered Atkins; "and you never rode no circus hawse at Coney Island, neither. I've seen fellers that knowed yore kinfolks down on the river, and they swore to Gawd you never been outside of Arizona. More'n that, they said you was a worser liar than old Tom Pepper—and he got kicked out of hell fer lyin'."

A guffaw greeted this allusion to the fate of poor old Tom; but Brigham was not to be downed by comparisons.

"Yes," he drawled; "I heerd about Tom Pepper. I heerd say he was a Texican, and the only right smart one they was; and the people down there was so dog ignorant, everything he told 'em they thought it was a lie. Built up quite a reputation that

way—like me, here. Seems like every time I tell these Arizona Texicans anything, they up and say I'm lyin'."

He ran his eye over his audience and, finding no one to combat him further, he lapsed into a mellow philosophy.

"Yes," he said, cocking his eye again at Bowles; "I'm an ignorant kind of a feller, and I don't deny it; but I ain't one of these men that won't believe a thing jest because I never seen it. Now, here's a gentleman here—I don't even know his name—but the chances are, if he's ever been to Coney, he'll tell you my stories is nothin'."

"How about that hundred-foot pole?" inquired Poker Bill, as Bowles bowed and blushed.

"Yes, sure!" agreed Brigham readily. "We'll take that one now and let it go fer the bunch. If that's true, they're all true, eh?"

"That's me!" observed Bill laconically.

"All right, then, stranger," continued Brigham. "We'll jest leave the matter with you, and if what I said ain't true I'll never open my head again. I was tellin' these pore, ignorant Texas cotton-pickers that back at Coney Island they was a feller that did high divin'—ever see anything like that? All right, then, this is what I told 'em. I told 'em this divin' sport had a pole a hundred foot high, with a tank of water at the bottom six foot deep and mebbe ten foot square, and when it come time he climbed up to the top and stood on a little platform, facin' backwards and lookin' into a pocket mirror. Then he begun to lean over backwards, and finally, when everything was set, he threw a flip-flap and hit that tank a dead center without hurtin' himself a bit. Now, how about it—is that a lie?"

He looked up at Bowles with a steady gaze; and that gentleman did not fail him.

"Why, no," he said; "really, I see no reason to doubt what you say. Of course, I haven't been to Coney Island recently, but such events are quite a common occurrence there."

"Now, you see?" inquired Brigham triumphantly. "This gentleman has been around a little. Back at Coney them stunts is nothin'! They don't even charge admission."

"But how can that feller hit the water every time?" argued Bill the doubter, pressing forward to fight the matter out.

"Don't make no difference how he does it," answered Brigham; "that's his business. If people knowed how he done it, they wouldn't come to see 'im no more. By jicks, I'd jest like to take some of you fellers back to New York and show you some of the real sights. I ain't hardly dared to open my mouth since I took on with this ignorant outfit, but now that I got a gentleman here that's been around a little I may loosen up and tell you a few things."

"Oh, my Joe!" groaned Hardy Atkins, making a motion like fanning bees from his ears. "Hear the doggone Mormon talk—and never been outer the Territory! Been pitchin' hay and drinkin' ditch-water down on the Gila all his life and——"

"That's all right," retorted Brigham stoutly; "I reckon——"

"Well, git out of the way!" shouted the voice of Buck. "And throw down that frame so I can roast these ribs!"

That ended the controversy for the time, but before the ribs were cooked Brigham edged in another story—and he proved it by Mr. Bowles. It was a trifle

improbable, perhaps, but Bowles was getting the spirit of the Great West and he vouched for it in every particular. Then when the ribs were done he cut some of the scorched meat from the bones, and ate it half-raw with a pinch of salt, for he was determined to be a true sport. Buck and Brigham devoured from one to two pounds apiece and gnawed on the bones like dogs; but Mr. Bowles was more moderate in his desires. What he really longed for was a bed or a place to sleep; but the gentleman who had coached him on cowboy life—and sold him his fancy outfit—had not mentioned the sleeping accommodations, and Bowles was too polite to inquire. So he hung around until the last story was told, and followed the gang back to the bunk-house.

Each man went to his big blanket roll and spread it out for the night without a single glance at the suppliant, for a cowboy hates to share his bed; but as they were taking off their boots Brigham Clark spoke up.

"Ain't you got no bed, stranger?" he inquired; and when Bowles shook his head he looked at Hardy Atkins, who as bronco-twister and top-hand held the job of straw-boss. A silence fell and Bowles glanced about uneasily.

"There's a bed over there in the saddle-room," observed Atkins, with a peculiar smile.

A startled look went around the room, and then Buck came in on the play.

"Yes," he said, "that feller ain't here now."

"Oh, thank you," began Bowles, starting toward it; but he was halted in his tracks by a savage oath from Brigham.

"Here!" he ordered. "You come and sleep with me—that's Dunbar's bed!"

"Dunbar's!" exclaimed Bowles with a gasp. "Ah, I see!" And with a secret shudder he turned away from the dead man's bed and crept in next to Brigham.

Chapter V

Wa-Ha-Lote.

The cowboy's day begins early, no matter how he spends his night. It was four o'clock in the morning and Bowles was dead with sleep when suddenly the light of a lantern was thrown in his eyes and he heard the cook's voice rousing up the horse wranglers.

"Wranglers!" he rasped, shaking Brigham by the shoulder. "Git up, Brig; it's almost day!"

"All right, Gus!" answered Brigham, cuddling down for another nap; but Gloomy Gus had awakened too many generations of cowboys to be deceived by a play like that, and on his way out to finish breakfast he stumbled over Brigham's boots and woke him up to give them to him. So, with many a yawn and sigh, poor Brigham and his fellow wrangler stamped on their boots and went out to round up the horse pasture, and shortly afterward a shrill yell from the cook gave notice that breakfast was ready. Five minutes later he yelled again and beat harshly on a

dishpan; then, as the rumble of the horse herd was heard, he came and kicked open the door.

"Hey, git up, boys!" he shouted. "Breakfast's waitin' and the remuda is in the c'rell! The old man will be down hollerin' 'Hawses!' before you git yore coffee!"

The bite of the cold morning air swept in as he stood there and roused them at last to action. Swiftly Buck and Bill and Happy Jack rolled out and hustled into their clothes; other men not yet known by name hurried forth to wash for breakfast; and at last Bowles stepped out, to find the sky full of stars. A cold wind breathed in from the east, where the deceitful radiance of the false dawn set a halo on the distant ridges; and the cowboy's life, for the moment, seemed to offer very little to an errant lover. Around the cook's fire, with their coat collars turned up to their ears, a group of punchers was hovering in a half-circle, leaving the other half for Gloomy Gus. Their teeth chattered in the frosty silence, and one by one they washed their faces in hot water from the cook's can and waited for the signal to eat. Then the wranglers came in, half frozen from their long ride in the open pasture, and as Brigham poured out a cup of coffee, regardless, old Gus raised the lid from a Dutch oven, glanced in at the nicely browned biscuits and hollered:

"Fly at it!"

A general scramble for plates and cups followed; then a raid on the ovens and coffee-pots and kettles; and inside of three minutes twenty men were crouching on the ground, each one supplied with beans, biscuits and beef—the finest the range produced. They ate and came back for more, and Bowles tried to follow their example; but breakfast at home had been served at a later hour, and it had not been served on the ground, either. However, he ate what he could and drank a pint of coffee that made him as brave as a lion. It was real range coffee, that had set on the grounds over night and been boiled for an hour in the morning. It was strong, and made him forget the cold; but just as he was beginning to feel like a man again silence fell on the crowd, and Henry Lee appeared.

In his riding boots, and with a wooden-handled old Colt's in his shaps, Mr. Lee was a different creature from the little man that Bowles had whipsawed on the previous evening. He was a dominating man, and as he stood by the fire for a minute and waited for enough light to rope by, Mr. Bowles began to have his regrets. It is one thing to bully-rag a man on his front steps, and quite another to ride bronks on a cold morning. The memory of a man named Dunbar came over him, and he wondered if he had died in the morning, when his bones were brittle and cold. He remembered other things, including Dixie Lee, but without any positive inspiration; and he took a sneaking pleasure at last in the fact that Mr. Lee appeared to have forgotten all about him.

But Henry Lee was not the man to let an Eastern tenderfoot run it over him, and just as he called for horses and started over toward the corral he said to Hardy Atkins:

"Oh, Hardy, catch up that Dunbar horse and put this gentleman's saddle on him, will you?"

He waved his hand toward Bowles, whose heart had just missed a beat, and pulled on a trim little glove.

"What—Dunbar?" gasped the bronco-twister, startled out of his calm.

"Yes," returned Lee quietly. "The gentleman claims he can ride."

"Who—him?" demanded Atkins, pointing incredulously at the willowy Bowles.

"Yes—him!" answered the cattleman firmly. "And after what he said to me last evening he's either got to ride Dunbar or own himself a coward—that's all."

"Oh," responded the twister, relieved by the alternative; and with a wink at Buck and the rest of the crowd he went rollicking out to the corral. By the usual sort of telepathy Hardy Atkins had come to hate and despise Bowles quite as heartily as Bowles had learned to hate him, and the prospect of putting the Easterner up against Dunbar made his feet bounce off the ground. First he roped out his own mount and saddled him by the gate; then, as the slower men caught their horses and prepared for the work of the day, he leaned against the bars and pointed out the man-killer to Bowles, meanwhile edging in his little talk.

"See that brown over there?" he queried, as Bowles stared breathlessly out over the sea of tossing heads. "No, here he is now—that wall-eyed devil with his hip knocked down—he got that when he rared over and killed Dunbar. Can't you see 'im? Right over that bald-faced sorrel! Yes, that hawse that limps behind!"

At that moment some impetuous cowboy roped at his mount and the round corral became a raging maelstrom of rushing horses, thundering about in a circle and throwing the dirt twenty feet high; but as a counter movement checked the charge and the wind blew the dust away, the lanky form of the horse that killed Dunbar loomed up on the edge of the herd. He was a big, raw-boned brute, colored a sunburned, dusty brown, and a limp in his off hind leg gave him a slinking, stealthy air; but what impressed Bowles the most was the sinister look in his eyes. If ever a horse was a congenital criminal, Dunbar was the animal. His head was long and bony and bulging around the ears, and his eyes were sunk deep, like a rattlesnake's, and with a rattlesnake's baleful glare. But there was more than a snaky wildness in them: the wicked creature seemed to be meditating upon his awful past, and scheming greater crimes, until his haggard, watchful eyes were set in a fixed, brooding stare. He was a bad horse, old Dunbar, and Atkins was there to play him up.

"You want to be careful not to hurt that hawse," he warned, as Bowles caught his breath and started. "The boss expects to git a thousand dollars fer him at the Cheyenne Rough-Riding Contest next summer. Now that old Steamboat is rode, and Teddy Roosevelt is busted, they's big money hangin' up fer a bad hawse. Got to have one, you know. It's fer the championship of the world, and if they don't git another man-killer they can't have no contest. I would've tried him myself, but he's too valuable. How do you ride—with yore stirrups tied? No? Well, I reckon you're right—likely to get caught and killed if he throws himself over back. You ain't down here fer a Wild West Show, are ye? Uh-huh, jest thought you might be—knowed you wasn't a puncher. Well, we'll saddle him up fer you now—if you say so!"

He lingered significantly on the last words, and Henry Lee, who was standing near, half smiled; but there must have been some sporting blood back in the Bowles family somewhere, for Mr. Bowles merely murmured:

"If you will, please!" and got his saddle.

So there was nothing for Atkins to do but go in and try to catch Dunbar. The bronco-twister shook out his rope, glanced at the boss, glanced at him again, and dropped reluctantly into the corral. Hardy Atkins would rather have taken a

whipping than put a saddle on Dunbar; but he was up against it now, so he lashed his loop out on the ground and advanced to make his throw. One by one the horses that had gathered about Dunbar ran off to the right or left, and as the old man-killer made his dash to escape the long rope shot out with a lightning swiftness and settled around his neck. The twister passed the rope behind him, sat back on it and dug his high heels into the ground; but the jerk was too much for his hand-grip, and before anyone could tail on behind he let go and turned the horse loose.

Then, as the great whirlpool of frightened horses went charging around the corral, Buck Buchanan, the man with the bull-moose voice, hopped down and rushed to the center. Some one threw an extra rope to Hardy Atkins, and once more they closed in on the outlaw. But the horse that killed Dunbar was better than the two of them, and soon he had a second rope to trail. A third and a fourth man leaped in to join the conflict; and as they roped and ran and fought with Dunbar the remuda went crazy with excitement and threatened to break down the fence.

"Put up them bars!" yelled Hardy Atkins, as a beautiful, dappled black made a balk to leap over the gate. "Now all on this rope, boys—snub him to that post—oh, hell!" The pistol-like report of a grass rope parting filled out the rest of the sentence. Then the bronco-twister came limping over to the gate where Bowles and Henry Lee were sitting, shaking the blood from a freshly barked knuckle.

"We can't hold the blinkety-blank," he announced, gazing defiantly at the boss. "And what's the use, anyhow?" he demanded, petulantly. "They ain't a bronk in the remuda that can't throw this Englishman a mile! Of course, if you want us to take a day to it——"

"Well, catch Wa-ha-lote, then!" snapped Mr. Lee. "And be quick about it! I've got something else to do, Mr. Bowles," he observed tartly, "besides saddle up man-killers for a man that can't sit a trotting-horse!"

This was evidently an allusion to Mr. Bowles' way of putting the English on a jog-trot; but Bowles was too much interested to resent it. He was watching Hardy Atkins advancing on the dappled black that had tried to jump the bars.

"Oh," he cried enthusiastically, "is that the horse you mean? Oh, isn't he a beautiful creature! It's so kind of you to make the change!"

"Ye-es!" drawled Mr. Lee; and all the cowboys smiled. Next to Dunbar, Wa-ha-lote was the champion scrapper of the Bat Wing. There had been a day when he was gentle, but ever since a drunken Texas cowboy had ridden him with the spurs his views of life had changed. He had decided that no decent, self-respecting horse would stand for such treatment and, after piling a few adventurous bronco-busters, had settled down to a life of ease and plenty. The finest looking horse in the remuda, by all odds, was old Wa-ha-lote, the Water-dog. He was fat and shiny, and carried his tail straight up, like a banner; the yellow dapples, like the spots on a salamander's black hide—whence his Mexican name, Wa-ha-lote—were bright and plain in the sunlight; and he held his head up high as he ramped around the corral.

The sun had come up over the San Ramon Mountains while Hardy Atkins was wrestling with Dunbar; it soared still higher while the boys caught Wa-ha-lote. But caught he was, and saddled, for the horse never lived that a bunch of Texas

punchers cannot tie. It was hot work, with skinned knuckles and rope-burned hands to pay for it; but the hour of revenge was at hand, and they called for Bowles. A wild look was in every eye, and heaven only knows what would have happened had he refused; but the hot sun and the excitement had aroused Mr. Bowles from his calm, and he answered like a bridegroom. Perhaps a flash of white up by the big house added impetus to his feet; but, be that as it may, he slipped blithely through the bars and hurried out to his mount.

"Oh, what a beautiful horse!" he cried, standing back to admire his lines. "Do you need that blinder on his eyes?"

"What I say!" commented Atkins, ambiguously. "Now you pile on him and take this quirt, and when I push the blind up you holler and throw it into 'im. Are you ready?"

"Just a moment!" murmured Bowles, and for the space of half a minute he stood patting old Water-dog's neck where he stood there, grim and waiting, his iron legs set like posts and every muscle aquiver. Then, with unexpected quickness, he swung lightly into the saddle and settled himself in the stirrups.

"All right," he said. "Release him!"

"Release him it is!" shouted Atkins, with brutal exulting. "Let 'im go, boys; and—yee-pah!"

He raised the blind with a single jerk, leaped back, and warped Wa-ha-lote over the rump with a coil of rope. Other men did as much, or more; and Bowles did not forget to holler.

"Get up, old fellow!" he shouted.

As the lashes fell, Wa-ha-lote made one mighty plunge—and stopped. Then, as the crowd scattered, he shook out his mane and charged straight at the high, pole gate. A shout went up, and a cry of warning, and as the cowboys who draped the bars scrambled down to escape the crash Bowles was seen to lean forward; he struck with his quirt, and Wa-ha-lote vaulted the bars like a hunter. But even then he was not satisfied. Two panel gates stood between him and the open, and he took them both like a bird; then the dust rose up in his wake and the Bat Wing outfit stood goggle-eyed and blasphemous.

"W'y, the blankety-blank!" crooned Hardy Atkins.

"Too skeered to pitch!" lamented Buck.

"You hit 'im too hard!" shouted Happy Jack.

"But that feller kin ride!" put in Brigham stoutly.

"Aw, listen to the Mormon-faced dastard!" raved Hardy Atkins; and as the conversation rose mountain high, the white dresses up on the hill fluttered back inside the house. But when Bowles came riding back on Wa-ha-lote not even the outraged Hardy could deny that the Bat Wing had a new hand.

Chapter VI

The Round-Up.

It is an old saying that there is no combination or percentage known that can beat bull luck. Bowles was lucky; but he didn't know how lucky he was, never having seen a real bronk pitch. After Wa-ha-lote had had his run he changed his mind again and decided to be good, and when Bowles galloped him back to the ranch he was as gentle as a dog, and the top horse in the remuda. Even when Bowles started to rise to the trot the Water-dog was no more than badly puzzled.

By this time the outfit was pouring out the gate on their way to the belated round-up, and all except the principals had decided to take it as a joke. To be sure, they had lost an hour's daylight, and broken a few throw-ropes; but the time was not absolutely lost. Bowles would soon draw a bronk that would pitch, and then—oh, you English dude! They greeted him kindly, then, with the rough good-nature you read so much about, and as Bowles loosened up they saw he was an easy mark.

"Say, pardner," said one, "you sure can jump the fences! Where'd you learn that—back at Coney Island?"

"Coney Island nothin'!" retorted another. "W'y, Joe, you show your ignorance! This gentleman is from England—can't you see him ride?"

"Well, I knowed all along he was goin' to ride Wa-ha-lote," observed a third, oracularly. "I could tell by the way he walked up to him. How's he goin', stranger—make a pretty good buggy-horse, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, indeed!" beamed Bowles. "That is, I presume he would. He is one of the best gaited animals I ever rode. A perfect riding horse! Really, I can't remember when I've enjoyed such a glorious gallop!"

They crowded around him then, in an anxious, attentive cluster, still jabbing their horses with the spurs to keep up with Henry Lee but salting away his naive remarks for future reference.

Henry Lee was just making some little gathers near the home ranch while he waited for his neighbors to send in their stray men for the big round-up, and as the conversation rattled on in the rear he headed straight for a range of hills to the south. An hour of hard riding followed, and then, as they began to encounter cattle, he told off men by ones and twos to drive them in to the cutting ground. Hardy Atkins took another bunch of men and rode for a distant point, and soon the whole outfit was strung out in a great circle that closed in slowly upon a lonely windmill that stood at the base of the hills.

As no one gave him orders, Bowles tagged along for a while and then threw in with Brigham, hoping to imbibe some much-needed information about the cow business from him; but a slow, brooding silence had come over that son of the desert and he confined his remarks to few words.

"Don't crowd the cattle," he said; "and don't chase 'em. They's nothin' to it—jest watch the other hands."

He mogged along glumly then, spitting tobacco and looking wise whenever Bowles made effusive remarks; and soon the spirit of the wide places took hold of the impressionable Easterner and taught him to be still. The sun was shining gloriously now, and the air was like new wine; he had conquered Wa-ha-lote, and won a job on the ranch; yet, even as the hot blood coursed in his veins and his heart leaped for joy, the solemn silence of burly Brigham exhorted him to peace. Nay, more than that, it set up uneasy questionings in his mind and made him

ponder upon what he had said. Perhaps he had spoken foolishly in the first flush of his victory; he might even have laid himself open to future gibes and jests, branding himself for a tenderfoot with every word he said.

Yes, indeed; perhaps he had. At any rate, the first words he heard as they neared the cutting-grounds were indicative of the fact.

"Hey, Bill!" roared Buck Buchanan, wafting his bull voice across the herd. "Release that Bar X cow!"

"Beg pahdon?" replied Bill, holding his hand behind his ear; and then there was a rumble of Homeric laughter that left Bowles hot with shame.

"Hey, Buck!" echoed Happy Jack, reining his horse out to turn back an ambling steer; and while all hands watched him eagerly he struck into a rough trot across the plain. Then, holding out his elbows in a manner that he supposed to be English, he bobbed higher and higher at every jump until he fell face forward on his horse's neck, and the cowboys whooped for joy. Bowles was able to laugh at this joke, and he tried to do it graciously; but the sudden wave of good manners and faultless grammar which swept over the crowd left him heated and mad clear through. Any dreams he might have cherished of becoming the little tin hero of the cow country were shattered beyond repair, and he saw the American cowboy as he really is—a very frail and human creature, who scorns all things new and foreign, and particularly objects to Eastern tenderfeet who try to beat him at his own game.

If Bowles had been piled in the dirt by his first mount and come limping forth with a grin, he would have won a corralful of friends by his grit; as it was, he had ridden Wa-ha-lote, a horse supposed to be a rank outlaw, and the cowboys were quick to resent it. Even the loyal Brigham had turned against him, looking on with a cynical smile as he saw him mocked; and as for Henry Lee, he could not even get near him. Scorn and anger and a patrician aloofness swept over Bowles' countenance by turns, and then he took Brigham's unspoken counsel and let the heathen rage. It was hard on his pride, but he schooled himself to endure it; and as cant phrase after cant phrase came back at him and he realized how loosely he had talked he decided in the future to keep his mouth shut. So far, at least, he had caught the great spirit of the West.

But now for the first time there was spread out before his eyes the shifting drama of the cow country, and he could not resist its appeal. On the edge of a great plain and within sight of jagged rock-ribbed mountains he beheld the herd of lowing cattle, the remuda of spare horses, the dashing cowboys, the fire with its heating irons, and all the changing scenes that go to make up a Western branding. For a spell the herd stood still while mothers sought out their calves and restless bulls plowed in and out; then when the clamor and blatting had lulled, and all hands had got a drink and made a change of horses, a pair of ropers rode into the herd, marking down each cow and calf and making sure they were mother and offspring. At last, when Henry Lee and his neighbors' stray men were satisfied, the ropers shook out their loops, crowded in on some unbranded calf and flipped the noose over its head. Like automatons, the quick-stepping little cutting ponies whirled and started for the fire, dragging the calves behind them by neck or legs or feet. Any way the rope fell was good enough for the cowboys, and the ponies came in on the lope.

Behind the calf pranced its frantic mother, head down and smelling its hide, and a pair of cowboys stationed for that purpose rode in and turned her back. Then the flankers rushed out and caught the rope, and the strong member seized the calf by its neck and flank and with an upward boost of the knees raised its feet from the ground and threw it flat on its side. One held up its head, the other the hind legs, and in a flash the ear-markers and hot-iron men were upon it, to give it a brand for life.

"Bat Wing!" called the dragger-up, giving the mother's brand. There was a blat, a puff of white smoke, and the calf was turned back to his "Mammy." That was the process, very simple to the cowboy and entirely devoid of any suggestion of pain; but to Bowles it seemed rather brutal, and he went back to help hold the herd.

As one roper after the other pursued his calf through the throng, or chased it over the plain while he made wild and ineffectual throws, the great herd milled and moved and shifted like a thing of life. At a distance of a hundred feet or more apart a circle of careless punchers sat their mounts, nominally engaged in holding the herd but mostly loafing on the job or talking it over in pairs. To Bowles it seemed that they were very negligent indeed, letting cows walk out which could have been turned back by the flip of a rope, and then spurring furiously after them as they made a break for the hills. If a calf which the ropers had failed to catch came dashing by, one guard, or even two, might leave his place to join in a mad pursuit, meanwhile leaving Bowles and Wa-ha-lote to patrol the entire flank of the herd. To be sure, he liked to do it; but their system seemed very poor to him, though he did not venture to say so.

Meanwhile, with futile pursuits and monotonous waits, the branding dragged slowly along, and suddenly Bowles realized he was hungry. He looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly noon, but he could perceive no symptoms of dinner. He regretted now the insufficient breakfast which he had eaten, remembering with a shade of envy the primitive appetite which had enabled the others to bolt beefsteaks like ravening wolves; also, he resolved to put a biscuit in his pocket the next time he rode out on the circle. But this availed him nothing in his extremity, and as the others sought to assuage their pangs with brown-paper cigarettes he almost regretted the freak of nicety which had kept him from learning to smoke. It was noon now—seven hours since breakfast—and just as he was about to make some guarded inquiries of Brigham the work of branding ceased. The branders, their faces grimed and sweaty and their hands caked with blood, pulled on their heavy shaps and came riding up to the herd; but not to cry: "Release them!"

Odious as these words had become to Bowles, they would have sounded good under the circumstances; but there was more work yet to come. Driving a bunch of old cows to one side for a "hold-up," Henry Lee and his strenuous assistants began cutting out dogie calves. Everything over a year old was fated to become a feeder and, while mothers bellowed and their offspring protested, Hardy Atkins and the best of the cowhands hazed the calves into the hold-up herd. It was a long and tedious operation, involving numerous wearisome chases after calves that wanted their mothers; and when at last it was done and the main herd was released, behold, a lot of cows and undesirables had to be cut back from the hold-up herd. Then the dogies had to be separated into yearlings and "twos"; and when Bowles was about ready to drop off his horse from weakness Henry Lee detailed a

bunch of unfortunates to drive up the calves, and turned his pony toward home. To him it was just a little gather while the neighbors were sending in their men; but to Bowles it combined the extreme hardships of a round-up with the rigors of a forty days' fast.

In a way it was all Bowles' fault, too, for he had kept the whole outfit waiting while he made a bluff at riding Dunbar. His resolution to keep his mouth shut stood him in good stead now, for a hungry man is a wolf and will fight if you say a word. There were no gay quips and gags now, no English riding and classic quotations; every man threw the spurs into his horse and started on a run for camp. Wa-ha-lote pulled at the bit a time or two at this, and Bowles did not try to restrain him; he broke into a gallop, free and sweeping as the wind, and the tired cutting horses fell behind; then as the ranch showed up in the distance he settled down to a tireless lope, eating up the hurrying miles until Bowles could have hugged him for joy.

Here was a horse of a thousand—this black, named in an alien tongue Wa-ha-lote—and he longed as he rode into the ranch to give him some token of friendship—a lump of sugar, or whatever these desert horses liked best to eat—in order to hold his regard. So he trotted over to the cook's wagon, being extremely careful not to bob, and asked Gloomy Gus for a lump of sugar. Now Gus, as it happened, was in another bad humor, due to the boys' being an hour or so late, and to a second matter of which Bowles knew nothing; and he did not even so much as vouchsafe an answer to his request.

"I beg your pardon," began Bowles again, when it was evident he was not going to get the sugar. "Perhaps you will give me a biscuit, then. You see," he explained rather shamefacedly, "I am riding this horse for the first time, and he has been so gentle I wanted to give him something. Any little thing, you know, and I shall be glad to pay for it——"

"I am not cookin' fer hawses!" observed Gloomy Gus; but at the same time he glanced apprehensively toward a long pile of cord-wood which flanked his fire to the south; and as if to verify his suspicions a summer hat appeared from behind the tiers of crooked juniper and a lady stepped into view. She was a very beautiful lady, middle-aged and with haunting brown eyes; and the moment she turned them upon Bowles he knew she was Dixie Lee's mother. Not that she looked so much like the elusive Dixie May, but she had the same way with her eyes—and, besides that, she was very contained and quiet, and looked as if she came from the East. She gazed at him for a moment with a kind, motherly air—as if she had heard all he said—and addressed herself to the cook.

"Well, really, Gus," she began, speaking in the low-pitched tones of the drawing-room, "I can't imagine what happens to those eggs. I have over forty hens, and surely they lay more than seven eggs a day. There's one nest, away in there, but——"

"Well, I ain't took none," grumbled Gus, turning sulkily to his pots and kettles; "that's all I got to say."

"Pardon me," broke in Bowles, swinging lightly down from his horse and standing hat in hand, "perhaps I could creep in and——" He smiled as he had smiled at the ladies who attended the Wordsworth Society, and Mrs. Lee glanced at him approvingly.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself," she said politely. "If it were humanly possible to reach them, I am sure they would be gone by now. I didn't mean to blame you at all, Mr. Mosby,"—this to the cook—"but, really, I was trying to save enough eggs to make the boys a cake."

A wave of indignation swept over Bowles. He remembered those graceless "boys" roasting eggs by the fire at night, and he thought how little they deserved her kindness; but all he did was to murmur his appreciation. At this the lady looked at him again, like one who knows her own kind, and her voice was very pleasant as she said:

"Oh, you are the young man that rode Wa-ha-lote this morning, aren't you? Ah, he is such a beautiful horse!" She came over and stroked his neck thoughtfully while Bowles stood by his head and smiled. "Don't you know," she said, "I have always claimed that a horse could be conquered by kindness. And I'm so glad!" she murmured, with a confidential touch of the hand. "Won't you come up to the house, and I'll give you that lump of sugar."

Chapter VII

The Queen at Home.

The Bat Wing ranch, with its big white house on the hill, its whirling windmill, its tank that spread out like a lake and gleamed like liquid silver, its pole corrals, its adobe houses half shaded by wind-tossed cottonwoods, was one of the most sightly in Arizona. The yellow-white sheen of the bunch grass made the distance seem fair and inviting; at sunset the saw-toothed summits of the Tortugas changed to blues and purples and mysterious, cañon-deep black; the heavy bunches of sacaton out in the horse pasture gleamed white in the evening glow. Many riders passed by that way, rigged out in the finery of their kind, and most of them took it all in—and yet, at times, the place looked kind of bare and tame.

Bowles was a stranger to those parts and he admired the landscape mightily; but to him too it seemed a little bare. It needed a dash of color, a vigorous girlish figure in the foreground, to give it the last vivid touch. But the queen, of course, must be humored—let the picture wait! So Bowles waited, along with the rest of the bunch, and in the evening while they were at their supper the Queen of the Bat Wing came. At the Wordsworth Society she had been stunningly gowned in a creation which Bowles would not soon forget; on the train she had worn a tailored traveling dress, very severe and becoming, the only note of defiance being in the hat, which was her Western sombrero with a veil to take off the curse. But now the trimming was gone, and a silver-buckled, horsehair band took its place. Dixie May was back on her own range and she wore what clothes she pleased!

First there was the hat, a trim, fifteen-dollar Stetson held on by a strap that lapped behind; then a white shirt-waist to supply the touch of color; a divided skirt of golden-brown corduroy; and high-heeled cowboy boots, very tiny, and supplied with silver-mounted spurs, ornate with Mexican conchos. She wore a

quirt on her wrist, and her hair in Indian braids, and a fine coat of newly acquired tan on her cheeks.

A silence fell on the squatting punchers as she ran lightly down from the house; one or two of them ducked out of sight as she passed through the gate, but the rest sat motionless, stoically feeding themselves with their knives, and waiting for the queen to pass. Only Bowles, the man from the East, rose up and took off his hat; but Dixie Lee remembered her promise, and never so much as looked at him.

Illustration:

Only Bowles, the man from the East, rose and took off his hat.

"Hello, Brig," she said, singling out the blushing Brigham for a teasing grin. "'Evening, Mr. Mosby. Say, Maw sent me down to look for some eggs—she wants to make a cake for these worthless punchers before she invites 'em up to hear the phonograph."

"Well, well, Miss Dix," responded the cook, shuffling and ill at ease. "I'm afraid yore maw is goin' to be disapp'inted. If you can find any eggs around here, you're welcome to 'em. I ain't got none hid out—that's all I'll say."

"Oh, I know where they go to, Mr. Mosby," replied Dixie Lee, showing her white teeth in a knowing smile. "If a man will suck eggs, he'll steal—you know that saying yourself—and I can tell by the shells around the fire here what's going on o' nights."

"Oh, that's that big fat Brigham Clark!" spoke up Hardy Atkins. "You—“

At this bare-faced libel Bowles cleared his throat to speak. He had noticed particularly on the evening before that the eggs were brought in by Happy Jack and Hardy Atkins himself; but before he could enter a protest a general rumble of laughter set him back to a thinking part.

"Yes, sir!" observed Buck Buchanan, speaking to the world at large. "That feller sucks aigs worse'n a setter pup."

"An' he don't deny it none, neither," commented Happy Jack, as poor Brigham blushed deeper and hung his head.

"Jest born that way, I reckon," remarked Poker-face in a tone of pity; and then the whole outfit broke into a whoop of laughter. It was a new form of jesting to Bowles, and he retired to the shelter of the wood-pile. A sudden gloom had come over his soul, and it even affected his appetite, whetted keen by the cold, thin air. Of course, Dixie Lee had told him she would do so, but it seemed rather heartless not to look at him. He sat down with his back against the jagged juniper stubs and listened sullenly, while the punchers chuckled in front of him and continued to eat with their knives.

"Aw, Brig's jest bashful, that's all," explained some simple-minded joker, after every one else had had his say; and as his hollow laughter rose up, Bowles wondered dimly why Brigham did not retort. The evening before, when he was telling stories around the fire, he had returned a Roland for an Oliver until even Hardy Atkins had been content to quit; but now he confined himself to self-conscious mutterings and exhortations to shut up. Perhaps the simple-minded joker was right—poor Brigham was bashful.

But Dixie Lee had come down to get some eggs and she did not allow camp persiflage to divert her from her purpose.

"Well, say," she said, getting up from the cook's private seat, "I came down to hunt for eggs—who wants to help me?"

"That's where I shine!" cried Hardy Atkins, throwing his tin plate into the washtub with a great clatter. "They's a nest around hyer in the wood-pile!"

He capered around the end of the wood-pile, and soon Bowles could hear him panting as he forced his way in between the crooked sticks.

"Hyer they are!" he shouted at last. "I got a whole hatful—somebody pull me out by the laig!"

There was a ripple of high-pitched laughter from Dixie Lee, an interval in which Bowles cursed his fate most heartily, and then a frantic outcry from Hardy:

"Hey, there, don't pull so fast! You Dix, you'll break my aigs! Well, laugh, then, doggone it! Now see what you went and done!"

A general shout of laughter followed, and Hardy Atkins, his lips pouted out to play the fool, and his eyes rolling to catch their laughter, came ambling around the wood-pile with a hat that looked like an amateur conjurer's after the celebrated egg trick. But there were enough whole ones left to make a cake, and Happy Jack came galloping in with a hatful from his own private cache; so everybody laughed, though Brigham looked on sourly enough. A rapid fire of barbed jests followed; then, with her two admirers behind her and the others gazing dumbly on, Dixie Lee ran lightly back to the house, and Bowles had had his first lookin on ranch society. It did not look so good to him, either, and yet—well, just as Dixie May turned away she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. To be sure, it was one of Hardy Atkins' raw jokes at which she was laughing, but somehow a golden glow crept into the sunset, and ranch society did not seem so bad.

Five minutes later Dixie Lee was down at the corral bridling a white-faced roan, and soon, with Happy Jack for an escort, she was galloping away to the east where, like glowworms in the dusk, the scattered lights of settlers' houses showed the first beginnings of a neighborhood. The phonograph was going to play in the big house that evening, and all the "nesters" were invited.

No one had been more outraged than Henry Lee when the first nesters came in on his range; but latterly he had come to regard them tolerantly as poor, misguided creatures, slightly touched in the head on the subject of high-and-dry farming. Having seen a few hundred of them starve out and move on, he had accepted them as a necessary evil, and deemed it no more than right, if the women-folks wanted to invite them, to ask the few nearest ones to the house and help them forget their misery. So the whole-souled Dixie May was off to call in the company while the cowboys were scraping their beards off and dolling up for the dance.

It was Saturday night, as a matter of fact, and though all days are alike to a puncher his evenings are his own around the ranch. One by one the socially backward and inept caught the fever and began to search their war-bags for silk handkerchiefs and clean shirts. Only Brigham remained recalcitrant, and no argument could induce him to shave.

"I was on the wrangle last night," he complained, as the forehanded ones came back to argue the matter, "and I'm short on my sleep. Say, lemme be, can't ye—

what difference does it make to you fellers, anyway? They won't be girls enough to go around, nohow!"

"Well, come up and hear the music," urged the Bar Seven stray man, who wanted him for company.

"Mrs. Lee invited you, Brig," reminded Gloomy Gus, who believed that every man should do his duty.

"Aw, it's too late to do anything now," grumbled Brigham, beginning at last to weaken. "And my beard is a fright, too!"

"Soak it in hot water, then!" cried Bar Seven enthusiastically. "Come on, fellers; let's make 'im do it! It ain't right—a nice lady like Mrs. Lee! She'll think you're 'shamed because you done stole them aigs!"

"I did not!" denied Brigham hotly.

"Well, come along, then!" countered Bar Seven triumphantly, "or the boys will be tellin' everybody!"

So the last unwilling victim was cajoled into going, and at a cheery summons from Dixie May they marched up the hill in a body. It was too early yet for the nester girls to appear, and while they were waiting for the dance to begin the twenty or more punchers wedged into the big front room and settled down to hear the phonograph. A cattle ranch without a phonograph nowadays is as rare as a cow outfit without a mouth-organ; but the Lees had a fine one, that would play for dances on a scratch, and a rack piled high with classic records. Mrs. Lee sat beside it, and after welcoming the self-conscious cowboys she asked them what they would have.

"The barnyard one!" somebody called; and as the cow mooed, the pig squealed, and the hired girl called the chickens, the cowboys laughed and forgot their feet. Then Caruso sang a high one, caught his breath and expired, and the company shifted in their seats. That was not exactly their style.

"What's the matter with the dog fight?" cried a voice from the corner; and Mrs. Lee, who had dreams of elevating their taste, sat undecided, with the sextet from Lucia in her hand.

"Perhaps you would like the Anvil Chorus," she suggested by way of a concession.

"No, the dog fight!" clamored Hardy Atkins from the same corner. Then, quoting from the well-known favorite, he inquired in up-stage Irish: "'Will some sport kindly let Mr. Ho-ogan, the time-keeper, hold his watch?'"

"'Faith,'" broke in Happy Jack, continuing the selection, "'an' who will hold Ho-ogan, then—har, har, har, har, har!'"

So contagious was the spell of this laughter that there was nothing for it but to put on the record, which gave a dog fight in Harlem from the time the bets were made till the spotted dog licked and the place was raided by the police. Not very elevating, to be sure, but awfully popular, and calling for more of the same. Mrs. Lee sighed wearily and laid the sextet aside; then, with quick decision, she resigned her place to Dixie May and retired to a seat by the door—and, as luck would have it, she sat down next to Bowles.

"Won't you take my chair?" he said, rising with all the gallantry of his kind. "I enjoyed that Donna e Mobile of Caruso's so much!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Lee, beaming with pleasure, "you know it, then! And do you care for it, too?"

"Very much!" replied Bowles, falling back into the familiar formula of polite conversation; and by the time the phonograph had started up on "Casey Jones" they were deep in a discussion of classic music. As often happens in good society, they discovered a wonderful similarity in their likes and dislikes; and by the time the nester girls began to arrive and the dance started up on the gallery, Bowles was very popular in the big house—that is, as far as the hostess was concerned.

But the climax of the evening came at the close of the dance, just as Mr. Bowles was taking his leave.

"Well, good-night, Mrs. Lee," he murmured as he stood in the half light of the porch. "It was so kind of you to invite us up."

He paused then with the rest of his politenesses unsaid, for Dixie Lee was coming down the hall.

"I can't say how much I have enjoyed talking with you, Mr. Bowles," returned the lady, offering him her hand. "It takes me back to my girlhood days, when music was the breath of my life. Perhaps——Oh, Dixie, have you met Mr. Bowles?"

There was silence for a moment as their eyes met across the abyss, hers stern and forbidding, his smiling and conciliatory; and then Dixie bowed very stiffly.

"Why, not that I remember," she replied, with a militant toss of the head.

"How do you do, Miss Lee," observed Mr. Bowles, bowing formally as he received his congé. "So glad to make your acquaintance!" And, murmuring other maddening phrases, he bowed himself out the door, leaving Dixie Lee to explain the feud in any way she chose.

Chapter VIII

A Cowboy's Life.

As the name of the Deity, to a cowboy, means little more than a word to swear by, so the holy Sabbath is forgotten as a day of rest. Not that the hard-riding puncher would not rest if he got the chance, but the traditions of the cow business make no allowances for godliness and ease. For forty dollars and found, the round-up hand is expected to work every day in the month, and take all his Sundays in a bunch when the boss writes out his time. From daylight to dark are his hours of labor, with horse wrangling and night-guard to boot; and yet there are men of elegance and leisure who try to crush in on the job.

Mr. Bowles rolled into bed a perfect gentleman, and something of a knight-errant as well; but when Gloomy Gus gave vent to his shrill morning call he turned in his blankets and muttered. As the dishpan yammered and clashed discordantly he shuddered like a craven; and when Gus finally kicked open the door he could have cursed like any cow-puncher. It was a dreary life he had elected to follow, a life of drudgery, hardship, and discomfort, and with no compensating element but

the danger of getting killed. And all for the sake of a girl who never had met him before!

Bowles crawled out very slowly and stood shivering by the fire, marveling at the iron endurance of Gloomy Gus, and understanding his gloom. Never again, he resolved, as he drank a pint of hot coffee, never again would he address Mr. Mosby in aught but terms of respect. A man who could stand his life and still wear the mantle of self-restraint was worthy of a place among the stoics. And to get up alone—alone and of his own volition—at three-thirty and four of the morning! It was a task to give a Spartan pause and win an enduring fame among the gods. A large humility came over Bowles as he contemplated the rough men about him and observed how uncomplainingly they accepted their lot. And they had been at the work for months and years—it was the second day for him!

The cook beat on his pan, and at the thought of the long ride before him Bowles did his best to eat—to eat heartily, ravenously, to gorge himself full of meat against the hours of hunger to come; and, passing up the three-tined steel fork, he went to it with his knife and spoon.

"You make the finest biscuits I have ever eaten, Mr. Mosby," he observed by way of apology as he slipped one into his pocket; and the sleep-weary eyes of the cook lighted up for a moment before he summoned his cynical smile.

"That's what they all say—when they're hungry," he remarked. "Then when they've et a plenty they throw 'em in the dirt."

He waved his hand at a circle of white spots that lay just outside the firelight, and turned to begin his dishwashing. Then, seeing that Mr. Bowles was still interested, he dilated on his troubles.

"Yes, sir," he said; "a cowboy is jest naturally wasteful—if he wasn't, he wouldn't be a cowboy. He'll take a whole biscuit and eat half of it and throw the other half away. There you see 'em out there, jest like I been seein' 'em fer forty years and more. It's in the blood. A cowboy wastes his grub, he wastes his terbakker, he wastes his money. He wastes cows, and hawses—an' he wastes his life. I got my opinion of a man that will work like a dog fer forty dollars a month. These hyer boys know what I think of 'em."

The cowboys grinned sheepishly and backed up nearer the fire. It was still too dark to rope, and they were waiting for Henry Lee; and the cold starlight made them solemn. When the sun came up and they got a horse between their knees they would laugh old Gus to scorn; now they listened to him soberly in lieu of sprightlier conversation.

"And me," continued Gloomy Gus, as he sensed the heavy silence, "I work harder than any of 'em. The mornin' star don't catch me in bed—no, sir! Not after half-past three. I got to git up then and mix my bread. And come night time, after my long day's work, I got to set my dough. But I git paid fer it—eighty dollars a month—and you can have the job to-morrer."

He paused again, as if to emphasize the lack of bidders, and then went deftly about his task.

"No, sir," he said; "you don't see no one strikin' fer the job of cook. That's hard work, that is. These boys all want to sit on a hawse and see the world go by."

Once more the heavy silence fell upon them, and Brigham picked up a towel and began to wipe the dishes.

"Goin' out to-day?" he inquired, as the boys began to straggle toward the corral.

"That's the word!" returned the cook. "Dinner at the north well, and back ag'in fer supper. Pack up and unpack, and pack ag'in at the well. Then cook a dinner and hook up the hawses, and cook some more at the home. Ef Henry Lee don't git me a flunky pretty soon I'm shore goin' to up and quit."

He glanced significantly at Bowles as he finished this last remark, but Brigham shook his head.

"I seen that Pringle kid come in yisterday," he said. "Mebbe you could git to have him."

That closed the conversation, and Bowles moved away. He was sorry for Mr. Mosby, very sorry; but not sorry enough to take a job as official dishwasher. Somehow all the world seemed to be in a conspiracy to make him flunky to the cook.

He hurried over to the corral, where the roping was going on, and as he neared the gate he met the boss coming out. On the previous day Mr. Lee had seemed a little under the dominance of his feelings, but this morning he was strictly business.

"Mr. Bowles," he said, "I'll keep my word with you and take you on for a puncher. Do your work and keep off Dunbar, and I'll try to get along with you—otherwise you get your time. Now come on back and I'll cut you out a mount."

He tied his own horse to a post, and swung up on the corral fence.

"You get two gentle horses and five bronks," he continued; "and I'll call Wa-ha-lote a bronk."

"Oh, thank you!" began Bowles; but the boss checked him right there.

"You've got nothing to thank me for, young man," he said. "I'd rather lose a top hand any time than take on a tenderfoot, so don't think for a minute that I'm stuck on you. Passed my word, that's all—and Wa-ha-lote forgot to buck. Now you see that gray over there—the one with the saddle-marks on his back—that's one of 'em—he's gentle. See this little sorrel, right close—that's Scrambled Eggs—he's a bronk. Then you can have that red roan over there for a night horse, and I'll cut you out some more bronks bymeby. You ride old Gray and the roan for a while—understand? And I employ a twister to break my wild stock, so keep off of them bronks—if—you—please."

He added this last as if he really meant it, and left Bowles to wonder at his emphasis—but not for long. The times called for action. He was a puncher now, and it was necessary for him to lasso his mount. So, shaking out his new rope, which snarled and crawled in a most disconcerting fashion, the new cowboy dropped down into the corral, while everybody who could conveniently do so stepped up and looked over the fence. But Bowles had had a few days' training at the hands of Jim Scrimsher, the livery-stable keeper and all-round horse trader and confidence man at Chula Vista, and he shook out a fairly good loop. Then, swinging it above his head, he advanced upon the gray, who promptly put the whole herd between them, and raced along next the fence. The roan came along just then and Bowles made a cast at him and caught two others, who instantly made away with his rope.

A yell went up from along the top of the fence; and with many shouts of encouragement and veiled derision, they threw him a new rope. This was a worn

one and capable of dexterous handling, and, with a set smile on his face, Bowles shook out a big loop and advanced cautiously upon the roan. By this time he, too, had read the hypnotic message of the eye, and had crowded well in behind the main herd, which was dashing around the corral with ever-increasing speed. The slashing rope-work of the old hands had already left the horse herd nervous and flighty, and something about the way Bowles whirled his wide-flung loop seemed to drive them into a frenzy. A shout of warning went up, and then another, and then, as Wa-ha-lote made another balk at the gate, Hardy Atkins rushed out through the cloud of dirt and signaled him to stop.

"What do you want to do?" he yelled. "Break down the fence?"

He edged in on the leaders as he spoke and soon brought them to a halt; then, with his eyes on another horse, he stepped in close, dragging his loop, until suddenly he whipped it over the old gray's head and jerked him out of the herd.

"Here's yore hawse," he said, handing him over the rope's end. "And, say, if you can't rope without swingin' a Mother Hubbard, jest let me ketch yore hawse!"

"Why, what's the matter?" inquired Bowles.

"Oh, nawthin'," sneered the bronco-twister, "only it skeers 'em to death—that's all. Old Henry generally gives a man his time fer swingin' his loop in the corral."

Bowles followed along after him, flushed and downcast over his mistake; and as the others saddled their prancing bronks and went pitching and plunging around the horse lot he threw his saddle on the old, moss-backed gray and watched them with a wholesome awe. Horse after horse, as his rider hooked the stirrup, flew back or kicked like a flash. Some bucked the saddles off and had to be mastered by brute force. Here it was that the green-eyed Hardy Atkins, that long and lissom twister whom he so heartily despised, stood out like a riding king among the men. If a horse would not stand, he held it by the ears; if it bucked its saddle off, he seized an ear in his teeth, and hung on like a bulldog until the girths were cinched; and then, if the rider but said the word, he topped it off in his place. And all with such a tigerish swing, such a wild and masterful certitude, that even Bowles could not but secretly admire him.

It was nearing the first of April, when the wagon went out on the round-up, and the boys were topping off their mounts in order to gentle them for the spring work. Shrill yells and whoops went up as man after man uncocked his bronk; and then, as the procession filed out the gate, Hardy Atkins swung up on his own and went whipping and plunging after them. This was the big event of the day, and all hands craned their necks to view it; but the real spectators were up by the big white house, where Dixie Lee and her mother stood watching.

"Good boy, Hardy!" cried Dixie May, waving her hat to flag him. "Stay with him, Hardy!" And while the wild brute bucked and grunted beneath the steady jab of the spurs his rider raised a slender hand and waved it in salute. Bowles came dragging after him, sitting up very straight on old Gray; but nobody gave him a gay salute or so much as noticed him pass. Big Snake, the outlaw, was sun-fishing and doing buck-jumps, and every eye was upon the gallant rider who sat him so limber and free—Hardy Atkins, bronco-twister, and top cowboy at the Bat Wing.

"Pitch, then, you bastard," he was shouting. "Buck, you wild, woolly wolf—I'll put a hat on you!"

Bowles did not know what a "hat" was as he rode along out the gate, but when the cattle were thrown together and the wrangler brought up the spare horses, he knew. Walking across the brushy flat came Hardy Atkins, leading the worn and whip-marked Snake at a slow walk; and as he drew near, Bowles saw the "hat," a great, puffed-up swelling, raw and bloody, where the spur had jabbed his side. And there was a look in the outlaw's haggard eye that reminded him of old Dunbar—a wild, homicidal stare, yet tragic with fear and pain. As he reached the horse herd the twister looked back and regarded his mount intently; then very cautiously he worked up to his head and caught him by the cheek-strap.

"Don't you bite me, you devil," he threatened as the Snake showed all his teeth, "or I'll beat yore brains out with this quirt!"

The Big Snake winced and crooked his neck sullenly; then, as the twister snapped up the stirrup and uncinched the saddle with his free hand, he sighed and hung his head. With a deft jerk the puncher stripped off saddle and blanket; he reached up between his ears and laid hold of the headstall, then with a heave he tore off the bridle and landed his boot in the Snake's ribs.

"Git, you owl-headed old skate!" he yelled; and the Snake cow-kicked at him like a flash of light.

"Hah!" laughed the twister, stepping dexterously aside; and, swinging the bridle as he ducked, he brought the heavy reins down across his mount's rump. Again there was a flash of light as the Snake lashed out from behind; and then he limped off to one side, his eyes glowing with impotent rage and hate. Bowles looked at him as he lay wearily down in the sand, and then at the man who had conquered him, and a glow crept into his own eyes—a glow very much like the Big Snake's. He had entered a new world, with a different standard of courage and hardihood, and the first look at it frightened and awed him. But though he knew he could not meet its standards nor measure up to its tests, he scorned the man who could, and hated him for his rude strength—and his sympathy went out to Big Snake, the outlaw.

Chapter IX

Reduced to the Ranks.

The last place in the world for a humanitarian is around a cow camp, for everything there seems to savor of cruelty and blood. The only anti-cruelty-to-animals man who ever made a winning in the cattle business was good old Dr. Maverick, of Texas, who, when they made up the first brand book, swore he could not bring himself to cut an ear or burn a brand and craved the privilege of letting his cattle run unmarked. So, when it came to the round-up, the old doctor received his reward, for he claimed every maverick in the bunch and took them home for his own. This was a long time ago, in the age of myth and fable, and the doctor's herd has been sadly decimated since by rustlers and ruthless brand blotchers. A brand that can't be burned over is more precious than rubies now; and the bigger it is, the better.

The Bat Wing was an old brand, dating back to some Mexican Manuel Ortega, or Mariano Ortiz, who had writ his initials large on the left hip of his steers, M above O, connected. With years the O had shrunk and the M spraddled out until it looked like a winged disk—and had taken on different names: Money-bug, from its resemblance to a dollar on the wing; Bat-out-o'-hell, from a similar frontier fancy; until finally it settled down to plain Bat Wing. But whatever else happened to the Bat Wing brand, the iron never got any smaller; in fact, the reason the M grew so big that it flew away with the O was because a calf's hip widens out at the top and if the whole space is securely covered there will be no room left for illicit alterations.

This is all very interesting and romantic, of course, when taken by itself; but nobody stopped to explain it to Bowles, the humanitarian cowboy. When the cattle were on the cutting-grounds and the branding was about to begin, Henry Lee cast a contemptuous glance at his new hand and decided to put him to work.

"Bowles," he said, "you help with the flanking."

So when the first little calf came gamboling in on the line, Bowles rushed out and seized the rope. Working down to the calf, he caught it by its neck and flank and finally wrestled it to the ground. He was casting loose the rope when Buck Buchanan grabbed the calf by the upper hind leg, braced his boot against the lower leg, and sat comfortably down behind. Then Happy Jack came ramping out with a red-hot stamp-iron and slapped it against the tender hide.

"Baaa!" blatted the little calf, rolling its eyes until they showed the whites. "Baaa!" And then, before it knew what was happening, Hardy Atkins knelt roughly on its neck, grabbed its left ear, and cut away half of it at a single stroke of the knife. "Baaa!" bellowed the calf, curling up its tail; and as the blood trickled forth Bowles felt himself grow sick and faint.

"Hold his head up!" directed Atkins; and then, with an impatient yank, he twitched up the second ear and cut a swallow-fork. The calf writhed and struggled to escape, and as he fought against it Bowles caught the stench of burning hair. Turning, he discovered Happy Jack still bearing down on the hot iron and searing it deep into the flesh. That finished Bowles, and he sank back on the ground, turning his victim loose.

"You want to hold their heads up," remarked Buck Buchanan, and Bowles nodded and answered faintly. What he really wanted was a chance to guard the herd; but orders were orders with Henry Lee, and if he failed to do his work he was fired. Another calf came in—a big, lusty yearling—and Buck made a motion with his hand.

"Ketch that one," he directed in a fatherly tone of voice, and Bowles staggered out to do or die. But a yearling calf can be a very obstreperous brute on occasion, and this one was hot from his run. Within a minute after he had grappled with it all thought of pity had died out in Bowles' breast. First he caught the bull calf by the neck and flank and tried to pull it over; then, as it fought against him and trampled on his feet, he seized its further legs and tried to lift them up; failing in this, he laid hold of it in a frenzy and tried to throw it by main strength.

"Git yore knees under him," suggested Buck from the middle distance. Then, after another period of waiting, he slouched ponderously out and shoved him aside.

"Let me at 'im," he said. "You're keepin' Bill waitin' for his rope."

He felt of the calf for a minute and pushed him to make him change his feet; then, as the yearling started to step, he boosted him with his knees, heaved him into the air, and slammed him down on his side. It was a man's job, and difficult for the best of them, but Bowles didn't know that. All he knew was that the boss was watching him, over there by the fire where he was keeping tally on the brands, and thinking what a tenderfoot he was. And he was right—Bowles conceded it. He could not catch his horse, he could not ride a bronk, he could not even throw a calf or lift it off the ground. And his back ached, awfully.

It was a long morning for Mr. Bowles, packed with misery and hopeless struggling, like a nightmare without end. They say that in the short time between the instant a man starts falling out of bed and the moment he hits the floor, he can pass through a very inferno of dreams, passed down from our tree-living ancestors and striking terror to the heart—and yet he generally wakes up before he lands. If he did not, so the old nurses say, he would surely, surely die. The jagged rocks that threatened him in his dream would pierce his quivering body and he would be found dead on the floor. The coroner would call it heart-failure, of course; and that was what threatened Bowles.

He was saved by a sound he had cursed that very morning—Gloomy Gus beating on his dishpan! Packing all his kit into the chuck-wagon, and throwing on a few sticks of wood, the cook had struck out through the dog towns and across the brushy flats and set up his fire irons by the side of a man-made lake. There he had gone busily about his task without waiting for the herd to come in; and just as Bowles was dropping dead, the dinner-call saved his life.

It had been a bad dream, but, thank Heaven, he had waked up before he struck. A pint of scalding coffee, black and bitter from much boiling, and he was able to look about; and as he disposed of a couple of beefsteaks and dipped his biscuits in the grease, the weak place in his middle seemed comforted; and by the time he got around to the "fruit" and syrup he felt almost like a man again. Such jests as had been passed upon his condition had fallen upon unhearing ears, but now that he was brought back to health and strength he was able to smile grimly at his appearance as mirrored in the honest lake.

His face, which he had neglected to wash before eating, was crusted with sweat and dirt and spotted with gouts of blood; his hair was matted and dust-powdered; and in the bloodshot and haggard orbs that gazed up at him from the placid depths he saw a look that made him start. It was a cruel, vindictive look, almost inhuman in its intensity; and it came from flanking bull calves. He looked down at his hands, all swollen and crabbed from clutching, and saw that they were caked with blood. His shirt, too, and his trim-fitting trousers were dirty and spattered with gore. In fact—and here was where the grim smile came in—he could hardly be told from a real cowboy!

After dinner the cutting and branding went on as before, but with this important difference—Bowles flanked only his share of the calves. There were two sets of flankers, two hot-iron men, and two ear-markers, and the calves came up as they were caught. A really ambitious flanker, out for experience, could get almost all the calves; but the only ones that Bowles ran after now were the ones that were easy to throw. If a yearling came dancing up on a rope, he stepped on

his own foot and let the other man beat him to it—either that or turned him over to Buck. It was quick work; but Bowles had a college education—he had been only six hours a cowboy when he learned to malinger on the job.

As for the rest of the gang, inured as they were to hard labor, the branding was no more than a picnic for them. They found time to take chews of tobacco, tell stories, and watch all the roping; and if any calf turned out to be too big for flanking they grabbed him by the neck and made him run, and bulldogged him, "California fashion." Happy Jack was best at that, and several times in a fit of emulation he shoved some puncher aside and showed him how it ought to be done—but never for Bowles. It was strange how carefully they all avoided him—never looking at him, rarely addressing him, and answering his inquiries with a word. He was an alien, a stranger among them, and—slowly the truth was borne in on him—an inferior.

From the start Bowles had taken it for granted that they were abashed, tongue-tied by his obvious education, and awed by his gentlemanly bearing. But now they would not so much as laugh at him, lest it encourage him to familiarity. Never for a minute did they allow him to presume on their sufferance, and his remarks fell dead and flat. Even Henry Lee, who had the bearing and spoke the language of a gentleman, refused to encourage him by a word; and at last he retired within himself, and saved his breath for flanking and his wits for dodging work.

If a cowboy never soldiered on the job he would be dead before it came pay-day; but there are certain tasks which cannot be slighted, and one of these is bringing home the herd. After the day's branding the calves are cut into "ones" and "twos," and while the rest of the outfit troops gaily homeward somebody must stay behind and bring up the cut. One of them must be a cowman, for trailing is an art in itself, but the others are likely to be dubs. Certainly no boss would penalize his best hands and most willing workers by giving them such a task; and so, when the cutting was over and Henry Lee looked around for a poor hand, or one who had been soldiering on the job, he picked Bowles on both counts.

"Bowles," he said, "you help Brigham bring up those twos!" And that was all there was to it. But to Brigham he spoke differently. It was "Brig," with him; and instead of an order it was a request.

"Brig," he said, "I'll ask you to take charge of the twos. Drive 'em easy and put 'em in the north pasture."

"All right, sir," answered Brigham in a friendly, off-hand way, and then the drive began. Mounted upon a rough-coated bronk that fought his bit constantly yet responded to every touch of rein or spur, the burly puncher rode back and forth, from the rear to the flank, and then up near the point; and when he had them strung out to suit him he traveled along on one side, while Bowles brought up the rear. It was weary work, after the long day of flanking, and as the weaker ones began to get footsore they fell back to the drag and more than doubled his labors. At times Brigham Clark dropped back and strung them out for him again; but he said nothing, chewing placidly on his tobacco and giving all his thought to the cattle. Still the drag increased, and as they began to lag behind, Bowles let down his rope and lashed them with the loop. It was then that Brigham Clark spoke.

"Don't do no good to whip 'em," he remarked, falling back to string them out. "They'll travel as fast as the leaders—jest let 'em go."

So Bowles put up his rope and let them go, and soon they fell farther behind; but about the time he was preparing to whip them anyway, the cowman dropped back from the flank.

"Now, that's the way to handle cattle," he said, nodding at the plodding line. "String 'em out and crowd the leaders—the drag will take care of itself."

At that he was gone again; and for an hour or more he rode tirelessly up and down the side, filling up every hole and gap and shoving the leaders ahead. The cottonwoods of the home ranch showed green against the hills, and the end of their drive was in sight, when suddenly Brigham held up his hand to stop.

"Let 'em feed a while," he said, as Bowles rode up to inquire. "The drag is gittin' weak." Then he sat silent on his rough-haired bronk, his inscrutable eyes gazing dully over the plain to the south, and Bowles dropped wearily off his horse and stretched himself out on the ground. Half an hour afterward he roused up with a start just as Dixie Lee, mounted on a long, rangy bay, came galloping up the road. Her eyes were very bright, and her cheeks were flushed from riding against the wind, and as she reined her horse in with a jerk her hair framed her face like a halo. But she did not see Bowles, though he stood up and took off his hat.

"Hello, Brig," she called. "Watching 'em pick the flowers?"

"Yes'm," answered Brigham, grinning amiably. "Watchin' 'em pluck the blossoms. What's goin' on down below now? Seen you go down there several times."

"Oh, you're still keeping track of me, are you?" queried Dixie Lee gaily. "Well, you want to look out, Brigham—I'm getting awfully interested in a young Texican down there. He's got a nice farm, too—hundred and sixty acres!"

"Sure!" agreed Brigham. "All covered with loco weed and this nice white stuff!"

He nodded at the glistening alkali along the flat, and his eyes twinkled with furtive humor as Dixie Lee raised her quirt.

"Aw, Brigham," she chided, "I believe you're jealous!" She leaned forward as she spoke, and the bay broke into a gallop, while Dixie sent a laugh down the wind.

"Heh, heh, heh," chuckled Brigham, reaching into his vest for a cigarette paper. "That's Dix, all right. Don't you know, stranger," he went on as he rolled himself a smoke, "that's the finest gal in Arizona. Good folks an' all that, but nothin' stuck up about her. Heh, heh, mighty nigh ast her to marry me one time, but couldn't quite cut it—she's been joshin' me ever since. Got 'em all comin' and won't have none of 'em. Oh, hookey, wisht I wasn't a common, ornery cow-punch!"

He paused and smoked a while, still gazing at the streak of dust.

"Good rider, too," he observed; "beat most of the boys. I knowed her four miles away by section lines."

Once more he paused, and Bowles preserved his Sphinx-like silence. He was learning the customs of the country fast.

"Don't have any like her back where you come from, I reckon," suggested Brigham, his eyes shining with local pride; and Bowles sadly shook his head. No, they did not—there was no one like Dixie Lee.

Chapter X

The First Smile.

The next three days were one long, aching agony for Bowles. He carried a little water for Gloomy Gus, but stubbornly refused the job of flunky. He helped the horse wrangler—a wild-eyed youth who could pop a rope like a pistol-shot and yell like a murdering Apache—but as resolutely refused the job of assistant. He had been taken on as a cowboy, and a cowboy he tried to be, though every nerve and muscle called a halt. From the first morning, when they sent him out in the dark to wrangle the horse pasture, to the third evening, when he crawled wearily into an old "bed" that he had picked up, his life was a prolonged succession of accidents, mistakes, and awkward happenings; yet he stayed with it, bull-headed and determined, until Henry Lee grew tired of hazing him and put him on the day-herd to get healed up.

There was very little left of the lily-white Mr. Bowles when the ordeal came to an end. His hands that had been so trim and slender were swelled up too big for his gloves. The outside was raw with sunburn and wind-chap and the inside was blistered and rope-worn. His lips had cracked wide open from the dry north wind, and his face was beginning to peel like a snake. Also his arms had been nearly jerked from the sockets by a horse he had tried to hold, and a calf had kicked him in the leg while he was trying to bulldog it at the branding. Like the cowboy in the ballad, "he was busted from his somber to his heel," but he had managed to come through alive. And now, as a reward for his prowess and daring, he was set to mind the day-herd.

Grass was short in the Bat Wing pastures, and every day brought in new herds of dogies to be held for the April shipping; so, just to keep all hands busy and save a little feed, Henry Lee turned his gentle cattle out on to the prairie to rustle what provender they could. Now riding day-herd is not supposed to be a very high-grade or desirable occupation, and good punchers have been known to quit a boss who put them at it; but Bowles was led to believe that it was a post of honor. Awful stories of cowboys who had gone to sleep on guard were told by the fire at night, and the danger from sudden stampedes was played up to the skies. The monotony of the job was admitted, but the responsibility was great. So Bowles accepted the position gladly, and the round-up went on unimpeded.

Lolling in the shade of his horse or sitting with his back to the dry wind, Bowles watched them "pluck the blossoms" while he doctored his numerous wounds, meanwhile falling into lovelorn reveries on the subject of Dixie Lee. It was humiliating, in a way, to be reduced to the ranks; to be compelled to wait on her pleasure, and court her from afar; but something told him that Dixie thought of him even though she passed him by; and just to be one of her lovers, to be allowed to worship with the rest—that was enough to bear him up and give him courage to wait. And either in the end she would speak to him and take him back into her life, or he would depart in silence to hide from her laughing eyes. The game of love was new to Bowles and he knew little of its stealth and wiles; just to be near her

was all he knew, and the future must solve the rest. So, like a questing knight, nursing his hurts after his first combat, he sat out on the boundless prairie and communed with his own sad heart.

Across the herd from him a battered old-time cowboy sat, crooked-legged, on his horse. On the day before a bronk had thrown him by treachery and kicked him as he dragged—even turned around and jumped on him and stamped him in the face. A great bruise, red and raw, ran up from his brows to his bald-spot where the iron shoe had struck; but still the old-timer was content.

"A cowboy don't need no haid above his eyebrows, nohow," he had said. "Jest think if he had hit me on the jaw!" Yes, indeed, but what if he had hit him in the temple or trampled him to death! Or suppose, just for instance, that Mr. Bowles, of New York, had been on the bronk instead of Uncle Joe, the veteran—would he have had sense enough to get his foot out of the stirrup? That was the trouble with standing day-herd—it gave the imagination a chance to work.

Bowles looked out over the plain again and noticed every little thing—the rattleweed, planted so regularly on the sandy flat; the dogholes, each with its high-topped mound to keep out the rain and floods; the black line of mesquite brush against the distant hills; the band of yuccas along their flanks; and then the soft, moulded summits, now green, now yellow, now creamy white as shrubs and bushes and bunch grass caught the light. It was very beautiful, but lonely. Yes, it lacked color—a vigorous girlish figure in the foreground to give it the last poetic touch.

The only men who can stand the monotony of day-herding are those who are not overburdened with brains, and so have the ability to turn off the thinking-machine entirely until they need it again. Smoking helps, and singing long-drawn songs; but Bowles turned back to Wordsworth, the poet of nature. Stray snatches of poems and sonnets rose in his mind, and he tried to piece out the rest; then he gazed at the quivering mirage, the plain, the straying cattle, and wondered how Wordsworth would see it. He was engaged in this peaceful occupation when, on the second day, he noted a moving figure, far away; dreamily he watched it as it emerged from the barbed-wire lanes of the nesters, and then, like a flash, the words of Brigham came back to him: "I knowed her four miles away by section lines." It was Dixie Lee, and she was coming his way!

There were three other worthless cowboys like himself on the day-herd, and they had seen her already. Like Brigham, they knew her by the way she rode, miles and miles away. Steadily she pounded along, keeping the rangy bay at an even lope, and then she turned toward the ranch. The long wire fence of the horse pasture had thrown her from her course, but now she was on the barren prairie and could skirt the north fence home. A series of muttered comments marked this sudden turn to the west, and the tall, cigarette-smoking youth who had been rubbing the sleep from his eyes lopped down beneath his salt-bush again. But he had returned to Morpheus too soon, for almost immediately after he had laid his hat over his eyes the distant rider changed her course, and the boys held up their hands for silence. Dixie Lee was going to make them a visit, after all, and they would let her catch him asleep.

Swiftly the tireless bay came loping across the flats, winding in and out to dodge the dog towns, and soon the queen of the cowboys was up to the edge of the herd.

"Hello, Uncle Joe!" she hailed, riding over toward the old-timer. "How's your head?"

"All right, Miss Dix," replied the puncher amiably. "Cain't hurt a cowboy in the haid, you know."

"No, but you can spoil his looks, Uncle," retorted Dixie May playfully. "You want to remember that—I heard a lady down here inquiring for you mighty special. What's the matter with Slim over there?"

A whoop went up at this, and the sleeper sat up guiltily.

"Oh, him?" queried Uncle Joe, speaking loud so that all could hear. "W'y, kinder overcome by the heat, I reckon. He gits took that way every once in a while."

"Ever since he begin settin' up with that nester girl!" put in the other day-herder, with a guffaw; and Dixie May began to chuckle with laughter as she rode around the herd.

"Well, it's too bad about him," she called back. "I'll have to go over there and see if he's likely to die."

It took her but a moment to diagnose the sad case of Slim, and then the other cowboy had his call from the consulting physician. Bowles was the last man on the circuit, but he did not step out and bow. He did not expect a visit—and, besides, something told him she did not approve of it. So he stood quietly by his horse, and only his eyes followed her as she bore down on him, her head turned back to fling some gay retort and her horse falling into his stride. She rode to the right of him, and as she faced about and met his glance she stared, as if surprised.

"Why, hello there, cowboy!" she challenged bluntly; and then, with a smile on her face, she went galloping on toward the ranch.

Nobody heard her speak but Bowles; and he, poor, unsophisticated man, was more puzzled than enlightened by her remarks. Of one thing he was sure—she had lowered her voice on purpose, and her words were for him alone. But her smile—was it one of derision, or a token of forgiveness and regard? And her secret greeting—was it an accident, or was she ashamed of his friendship? Perhaps she had weighty reasons for keeping their acquaintance unknown. Somehow, that thought appealed to him above the rest. Perhaps she knew more than he did of the dangers which surrounded him—from Hardy Atkins, or some other jealous suitor, to whom a single smile for him might be the signal for reprisal. They might—why, there were a thousand things they might do if they knew what was in his heart! Bowles ran it all over in his mind: her sudden turning upon him as they approached the Chula Vista hotel; her haughty repudiation of him when he met her at the big house; and now this secret greeting, so carelessly given, yet so fraught with hidden meaning.

"Why, hello there, cowboy!" she had said. And she appeared surprised, as if she had not expected to see him in the guise of an ordinary puncher. She had smiled, too; but—well, a little too broadly. Of course, out in the West—but, even then, it was a little broad.

Chapter XI

Coney Island.

It is wonderful how much a smile, or even a grin, will do for a disconsolate lover. Bowles woke suddenly to the beauties of nature and the wild joy of living; and that evening, instead of dropping into his blankets like a dead man, he tarried by the fire. A chill wind swept in from the frigid north, and the smoke guttered and flurried from the burning logs; but the cowboys sat about in their shirt-sleeves and blinked patiently when they caught the smoke. Inside the bunk-house the noise of the perpetual pitch game told where battles were being lost and won, a secret understanding that every game was worth a quarter on pay-day being the contributing cause for the excitement, since Henry Lee allowed no gambling among his punchers. But outside everybody was either broke or in the hole, and so there was nothing but peace and amity and long-winded arguments.

The talk for the moment was centered upon "ring-tail" in horses, a subject upon which Brigham Clark claimed to be an authority, although Bowles had never even heard of it before.

"No, sir," asserted Brigham, addressing the company at large; "you show me a ring-tailed hawse, and I'll show you a hawse with weak kidneys, every time. Now, I don't say how he gits them weak kidneys, y'understand; he may git 'em from bein' rode too young, the way Uncle Joe claims; or he may git 'em from drinkin' bad water, like folks; or he may jest be born that way. But that ain't the point—when you take a nice young hawse and turn him up a hill, and he quits and goes to ringin' his tail around—that hawse is weak, I say, or he wouldn't quit. A ring-tailed hawse is a weak hawse, and you might jest as well give 'im to the kids to play with—he'll never be no good fer a cow-pony."

Coming as this did at the end of a long and technical argument, it was allowed to pass by the company. A quiet fell, and three or four men to leeward got up to avoid the smoke; but all the time Brigham Clark sat on the box he had captured, his big black hat pushed back on his head, his hand held out to the fire, and his shrewd eyes twinkling as he gazed down into the flames. Then he shook with silent laughter, and they knew he was off on another one.

"Heh, heh, heh!" he chuckled. "Speakin' of ring-tails reminds me of a ring-tailed monkey I used to have to take care of when I was on the road. He was the orneriest little brat you ever see in yore life—a little, spider-legged proposition, with a long, limber tail, and big eyes that he'd always be winkin' and a-blinkin' while he was figurin' out some new kind of devilment—and all the time he'd be sneezin' and cuddlin' and snugglin' up ag'inst you like he loved you more'n his mammy. The boss's wife kept the little snifter fer company-like, and she'd pet and coddle and talk foolish to 'im until the boss would nigh have a fit. Jest like when a woman keeps a lap-dog, I reckon—kinder makes a man want to kill 'im, to keep her from muchin' 'im all the time.

"Well, this here lady was shore foolish about that monkey, and every mornin' when we were in a town I had to take 'im out fer a walk. Leastways, somebody had

to do it; and rather than not see the town at all I'd take him along under my arm. If I'd had a hand-organ I'd shore made a lot of money that trip—but I was thinkin' about the time I took the ring out of his tail. Every time we'd come to a tree, or a fire-escape, or something like that, the little devil would begin to hook up at it with his tail; and this time I'm speakin' of we was goin' through a little park, and I'm a son-of-a-gun if he didn't git away on me. Jest reached out with his tail where it was hangin' down behind, and grabbed a limb, and slipped the collar on me.

"Yes, sir! And then he begun doin' circus stunts through them trees. First he'd climb up one, and then another, and then he hooked on to a fire-escape, and I chased him clean over a house. Policeman came along and wanted to arrest me, but I give 'im a talk and kept travelin', because I knew if I didn't ketch that monkey I didn't need to go back to the tent. Well, I chased him till my tongue hung out, but about the time I'd reach out to ketch 'im he'd swing off with his tail and git into the next tree; so I went over to a fruit store and tried to ketch 'im with bananas. Last chance I had, and I was gittin' pretty mad. All the kids was there to tease me, the policeman was tellin' me to move on—and that cussed monkey kept hangin' down by his tail and makin' faces at me, until, by grab, I reached down and took up a rock.

"'Now, hyer,' I says, holdin' up the banana, 'you'd better come down before I git hot and soak you with this,' and I showed him the size of that pavin' stone.

"'Etchee-etchee-etchee!' he says, swingin' up for a limb; and then I let 'im have it. They wasn't any ring in his tail when he come down, believe me; and when I showed the remains to the missus she like to tore my hair out. Boss he fired me—mad as the devil—then when she wasn't lookin' he slipped me a twenty, and told me to go back to Coney. There was a happy man, fellers, but he had to let on different—married, you know. So I took the twenty and went back to old Coney, where they shoot the chutes and loop the loops, and any man that's got a dime is as rich as John G. Rockefeller. Big doin's back there, fellers—you don't know what you're missin'."

An abashed silence followed this remark, calculated as it was to reduce his hearers to a proper state of humility; and then, to add to its effectiveness, the Odysseus of the cow camps turned to Bowles.

"Ain't that so, stranger?" he said; and Bowles thought he detected a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes, indeed!" he replied. "There's no place in the world like Coney Island. Changing very rapidly, too. Have you been there lately? That Dreamland is wonderful, isn't it? And Luna Park——"

"Hah!" exclaimed Brigham, slapping his leg. "That's the place! Loony Park! Ain't that the craziest place you ever see? Everything upside-down, topsy-turvy—guess I never told you boys about that. Didn't dare to, by grab—not till this gentleman come along to back me up!"

He glanced at Bowles significantly and waited for the questions.

"What does she look like, Brig?" inquired Bar Seven, the stray man. "Pretty fancy, eh?"

"Fancy!" repeated Brigham, with royal insolence. "Well, believe me, goin' through this Loony Park would make Tucson look like a cow camp! She's shore elegant—silver and gold, and big barroom looking-glasses everywhere—only everything is

upside-down. You go into the house through the chimney, walk around on the ceilin' and there's all the tables and chairs stuck up on the top. Big chandeliers standin' straight up from the floor, and all the pictures hangin' wrong side to on the walls. Stairs is all built backwards, and when you're half way up, if you look like a Rube, they'll straighten 'em out like a flat board and shoot you into the attic. Talk about crazy—w'y, they's been a feller walked through this Loony Park and never knowed straight up afterwards. It's shore wonderful, ain't it, pardner?"

"Yes, indeed!" answered Bowles suavely; and, seeing that he could be relied upon, Brigham Clark cut loose with another one.

"Ain't that so, mister?" he inquired at the end; and Bowles, who saw a chance for revenge, assured the gawking cowboys that it was. These were the boys who had been gloating over him for a week and more, but now it was his turn.

"Yes, indeed," he replied, with a blasé, worldly-wise air; "quite a common occurrence, I'm sure."

At this the ready Brigham took fresh courage, and his little eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Friend," he said, "if it's none of my business, of course you'll let me know, but you've been around a little, haven't you? Seen the world, mebbe? Well now, what's the wonderfulest thing you ever see?"

A flush of pleasure mantled Bowles' sunburned face, for it was the first time he had been addressed as man to man since he struck the Bat Wing; but he did not lose the point—Brigham had a bigger story to bring out and he was waiting for a lead.

"Well," he said, "I have seen a good many wonderful exhibitions, but the one that I think of at this moment as the most striking was Selim, the diving horse. You remember him, I guess—out at Coney Island. He was a beautiful horse, wasn't he? Snowy white, with a long, flowing mane, and intelligent as a human. He mounted to a platform forty-five feet high and leaped off into a pool of water. That was the most wonderful thing I ever saw, because he did it all by himself—climbed up to the platform, stepped out to the diving-place, and jumped off when his master said the word. Yes, that was certainly wonderful."

"You bet!" assented Brig, regarding him with admiring eyes; but the others were not so easily satisfied. That was one thing they claimed to be up on—horses—and they looked the solemn stranger over dubiously.

"How high did you say that platform was?" inquired Uncle Joe cautiously. "Forty-five—well, that was shore high. I cain't hardly git my hawse to cross the crick."

"How deep was that pool?" spoke up Bar Seven, the stray man. "Ten foot? Huh! Say, boys, this reminds me of that divin' story of Brig's!"

"Well, what's the matter with that divin' story of mine?" demanded Brigham orgulously. "You're behind the times, Bar Seven. While you was on yore way this gentleman come into camp, and he's seen that done himself. What do you know about it, anyhow—spent all yore life punchin' cows and eatin' sand—what do you know about divin', anyhow?"

"Well, they's one thing I do know," retorted Bar Seven, "and that's hawses. I been with hawses all my life, and you cain't tell me about no hawse divin'—stands to reason he'd hit the bottom and break his neck, anyway!"

"Perhaps I would better explain," broke in Bowles politely. "When the horse leaves the platform he slides down an inclined chute, below which is hung a heavily padded board. As the horse slips off he naturally kicks and struggles, and his feet, flying out behind, strike the padded board so that, while he leaps off headforemost, he rights himself in the air and falls into the pool feet first. Of course, forty-five feet is quite a distance, but he probably never goes to the bottom at all."

"Well, that's all right," admitted Bar Seven. "I don't know about that—but tell me this, stranger: How does the man git that hawse to climb up there and take the jump? Tell me that, and I'll believe anything!"

"Why, certainly," said Bowles. "At the time of which I speak, a young girl rode on his back when he made the plunge—just to make it more exciting, you know—but I watched the man quite closely, and really it was very interesting. First the girl went up the long incline, which had a railing and was provided with cleats, of course. Then the trainer brought Selim out and gave him a handful of sugar from his pocket, rubbing his head and talking to him while he was begging for more, until he had him up to the chute. There he stripped the halter off and spoke to him, and the horse started up by himself, he was so eager for the reward. At the top the girl mounted him and turned him down the diving-chute; and, don't you know, the first thing he did when he got to land was to trot back and get his sugar!"

"Oh, sugar!" cried Bar Seven, in disgust; but somehow the circumstantiality of the narrative seemed to carry conviction with the others, and he found himself alone.

"What breed of hawse was that?" inquired Uncle Joe, after a pause.

"A pure-blooded Arabian," answered Bowles; "supposed to be the most intelligent horses in the world. The Arabians, you know, keep their horses about their tents and raise them as if they were children, teaching them to understand the human voice and to answer like a dog."

"W'y, sure!" broke in Brigham, artfully taking the lead again. "Don't you fellers remember that story in the school book about Ali Ben Hassan, or whatever his name was, that was wounded in a battle and his hawse picked him up by his belt and packed him back to his tent? I tell you, them A-rabs are a pretty smooth bunch of hombres. They not only savvy hawses from the ground up but they're the finest jugglers and strong-armed men that the world has ever seen. I remember back at Coney they was three brothers that did sech tricks you couldn't hardly believe it.

"They was called the Hassan brothers—all A-rabs is either named Hassan or A-li—and the oldest one was a balancer. That feller could balance a peacock feather on his nose—throw a flip-flap clean over it, and come up with it still on his nose—but that was jest fer a starter. His big stunt was balancin' clay pipes. He'd take a hundred and forty-four long-handled pipes, balance 'em one on top of the other, and then skip up to the top and set there while he took a smoke."

"What! One on top of the other?" demanded Bar Seven incredulously.

"Aw, no, you bone head!" replied Brigham impatiently. "What d'ye think—would he pile 'em up a hundred foot high? He made 'em into a kind of pyramid-like—but he was nothin' to his younger brother. That feller was a rope-sharp. You punchers

think you can twirl the rope some, but you're back in the calf corral alongside of him. He could throw a loop out on the floor, and send it quilin' around like a snake, hoppin' over chairs and tables like a trained dog, and then have it come back and hog-tie 'im at one lick, so that an expert couldn't unfasten the knots in half an hour. But that was jest good rope work with him; his big play come at the end when he tied a twenty-pound weight at the end of it and began to swing it round. By Joe, that was great! And then, right at the end, when he pulled his big stuff, he heaved that weight forty foot into the air, clum up the rope and set down on top of it smokin' his cigar! Now, by grab, can you beat that?"

"Kin we beat it?" echoed Bar Seven and the bunch. "Kin we believe it—that's the point!"

"Well, what's the matter with it?" demanded Brigham irritably. "Seems like every time I tell you cotton-pickers anythin' you up an' call me a liar. What's the matter, anyway?"

"What's the matter?" yelled Bar Seven, raising his voice above the rest. "W'y, you ignorant devil, how could the feller set on the weight when it was only throwed up in the air?"

A chorus of other demands followed, but Brigham only sat on his box, smiling easily.

"Say, what do you take me for?" he inquired, gazing about him pityingly. "If I knowed how that A-rab did that rope-work, d'ye think I'd be punchin' cows? Not fer me—I'd be drawin' a thousand dollars a week back at Coney. Of co'se I can't say how it was done—no more than you can—but that's what makes the show! If the people knowed, they wouldn't come no more! Ain't that so, pardner?"

"Yes, indeed!" responded Bowles.

"W'y sure!" went on Brigham. "Anybody that knows anythin' about the show business knows that. No matter how good a stunt is, it's got to be mysterious or the people won't pay to see it. Either that, or it's got to be feats of strength and darin'. Now this youngest Hassan brother was a strong-armed man. He'd wrap a piece of chain around his arm, tighten up his muscle and pop! it'd break right square in two. Same thing with his chest—he'd wrap a loggin' chain around his breast, suck in his breast, and snap it like a thread. You've seen fellers like that, haven't you?"

"Sure!" said Bowles.

"Yes—all right!" continued Brigham apologetically. "Seems like the simplest thing I tell these fellers some rabbit-twister from Texas up and contradicts me. Well, this youngest brother had a pretty good stunt to end up with—nothin' flashy, of co'se, but pretty good fer a kid. He was powerful strong in the right arm and he'd hold it out like this"—Brigham held out his brawny arm—"and then he'd muscle up, real slow-like, and then, by grab, he'd raise himself right up, and come down over, and set right down on that thumb!"

He elevated his thumb as he spoke, and the cowboys gazed at it as if hypnotized. Then Bar Seven rose up slowly and, walking over to the defenseless Brigham, mashed his hat down over his eyes at a single blow.

"Brig," he said, his voice trembling with conviction, "you're a dad-burned liar!"

Chapter XII

Promoted.

There was quite a little excitement in the bunk-house that night, and when it was at its height Brigham Clark came tottering out with his bed.

"Say, where's that friend of mine—that Coney Island feller?" he inquired, addressing the recumbent forms of men as he scouted along the wagon-shed. "I'm skeered to sleep in the same house with them cotton-pickers and old Bar Seven—they might rise up in the night and throw me into the hawse-trough. Huh? Oh, that's him over there, hey? Well, so long, fellers—kinder cold out hyer, ain't it? But I cain't sleep in that bunk-house no more—them fellers, they doubt my veracity!"

He was still chuckling with subdued laughter as he dropped his bed down in a far corner beside Bowles; but nothing was said until he had spread his "tarp" and blankets and crept in out of the cold. Then he laughed again, quivering until the earth seemed to shake with his contagious merriment.

"Say, pardner," he said, "you're all right. We capped 'em in on that proper, and no mistake. Did you see old Bar Seven's jaw drop when he saw how he was bit? I'll have that on him for many a long day now, and it'll shore cost him the drinks when we git to town next month. Gittin' too lively for me over in the bunk-house, so I thought I'd come out here with you."

"Sure!" responded Bowles, who had secretly been lonely for company. "It's rather cold out here, but the air is better."

"Yes—and the company," added Brigham meaningly. "Ain't these Texicans the ignorantest bunch? W'y, them fellers don't know nothin' till they see you laugh! I could've got away with that strong-arm business if I could've kept my face straight, but old Bar Seven was too many fer me—I jest had to snicker or I'd bust! Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh!"

"There was one thing which kind of puzzled me, though," observed Bowles. "Would you mind telling me where you got that absurd idea of the three Hassan brothers?"

"W'y, sure not," giggled Brigham, creeping closer and lowering his voice. "Don't tell anybody, but I got it off a drummer in the smokin'-car when I was comin' back from the Fair in Phœnix. The way he told it, there was an Englishman and a Frenchman and an Irishman talkin' together, each one braggin' about his own country; and the Englishman began it by tellin' about his younger brother, who wasn't nothin' hardly in England but could do that first stunt with the clay pipes. Then the Frenchman told about his brother, who wasn't nothin' for a balancer but was pretty good at rope-work; and the Irishman, in order to trump 'em right, he tells about his youngest brother that was strong in the arms. Say, that shore knocked the persimmon, didn't it? Them fellers was like the man that come out of Loony Park—they didn't know straight-up! Their eyes was stickin' out so you could rope 'em with a grape-vine, but they didn't dare to peep. Been called down too often. But say, pardner, on the dead, how about that divin' hawse?"

"Why—er—what do you mean?" asked Bowles.

"Well, did he shore enough do that, or was you jest stringin' 'em?"

"Why, yes, certainly he did! Haven't you ever heard about Selim, the diving horse? How long ago was it that you were at Coney Island?"

"Who—me?" inquired Brigham. "Never was there," he replied with engaging frankness; "never been outside the Territory. Say, you didn't think I'd shore been there, did ye?" he questioned eagerly.

"I certainly did," replied Bowles. "Of course, I knew that you were drawing the long bow this evening—but how did you get all this information if you've never been there?"

"Heh, heh, heh!" chuckled Brigham, rolling over on his bed. "Say, this is pretty good, by grab! Feller comes clear out hyer from New York, and I take him in, too! W'y, pardner, I was with a carnival company down at the Territorial Fair last fall, and that was the nearest I ever got to Coney; but they was a feller there—the ballyhoo man for Go-Go, the wild boy—and he was always tellin' me about Coney, until I knowed it like a book. Yes, sir, I jest camped right down and listened to that spieler; and he was shore glad to talk. Talkin' was his business, and he'd been at it so long he'd got the habit—couldn't help it—all he needed was some feller to listen to 'im. But all he'd talk about was Coney Island. Been there for years and didn't know nothin' else—and he shore filled me up right. Learned me all his spiels and everythin', and when I come back from winterin' in that Phœnix country I tole 'em I was back from New York. New York and the Great White Way—and Coney.

"But you shore strengthened my hand immensely, pardner, the way you he'ped out to-night. Now, we want to stand pat on this—don't tip me off to 'em—and pretty soon I'll have 'em all spraddled out ag'in. Hardy Atkins and that bunch, they make too much noise—they won't let me talk at all—but you watch me go after Bar Seven and these stray men. I'll tell ye—you put me wise to a whole lot more stuff, and I'll frame up another come-on. How's that now?"

"All right," agreed Bowles, yawning sleepily. "Good-night!"

He dropped back into his blankets and covered up his head; but Brigham failed to take the hint.

"Got any more divin' stories?" he asked, with gentle insistence. "They bite on them fine. Or a hawse story! A cowboy thinks he knows all about hawses. Go ahead and give me one now, so I can spring it on 'em in the mornin'—I got to have somethin' to come back at 'em with. They're always throwin' it into me about being a Mormon—I jest wanter show 'em that I've got the goods. Go ahead now—tell me somethin'!"

"All right," said Bowles, coming out from under his blankets; "but, really, I'm awfully sleepy!"

"Yeah; you'll git over that after you've been punchin' cows a while," observed Brigham sagely. "I'm on the wrangle again, but it don't worry me none. Cowboy's got no right to sleep, nohow. Let 'im trade his bed for a lantern—that's what they all say—but don't fergit that divin' story, pardner. Didn't you never see no more divin' stunts—in New York or somewhere?"

"Why, yes," answered Bowles, brightening up; "that reminds me—there's the Hippodrome!"

"Aha!" breathed Brigham. "What's it like?"

"Why, the Hippodrome," continued Bowles, "is an immense playhouse right in the heart of New York that's given over entirely to spectacles. It has a stage large enough to accommodate a thousand people, and a great lake out in front that is big enough to float a fleet of boats; and every year they put on some new spectacle. One year it will be the battle of Manila Bay, for instance, with ships and men and cannons, and a great shipwreck scene right there in the lake, with people falling overboard and getting drowned—and the peculiar thing is that when a boatload of people fall into that lake they never come up again. It's just the same as if they were drowned."

"Aw, say," broke in Brigham, "you're givin' me a fill, ain't you?"

"No," protested Bowles warmly; "I'm telling you the truth. Why, I saw the most glorious spectacle there one night. It represented the tempting of some young prince by Cleopatra, the beautiful Egyptian queen. There were six hundred women in the play, and as they marched and countermarched across the stage the lights would throw soft colors about them, and then as they danced the colors would change, until the whole place looked like fairyland. Then they would swing up into the air on invisible wires and hover about like butterflies—there would be a flash and all would have wings—and then they would disappear again and come out dressed in armor like Amazons. And in the last act, when the prince had sent them away, they marched down the broad stone steps that lead into the lake, four abreast, and without taking a deep breath, or showing any concern whatever, they just walked right into that deep water and disappeared. Never came up again. Gone, the whole six hundred of them!"

"Gone!" echoed Brigham in amazement. "Where to? Where'd they go to?"

"Under the water—that's all I know."

"Gee, what a lie!" exclaimed Brigham, rising up in bed. "By jicks, pardner, I shore have to take off my hat to you—you got a wonderful imagination!"

"No, indeed!" protested Bowles. "It's every word of it true. This Hippodrome was designed by the same man who built Luna Park, and invented the loop the loop, and shoot the chutes, and all those other wonderful things. I was reading an article about that Hippodrome lake and it seems he built some kind of a great metal hood down under the water and filled it with compressed air of just the right pressure to displace the water. All the details are held secret, and the very people who use it are kept in ignorance, but as near as can be found out the performers dive right down under that hood and from there they are taken off through underground passages and carried back to their dressing-rooms. Several people were drowned while they were experimenting with it, but now it's perfectly safe; I don't suppose those women mind it at all."

"No!" cried Brigham, still struggling with his emotions. "Is it as easy as that? But say," he whispered, as the magnitude of the story came over him, "jest wait till I get this off on the cowboys—I'll have me a reputation like old Tom Pepper, or Windy Bill up on the J.F.! You don't want to pull it yoreself, do you? Well, jest give me the details, then, and I'll depend on you to make my hand good when they come back for the explanation. But, by grab, if it's anythin' like what you say, I'm shore goin' to save my money and drag it fer old New York!"

"Yes, indeed," murmured Bowles, cuddling down into his bed; "I'm sure you'd enjoy it."

He fell to breathing deeply immediately, feigning a dreamless slumber, and when Brigham asked his next question Bowles was lost to the world. The cowboy's night was all too short for him, ending as it did at four-thirty in the morning, and not even a consideration for Brigham's future career could fight off the demands of sleep. Yet hardly had he closed his eyes—or so it seemed—when Gloomy Gus flashed his lantern in his face and then turned to the ambitious Brigham.

"Git up, Brig!" he rasped. "It's almost day! Wranglers!"

"Oh, my Lord!" moaned Brigham, turning to hide his face, but the round-up cook was inexorable and at last he had his way. Then as the wranglers clumped away to saddle their night-horses the dishpan clanged out its brazen summons and one by one the cowboys stirred and rose. Last of all rose Bat Wing Bowles, for his head was heavy with sleep; but a pint of the cook's hot coffee brought him back to life again, and he was ready for another day.

Shrill yells rose from the far corner of the horse pasture; there was a rumble of feet, a din of hoofbeats growing nearer, and then with a noise like thunder the remuda poured into the corral. A scamper of ponies and the high-pitched curses of the riders told where the outlaws were being turned back from a break; and then the bars went up and the wranglers ran shivering to the fire.

"Pore old Brig!" observed Bar Seven with exaggerated concern. "He was up all night!"

"What's the matter?" inquired another. "Feet hurt 'im?"

"No," said Bar Seven sadly; "it was his haid!"

Brigham looked up from his cup of coffee and said nothing. Then, seeing many furtive eyes upon him, he laughed shortly, and filled his cup again.

"Yore eyes look kinder bad, Seven," he said. "Must've kinder strained 'em last night."

"Nope," answered Bar Seven, upon whom the allusion was not lost; and with this delicate passage at arms the subject of big stories was dropped. Henry Lee came down, there was a call for horses, and in the turmoil of roping and mounting the matter was forgotten. Brigham had scored a victory and he was satisfied, while the stray men were biding their time. So the marvels of the Hippodrome were held in reserve, and the round-up supplied the excitement.

As the riding of bronks progressed, the accidents that go with such work increased. Almost every morning saw its loose horse racing across the flats, and the number of receptive candidates for the job of day-herding was swelled by the battle-scarred victims. Then fate stepped in, the scene was changed, and Bowles found himself a man again.

"Bowles," said Henry Lee, as he lingered by the fire, "can you drive a team?"

Visions of a flunky's job driving the bed-wagon rose instantly in his mind; but Bowles had been trained to truth-telling and he admitted that he could.

"Ever drive a wild team?" continued Lee, with a touch of severity.

"Well—no," answered Bowles. "I've driven spirited horses, such as we have in the East, but——"

"Think you could drive the grays to Chula Vista and back?"

"Oh, the grays!" cried Bowles, a sudden smile wreathing his countenance as he thought of that spirited pair. "Why, yes; I'm sure I could!"

"Oh," commented Henry Lee, as if he had his doubts; but after a quick glance at the self-sufficient youth he seemed to make up his mind. "Well," he said, "I'll get Hardy to hook 'em up—Mrs. Lee wants you to take her to town."

"Certainly," responded Bowles, turning suddenly sober. "I'll be very careful indeed."

"Yes," said the cattleman; "and if you can't drive, I want you to say so now."

"I've driven in the horse shows, Mr. Lee," answered Bowles. "You can judge for yourself."

"Oh, you have, have you?" And the keen gray eyes of Henry Lee seemed to add: "Then what are you doing out here?" But all he said was: "Very well."

Half an hour later, with his gloved hands well out to the front, and the whip in his right for emergencies, Bowles went racing southward behind the grays; while Mrs. Lee, her face muffled against the wind, was wondering at his skill. As a cowboy, Mr. Bowles had been a laughing-stock, but now he displayed all the courage and control of a Western stage-driver, with some of the style of a coachman thrown in.

"How well you drive, Mr. Bowles!" she ventured, after the grays had had their first dash. "I was afraid I shouldn't be able to go to town until after the round-up—Mr. Atkins is so busy, you know."

Bowles bowed and smiled grimly. It had been Hardy Atkins' boast that he alone was capable of handling the grays, and as he was harnessing them up that gentleman had seen fit to criticize the arrangements, only to be rebuked by Henry Lee.

"You know Mr. Lee depends so much on Hardy," continued Mrs. Lee, "and he needs him so on the circle that I disliked very much to ask for him—but something you said the other night about stage-coaching made me think that perhaps you could drive. Of course, any of the boys could drive, but—well, for some reason or other, I can never get them to talk to me; and to ride forty miles with a man who is too embarrassed to talk, and who hates you because he can't chew tobacco—that isn't so pleasant—now, is it?"

"Why, no, I presume not," agreed Bowles. "You know, I'm recently from the East, and perhaps that's why I notice it, but these Western men seem very difficult to get acquainted with. Of course I'm a greenhorn and all that, and I suppose they haven't much respect for me as a cowboy, but it's such a peculiar thing—no one will speak to me directly. Even when they make fun of me, they keep it among themselves. Brigham Clark is the only one who gives me any degree of friendship—and, that reminds me, I must get him some tobacco in town."

"Yes, I know what you mean," said Mrs. Lee. "I guess I do! Think of living out here for thirty years, Mr. Bowles, and having them still hold aloof. With Dixie, now, it is different. She was born here, and in a way she speaks their language. I have done my best, to be sure, to keep her diction pure—and Henry even has given up all his old, careless ways of speaking in order to do his part; but, somehow, she has learned the vernacular from these cowboys, and in spite of all I can say she will persist in using it. It was only yesterday that I overheard her say to Hardy: 'Yes, I can ride ary hawse in the pen!' And she says 'You-all' like a regular Texan. Of course, that is Southern too—and I have known some very cultivated Texans—but, oh, it makes me feel so bad that my daughter should fall into these careless

ways! I have been in Arizona nearly thirty years now, and it has meant the loss of a great deal to me in many ways; but there was one thing I would not give up, Mr. Bowles—I would not give up my educated speech!"

She ended with some emotion, and Bowles glanced at her curiously, but he made no carping comments. When a lady has sacrificed so much to preserve the language of her fathers, it would be a poor return indeed to give her aught but praise—and yet he could sense it dimly that she had paid a fearful price. Personally, he was beginning to admire the direct speech of Dixie May, even to the extent of dropping some of his more obvious Eastern variants; but to the mother he hid the leanings of his heart.

"Your accent is certainly very pure," he said. "Really, I have never heard more perfect English—except, perhaps, from some highly educated foreigner. Our tendency to lapse into the vernacular lays us all open to criticism, of course. But don't you find, Mrs. Lee, that your Eastern speech is a bar, in a way, to the closest relations with your neighbors? I know with me it has been that way, and I am already trying to adopt the Western idiom as far as possible. Why, really, when I first came, they ridiculed me so for saying 'Beg pardon' that I doubt if I shall ever use the expression again. And I am having such a struggle to say 'calves'—not 'cahves,' you know, but 'calves'! It is all right to say 'brahnding cahves' back in New York, but out here it is so frightfully conspicuous! And besides——"

"Oh, now, Mr. Bowles," protested Mrs. Lee, laying a restraining hand on his arm, "I hope you will not shatter all my hopes by falling into this dreadful vernacular. If you only knew how much I enjoy your manner of speaking, if you knew what memories of New York and the old life your words bring up, you would hesitate, I am sure, to cast aside your heritage. Really, if Henry would have let me, I should have invited you up to the house the very evening you came; but you—well, you had some disagreement with him at the start, and it's rather prejudiced him against you. And, besides, he has his ideas of discipline, you know, and against making exceptions of one man over another; and so—well, I did hope you would be able to drive, because now I want to have a good long talk.

"I'm not proud, or 'stuck up,' as they say out here, Mr. Bowles," she went on, as if eager to begin her holiday; "and really I do everything in my power to be friendly, but the class of people who come here—these poor, ignorant nesters, and rough, hard-swearing cowboys—they seem actually to resent my manner of speaking. Of course, I was a school-teacher for a few years—before I married Henry—and I suppose that has made a difference; but I do get so lonely sometimes, with Dixie out riding around somewhere and Henry off on the round-up—and yet I just can't bring myself to speak this awful, vulgar Texas-talk. Now Dixie, she rides around anywhere, speaks to all the women, says 'Howdy' to all the men, and, I declare, when I hear her talking with these cowboys I wonder if she's my own daughter! They have such common ways of expressing themselves, although I must say they are always polite enough—but what I really object to is their familiar attitude toward Dixie. No matter what their class or station, they always seem to take it for granted that they are perfectly eligible, and that she is sure to marry one of them, and that even the commonest has a kind of gambler's chance to win her hand."

She paused, overcome apparently by memories of past courtships, and Bowles shuffled his feet uneasily.

"Of course," he said at length, "your daughter is very attractive——"

"Oh, do you think so?" exclaimed Mrs. Lee, making no concealment of her pleasure in the fact. "I thought, from the way you spoke to her—when I introduced you, you know——"

"Oh, that was just my manner!" interrupted Bowles hastily. "A little embarrassed, perhaps."

"But I thought," persisted Mrs. Lee, "I thought from the way you both acted that you had met before. In New York, perhaps—you know, she has been there all winter—or some time before that evening. You know, Dixie is generally so free with the new cowboys, but she spoke up at you so sharply, and you——"

"Ah—excuse me," interposed Bowles, "perhaps I would better explain. I did meet your daughter, very informally to be sure, on the morning of my arrival at Chula Vista. It was that which caused my embarrassment—always painful when people fail to recognize you, you know—and especially with a lady. Er—what do all these prairie-dogs live on, Mrs. Lee? We have passed so many of them, but I don't see——"

"Mr. Bowles," said Mrs. Lee, placing her hand once more upon his arm and looking at him with an anxious mother's eyes, "I want you to meet my daughter again. She was in New York all winter, you know, and perhaps you have some friends in common. Anyway, I wish we could see more of you—it would be such a pleasure to me, and Dixie——"

She let her eyes express her longing for the improvement of Dixie's diction—a certain approval, too, of Bowles—but he did not respond at once. Fighting within his breast was a mad, fatuous desire to stand in the presence of his beloved, to hear the music of her voice and behold the swiftness and grace of her comings and goings; but almost as an echo in his ears he could hear the mocking formalism of her answers, and feel the scorn in her eyes as she sneered at him for pursuing her. His face became graver as he thought, and then, with the ready wit of his kind, he framed up a tactful excuse.

"Oh, thank you," he said. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure—and there is nothing I should enjoy more—but under the circumstances I am afraid I shall have to decline. You know of course that, whatever my life may have been in the past, at present I am nothing but a hired hand—and a very poor hand at that, I am afraid. And since Mr. Lee has asked you not to make exceptions among the men, I should be very sorry indeed to go against his wishes."

"Oh, that is not the rule, Mr. Bowles," protested Mrs. Lee. "We make exceptions to it all the time, and I am sure Henry would be glad to have you come. Some evening after supper, you know. I want so much to have Dixie meet people of refinement and education, and while for the moment you may be working as a common cowboy, of course we know——"

"You know very little, as a matter of fact," interposed Bowles; "and I am sorry that circumstances make it impossible for me to discuss my antecedents. But has it not occurred to you, Mrs. Lee, that, considering the attitude of the cowboys in the past, it might—well, my motives might be misunderstood—if I should call."

"Why, surely, Mr. Bowles," began Mrs. Lee, her eyes big with wonder, "you are not—er—afraid of what the cowboys——"

"Oh, no, no!" protested Bowles, blushing to the tips of his sunburned ears. "Certainly not! I did not mean the cowboys."

"Well, what then?" demanded Mrs. Lee, in perplexity.

Mr. Bowles hesitated a moment, looking straight ahead to where Chula Vista rose between the horses' ears.

"You will excuse me, Mrs. Lee, I'm sure," he said, speaking very low. "But when I spoke of my motives being misunderstood, I did not have reference to the cowboys. I was—er—thinking of your daughter."

"My daughter!" echoed Mrs. Lee, suddenly sitting up very straight in her seat. Then, as the significance of his remarks became evident, she gazed across at him reproachfully.

"Why, Mr. Bowles!" she said; and then there was a long, pensive silence, broken only by the thud of flying feet, the rattle and rumble of wheels, and the yikr-r-r of startled prairie-dogs.

Chapter XIII

A Letter from the Postmistress.

The morning after Bowles' return from his trip to Chula Vista—during which he had made the startling proposition about being misunderstood by Dixie Lee—the entire Bat Wing outfit packed up its plunder and pulled out for the big round-up. First the cowboys, with a fifteen-mile ride ahead of them before they began to gather, went stringing across the plains at a high trot; then the remuda, stretching out in a mighty fan of horses, came fogging along behind them, to be ready for a change at the cutting-grounds; and last the chuck-wagon and the bed-wagon—one full of Dutch ovens and provisions, the other piled high with well-lashed beds—went hammering through chuck holes and dipping into dry washes in a desperate attempt to reach the rendezvous in time for dinner.

A gangling youth in overalls, and with a pair of cheap "can-opener" spurs on his shoes, acted the part of assistant to the horse-wrangler; and an open-faced individual with a great taste for plug tobacco and the song called "Casey Jones" drove the bed-wagon for Gloomy Gus; but Bowles rode out with the cowboys. By a piece of good luck, he had backed Wa-ha-lote into a corner that morning, and so menaced him with his rope that the good-natured monarch had finally stood and surrendered for a handful of sugar. So Mr. Bowles rode out in style, without any ostensible glances toward the big house, where Dixie May was reviewing her admirers from the gallery. By this time, of course, Mrs. Lee would have informed her daughter of the Eastern stray's presumption—of his daring to suggest that, in case he called, she, Dixie, might misunderstand his motives and think he was laying siege to her heart—and of course Dixie May would be indignant!

But, if she was, she carried it off well, for Bowles never got a look from her. Of course, in a bunch of thirty cowboys, even on such a fancy mount as high-headed Wa-ha-lote, one man does not stand out conspicuously from the rest—that is, not

unless his horse is pitching. Hardy Atkins was on an outlaw sorrel called El Paso del Norte, and he made up the center of the picture. Del Norte was a wonder at the buck-jump, especially if some one spurred him in the shoulders, which Hardy did, and the departure of our hero was a little dimmed by his dust. Still Bowles was pleased, even if he was leaving the home of his beloved for two weeks, for something told him that he had at last won distinction in the ruck of suitors—the only man who had not let it go for granted that he was in love with Dixie Lee. Of course, he was—desperately so—but an instinct deep down in his breast warned him to conceal it from all the world. And especially from Dixie, the capricious; otherwise, she might win him by a glance and a smile, and then disprize him forever.

But now the stern realities of life loomed up before him, and Bowles found himself with a real round-up on his hands. It does not take much of a man to sit on the front porch and talk near-love with a girl; but to follow a Western round-up is a task to try the hardiest. For three hours Bowles rode at a rough trot across the valley, fighting down the awful instinct to rise in his stirrups and "bob"; and then as the distant hills grew nearer the cowboys broke into a lope. They separated into two parties that formed the horns of a circle, dropping off man after man as they jumped up cattle, and still spurring on and on. The puncher with the weakest horse was dropped first, for there would be no chance to change till noon, and the best mounted was saved to the last in order to get his full strength. Bowles was on Wa-ha-lote, and he rode to the end before Henry Lee sent him back with the herd.

Very slowly now he plodded along behind his bunch of cattle, riding back and forth as he picked up strays, and driving them all to some common center. To the right and left, and far across to distant hills, he could see lone men at their task, and the great plain became dotted with cattle as the circle closed in on the grounds. A hundred cow-trails, sinuous as snake-tracks, led in to this place they all sought, and when the lowing strings of cattle met it was on the flat by a dammed-up lake. There the herds were thrown together, carefully so that no mother should lose her calf; and while they stood them upon the cutting-ground the wrangler brought up his horses, and each man caught out a fresh mount.

Nowhere in all his work is the mastery of the cowboy more apparent than when he changes horses on the open plain. The great remuda of over two hundred horses was driven in on the gallop; then the cowboys rounded them up, and each man dropped to the ground. One by one they took down their ropes and threw the loose ends to their neighbors, and there in a minute's time was a corral that would hold the wildest outlaw, for a rope is the greatest terror of a cow-pony. It was a rope that fore-footed him when he was a colt, and bound him at the branding; every morning the long, snaky loops whizzed past their ears and dragged out those who must ride till they were ready to drop; and so, even though they had the power to brush the rope fence aside, the frightened horses huddled away from it and submitted to the noose.

Bowles was barred, for his Mother Hubbard roping threw the herd into a frenzy; so he saddled up for Brigham and let that doughty puncher drag out his mount. Then the cutting and branding began, and Henry Lee put him to flanking calves. Perhaps he, too, had heard of the tenderfoot's remarks about his daughter; or it may have been the original grouch; but Bowles knew from the look in his eye that

he was elected to do his full share. So he labored on, trying to learn the tricks of the older flankers, and schooling himself to their stoical endurance.

A heavy wind came up, sweeping the dust across the flat in clouds, and still the cutters rode and roped. They ate dinner in relays, turning their backs to the storm and bolting their grimy food in silence, and hurried back to the herd. The sparks from the branding-fire flew fifty feet in a line, and the irons would hardly hold heat in the wind; but they carried the work through to the end. Then they moved the herd to harder ground, and cut it between the gusts, when every horse turned tail and the riders shut their eyes. The ones and twos were lumped together, the strays turned loose on the plain, and the outfit plodded on to the east, driving their cut before them.

That night they camped at a ranch, throwing down their beds in barns and sheds, and eating in the open. The next day they braved the wind and combed the distant mountain, riding far over the rocky slopes, and branding in a cañon. On the third day the wind brought up rain and sleet, and the mountains were powdered with snow, but the round-up moved on inexorably. Then the wind veered to the east and the air became bitter cold; Gloomy Gus could hardly cook for the gale that assaulted him, and the wrangler lost eight or ten horses; but still the hardy cowboys rode and cut and branded, for a round-up never stops for wind and weather.

As for Bowles, his face was peeled and swollen, his eyes half-blinded by dust and wind, his body chilled through in spite of his clothes, and he saw himself in that company like a child among grown-up men. Half of the cowboys left their coats on the wagon until the day of the blizzard; and Brigham was still in his shirt-sleeves, having rolled up his coat with his bed and forgotten to bring his slicker. Yet none of them railed at the weather; no one quit; it was their life. Perhaps from their earliest boyhood they had braved the Texas northers or endured the continual sandstorms of high and windy plains. They were used to it, like the horses that bore them; but Bowles was a more delicate plant. All he could do was to live on from day to day, wondering at their courage and hardihood, and marveling at his own presumption in thinking he could play at their game.

A week passed, and the wind grew warmer, though it still swept in from the southeast. The outfit reached the limit of its circle and turned toward home, sending its cuts of dogies on before it. On the first of May they were contracted to be delivered at Chula Vista, there to be shipped to Colorado and the Texas Panhandle and fattened into steers. But feed was short, for the cold had set back the grass, and Henry Lee had wired that he could deliver on the twentieth. So while he waited for an answer he sent his cattle ahead of him, and every day as he rode he watched for a messenger from home.

Nor was he alone in this, for the messenger would be Dixie; but no one said a word. It was part of the patience of these rugged sons of the desert that they should make no sign. They were camped in a grove of sycamores beneath the shelter of a hill, and the outfit was gathered about the fire, when she rode in at the end of the day. Each man of them regarded her silently as she carried the word to her father; and then, when he nodded his satisfaction, they stirred in expectation of her greeting.

"Howd-do, boys?" she said, vaulting lightly off her horse and coming nearer. "'Evening, Mr. Mosby; what's the chance for a little supper?"

She looked them all over casually as she drew off her gloves by the fire, and for a few minutes the conversation was confined to news. Then she went back to her saddle, and returned with a bundle of letters.

"Well, boys," she remarked, with a teasing smile, "I'm postmistress this trip, so line up here and give me your present names—also the names you went by back in Texas. 'James Doyle!' Why, is that your name, Red? Here's one for you, too, Uncle Joe. All right now, here's one from Moroni—for Charley Clark! Aw, Brig, are you still writing to that girl down on the river? Well, isn't that provoking! And here's a whole bunch for Hardy Atkins. Every one from a girl, too—I can tell by the handwriting. No, Mr. Buchanan, you don't draw anything—not under that name, anyway. But here's one for Sam Houghton—maybe that's for you? No? Well, who is it for? No, we can't go any further until I deliver this Houghton letter. Who is there here that answers to the name of Sam?"

She glanced all around, a roguish twinkle in her eye, but no one claimed that honor.

"Nothing to be afraid of," she urged. "It was mailed at Chula Vista, and written by a girl. Pretty handwriting, too—something like mine. I bet there's something nice inside of it—I can tell by the curly-cues on the letters."

Once more she surveyed her circle of smirking admirers, but no one answered the call. She looked again, and her eyes fell on Mr. Bowles.

"Stranger," she said, speaking with well-simulated hesitation, "I didn't quite catch your name down at the ranch—isn't this letter for you?"

For a moment Bowles' heart stopped beating altogether and a hundred crazy fancies fogged his brain; then he shook his head, and gazed shamefacedly away.

"My name is Bowles," he said stiffly; "Samuel Bowles."

"Well, this says Samuel," reasoned Dixie Lee, advancing to show him the letter. "Here—take a look at it!"

She stepped very close as she spoke, and as Bowles glanced at her he saw that her eyes were big with portent. Then he scanned the letter, and in a flash he recognized her handwriting—the same that he had seen on the train. A strange impulse to possess the missive swept over him at this, and his hand leaped out to seize it; but the look in her eyes detained him. They were big with mystery, but he sensed also a shadow of deceit. And while she might merely have designs on his peace of mind, there were other possibilities involved. To be sure, his name had been Houghton on his railroad ticket, but that did not prove anything now; and, besides, he did not want even that to be known. Affairs of the heart prosper best in secret, without the aid of meddling or officious outsiders; and for that reason, if for no other, Bowles desired to remain incog. Even with a false clue, Dixie May might write to New York, and ultimately reach his aunt, thus cutting short his romantic adventures. She might even—but he skipped the rest of the things she might do, and straightened his face to a mask.

"Ah, thank you, no," he said, speaking very formally. "Not for me—though the handwriting does seem familiar."

"Maybe it's money from home," she suggested; but still he refused to accept. He was ignorant of the ways of women, but his instincts were trained to a hair-line,

and he read mischief in her heart. Yet curiosity almost tempted him to accede—or was it the witchery of her presence? For Dixie May stood very close to him, closer than was necessary, and as she argued, half in earnest, she fixed him with her eyes.

The boys by the fire, who had been looking on in wonder, became suddenly restive and impatient. Their little game of post-office had been broken up in the middle, and this stranger was monopolizing the postmistress.

"But the postmaster thought it was for you," persisted Dixie May, now apparently annoyed. "He described you down to your hat-band; and if I don't get rid of this letter I'll have to take it clear back to town. Of course——"

"Aw, take the letter!" broke in Hardy Atkins, striding over from his place and fiercely confronting Bowles. "What's the matter with you—ain't you got no manners? Well then, when a lady asks you to take a letter, take it!"

He reached out to get the letter and force it upon him forthwith, but Dixie May tossed her head and jerked the missive away.

"Who called you in on this, Hardy Atkins?" she inquired, turning upon him haughtily. "It's a wonder you wouldn't go off somewhere and read those pink scented billets-doux I gave you. I reckon this man knows his own name without any outside help. Now, you go on away and let me do this!"

He went, his lips pouted out petulantly and a shifty look in his eye, and once more the fair postmistress turned upon her victim.

"Now, here," she said, lowering her voice and speaking confidentially, "I'm not trying to force this upon you, but I've got a duty to perform. Think of the poor lady that wrote this letter," she urged, smiling significantly; "she may have something important to tell you. And don't mind a little thing like an alias—these boys have all got one." Once more she smiled, holding out the letter; and the boys favored him with dark and forbidding glances; but Bowles was game to the end.

"So sorry," he murmured, bowing deferentially; "but my name is Bowles, not Houghton."

"Well, well," said Dixie Lee, looking him between the eyes; "so your name is Bowles, eh? I certainly hope you'll excuse me, stranger, but I sure thought your name was Houghton!"

So saying, she turned and left him; and after pondering upon the matter for some time Bowles suddenly felt his heart go sick, for she had addressed him at the last as "Stranger."

Chapter XIV

The English Lord.

A remarkable series of accidents happened to Bat Wing Bowles immediately after his discourtesy to the lady—accidents which seemed to indicate that he had lost his horseshoe as well as the good-will of his associates. For while Bowles had been a raw hand from the start it had early been remarked that horses would not

pitch with him—but now, on the very morning after his contretemps, his mount took a fit of bucking which all but landed him in the dirt. A term of years in a military academy, as well as a considerable experience in riding to hounds, had left Bowles a little vain of his horsemanship; but in this emergency he had been compelled to reach down and frankly grab the horn. Otherwise he would have been "piled" before he could recover from the surprise. As it was, he was badly jarred, not only by the shock of the buck-jumps but also by the caustic comments of the cowboys.

"Oh, mamma!" shouted one. "See 'im choke that horn!"

"Let go of the noodle, Sam!" advised another; and then, in a kind of chant, they recited those classic lines that are supposed to drive Englishmen mad:

"Hit's not the 'unting that 'urts the 'orse's 'oofs; hit's the 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the 'ard 'ighway!"

Time and again Bowles had explained that he was not English, that all gentlemen rose to the trot in the East, and that his people had never dropped an "h" in their lives. Like an old and groundless scandal that lives on denial alone, the tradition still clung to him; and now, as some vagrant fancy turned their will against him, they voiced their disapproval in this ancient gibe.

"It's Hinglish, you know!" they shouted; and once more Bowles was branded as an alien. And all for refusing a letter and speaking saucily to a lady.

As for the lady, she stayed at a ranch over night and went out early in the morning, taking a short-cut through the nesters' lanes for Chula Vista. A telegram must be sent to the receiving company that the cattle would be delivered on the twentieth, the cattle-cars must be ordered from the railroad, and the cattle inspector notified of the change; for the grass was eaten down to the rocks at Chula Vista, and a wait at the pens would be fatal. All these details Henry Lee trusted to his daughter, and, forgetting the frivolous nothings of yesterday, she rode past the Bat Wing outfit without stopping or waving her hand. Then somebody put something on Bowles' horse and they started the day with a circus.

A second day, full of excitement and rough riding, followed, and then the gang took pity on the poor tenderfoot and left him to think it over. But Bowles was not broken in spirit; far from it, for he had been secretly longing for a horse that would buck. He was rapidly becoming so wise that deception was no longer practicable. When a man has an old staid cow-pony rise up under him and try to paw the white out of the moon, he is liable to look over his rigging rather carefully to see what it was all about; and if he should find a yellow spot on the flap of his saddle-blanket, a tender place on his horse's rump, and a suspicious odor of carbon bisulphide in the air, he is likely to shy away from unfriendly horsemen, even if he never heard of "high-lifing" a bronk. Those were eventful days for Samuel Bowles, and he found himself learning fast, when Henry Lee suddenly called him aside and told him to go with Brigham.

Brigham was taking a bunch of dogies back to the home ranch and he needed a man to help him—also the boss was getting a little tired of these sudden accidents to Bowles. He was not conducting a circus or a Wild West Show but a serious and precarious business, and a touch of "high-life" at the wrong time might stampede his whole herd of cattle. So he told the tenderfoot to go on the drive with Brigham.

There is a good deal left unsaid in a cow camp—so much, in fact, that a stranger never knows what is going on; and Brigham had been as silent as the rest while Bowles was taking his medicine. Even on the drive he was strangely quiet, chewing away soberly at his tobacco and looking out from under his hat with squinting and cynical eyes. They were friends now, as far as a tenderfoot can expect to have a friend, but Brigham said nothing about stringing the cattle, and asked no questions about gay New York—he had something on his mind. And when the time came he spoke it out.

"Say, stranger," he said, still calling him by that cold name which marked him as a man apart, "did you see Dixie Lee back in New York last winter?"

It was a bolt out of the blue sky; but Bowles was trained to evasions—he had lived in polite society and tried to keep friends with Truth.

"Miss Lee?" he repeated in tones of wonderment.

"W'y, sure," answered Brigham; "she was back there all winter."

"So I hear," observed Bowles; "but there were about four million other people there too, Brig; so I can't say for sure. Why? What made you ask?"

"Oh—nothin'," mumbled Brig, playing with the rowel on his spur as he watched the cattle graze; "only it seemed like, the way she spoke to you the other day, you'd mebbe met before. Some of the boys said they reckoned you knowed her back there—she talked so kinder friendly-like."

A thrill went over Bowles at those kind words, but he hastened to cover up his tracks. Once let the boys know that he had followed her from the East, and there would be a dramatic end to all his hopes and dreams.

"I'll tell you, Brig," he said, speaking confidentially; "I did meet Miss Lee down at Chula Vista the morning she came home, and that probably gave them the idea. But, say, now—about that letter. She didn't even know my name—now, why should she do a thing like that? My name isn't Houghton, and she knew I couldn't take the letter. It's against the law! What was she trying to do—play a joke on me?"

He made his voice as boyish and pleading as possible; but it takes a good actor to deceive the simple-hearted, and Brigham only looked at him curiously.

"What did you say yore name was?" he inquired at last; and when Bowles told him he chewed upon it ruminatively. "Some of the boys thought mebbe you was an English lord, or somethin'," he observed, glancing up quickly to see how Mr. Bowles would take it. "Course I knowed you wasn't," he admitted as Bowles wound up his protest; "but you certainly ain't no puncher."

Bowles could read the jealousy and distrust in his voice, and he saw it was time to speak up.

"Say, Brig," he said, trying as far as possible to speak in the new vernacular, "I've always been friendly to you, haven't I? I know I've tried to be, and I want to keep your friendship. Now, I don't care what Hardy Atkins and his gang think, because they're nothing to me anyway, but I want you to know that I am on the square. Of course, I'm under an assumed name, and I guess you've noticed I don't get any letters; but that's no crime, is it?"

There was a genuine ring to his appeal now, and Brigham was quick to answer it.

"Aw, that's all right, pardner," he said. "I don't care what you did. Kinder hidin' out myself."

"Well, but I want to tell you, anyway," protested Bowles. "A man's got to have a friend somewhere, and I know you won't give me away. I didn't commit any crime—it isn't the sheriff I'm afraid of—but there must have been somebody down in Chula Vista that was following me, because I came away from New York on a ticket that was signed Sam Houghton. That isn't my name, you understand—but I signed it for a blind. Then I left the train at Albuquerque and came quietly off down here. But it looks as if somebody is searching for me."

"Umm!" murmured Brigham, nodding his head and squinting wisely. "I got into a little racket down on the river one time, and the sheriff was lookin' fer me. Made no difference—the feller got well anyhow—but you bet I was ridin' light fer a while.

"I'll tell you what we'll do!" he cried, carried away by some sudden enthusiasm. "I'm gittin' tired of this Teehanno outfit—let's call fer our time and hit the trail! Was you ever up in the White Mountains? Well, pardner, we'll head fer them—that's the prettiest country in God's world! Deer and bear and wild turkeys everywhere—and fish! Say, them cricks is so full of trout they ain't hardly room fer the water. The Apaches never eat 'em—nor turkeys neither, fer that matter—and all you have to have is a little flour and bacon, and a man can live like a king. They's some big cow outfits up there, too—Double Circles, an' Wine Glass an' Cherrycow. Come on! What d'ye say? Let's quit! This ain't the only outfit in America!"

For the moment Bowles was almost carried away by this sudden rush of enthusiasm, and even after a second thought it still appealed to him strongly.

"Are there many bears up there?" he inquired, as if wavering upon a decision.

"Believe me!" observed Brigham, swaggering at the thought. "And mountain lions, too! A man has to watch his horses in that country, or he'll find himself afoot."

"And the Indians?"

"Well," admitted Brigham, "of course them Apaches are bad—but they keep 'em around the Fort most of the time, and don't let 'em carry guns when they go out—nothin' but bows and arrows. Come on—they won't make us no trouble!"

"Well, by Jove, Brig," sighed Bowles, drawing a long breath, "I'm awfully tempted to do it!"

"Sure," nodded Brigham, "finest trip in the world—an' I know that country like a book!"

"But let's finish the round-up first," suggested Bowles. "And, besides, I want to find out who it is that's searching for me. I guess I didn't tell you what I'm hiding for?"

"No," shrugged Brigham; "that's all right. Then if anybody should ask me, I'll tell 'em I don't know nothin'."

"Well, I'm going to tell you, anyhow!" cried Bowles impulsively. "I've got an aunt back East, and she's an awfully nice woman—does everything for me—but I have to do what she says. She doesn't make me do it, you know—she just expects me to do it! Maybe you never had any one like that? Well, I've always tried to do what she liked—she's my father's sister, you know—but this spring I just had to run away."

"Too much fer you, eh?" commented Brigham, grinning.

"No, it wasn't that so much, but she—she told me I ought to get married!"

"Well, what's the matter?" inquired Brigham, his grin wreathing back to his ears. "What's the matter with that?"

Bowles blushed and blinked with embarrassment.

"Well, the fact is, Brigham," he said, "she picked out the girl herself!"

"No! Never asked you, nor nothin'? What did the girl say?"

"Oh, Christabel? Why, she never knew, of course. I came out West immediately."

A puzzled look came over Brigham's honest face.

"Say, lemme git the straight of this," he said. "I'm a kind of Mormon myself, you know, and these fellers are always throwin' it into me about the way Mormons marry off their gals—did yore aunt make some trade with her folks?"

"Who—Christabel?" gasped Bowles, now breaking into a sweat. "Why, bless your soul, no! You don't understand how things are done in New York, Brig. Nothing was even said, you know, it was just understood! My aunt didn't even tell me whom she had in mind—she just told me I ought to be married, and threw me into Christabel's society. But I knew it—I knew it from the first day—and rather than hurt Christabel's feelings I just picked up and ran away!"

"Well, I'll be durned!" observed Brigham, gazing upon him with wonder. "And we thought you was tryin' to git Dix!"

Chapter XV

Burying the Hatchet.

To the hard-riding cowboy of the plains, the subtleties of emotion and romance are a closed book—just as the hand that whirls the rope is too crabbed to play the violin. Some of us in this world must do the heavy work. Some hands must be knotted, some backs bent with labor, some brows furrowed with wind and weather and the hard realities of life; but in return the laborers gain the strength of the wind-tossed oak and the patience of the ages. There are others whose lot it is to write the poetry and paint the pictures and reach out into the great unknown for a thousand haunting chords and harmonies; but they are a people apart. Their very sensitiveness makes them unequal to the stress of life; their slender hands cannot perform hard labor, and their hearts cannot endure the monotony and anguish of unremitting toil—yet they have their place in the world.

The time may come when the tasks and rewards will be divided again and each of us be given a more equal share, but until that day men will fall into classes—and neither will understand the other. Samuel Bowles had lived the protected life, but Brigham had buffeted his way. At the story of the Lady Christabel he stood agape, marveling at the man who could perceive such subtle advances, wondering at the nature that would flee for such a cause; but in the end he gazed upon him pityingly, and accepted him for his friend.

"I'll tell you, pardner," he said, as they drifted their cattle along; "I'm up ag'inst it, too. They's a gal over on the river—don't make no difference about her name—but I used to think a lot of her. Wasn't skeered of her none, the way I am with Dix.

She was an awful good girl, too—no fly ways or nothin'—an' I was kinder fixin' to marry her when I had this racket with the bishop. My folks are all Mormons, of course, and so are hers, and I like 'em well enough in certain ways, but I can't stand them dang priests. As long as I'm free I can pull out and go where I please, but the minute I marry and settle down I'm up ag'inst it proper."

"Why, what's the matter?" inquired Bowles, thinking of all the awful things he had heard about the Saints, but discreetly holding his peace. "Will they punish you for running away?"

"No," answered Brigham, shaking his head dolefully, "it ain't that—it's the things they make you do. I'm a renegade now—I don't pay tithes or nothin'—but if I settled down on the river I'd have to come in ag'in. Mebbe jist about the time I'm married they summon me fer a mission. Two years to some foreign country to bring in converts to the church—an' who's goin' to take care of my wife?"

"Oh!" breathed Bowles sympathetically. "That is bad! Why don't you get married and live somewhere else, then?"

"That's jest it," frowned Brigham. "Gal's a Mormon too, and she won't come. So there I am!"

"Ah!" said Bowles; and they rode a long time in silence.

"That letter was from her," volunteered Brigham, jerking his head back toward the place where they had been camped, and after that he said no more. The old cynical look came into his squinted eyes, and he strung out the cattle methodically until they came to the home ranch. It was four o'clock in the afternoon then, and they lay over until the next day.

The Bat Wing bunk-house was hardly a cheery lounging place. Outside of the illustrated magazine literature with which the walls were papered, the library consisted of three books—a boot, spur and saddle catalogue, "Lin McLean," and that classic of the cow camps, "Three Weeks." When the entire outfit was at "the home," Happy Jack was in the habit of reading choice passages of "Three Weeks" to his friends, he being the scholar of the bunch, and closing each selection with the remark: "Well, I reckon that's plain enough for you, ain't it?" And the boys would generally agree that it was.

With the memory of Happy Jack still in mind, Bowles took shame to himself and read Owen Wister's "Lin McLean" instead, finding there a tenderfoot on another range who was worse even than himself. As things were coming now, Bowles hardly considered himself a tenderfoot any more. To be sure, he could not rope in the corral; but there were several local punchers in the same fix; and when it came to riding, he still had Wa-ha-lote in his string as a tribute to his skill as a fence jumper. He had also sat out a bucking fit or two when the boys put high-life on his horse; and, taken all in all he was not the worst rider in the outfit, by any means. As a branding hand, also, he was able to do his share; he had learned some of the rudiments of handling cattle; and his face had peeled off and tanned again, leaving him with a complexion in no wise different from that of his bronzed companions. And then, to top it all, he had won the friendship of Brigham, who was so good that he passed for a cowman.

Poor old Brigham! He never said what was in that letter from his girl, but Bowles knew he was wrestling with his problem. His carefree laugh was silenced for the time and, after cooking up a little food in the kitchen that stood next to the

bunk-house, he had caught up a fresh mount and ridden off alone. The windmill man and the fence mender were out on their rounds, and Bowles was reading "The Winning of the Biscuit-shooter" and wondering if it was true, when a horse trotted into the yard. Presently he heard a saddle hit the ground, and the pasture gate swing to, and then there was a clank of spurs on the stoop. The door swung open, and as he glanced up from where he lay he saw Dixie Lee looking in at him.

The instincts of a lifetime prompted Bowles to rise to his feet and bow, but other instincts were crowding in on him now, and he only nodded his head. The memory, perhaps, of a fake letter to Samuel Houghton gave color to his indifference, and for the first time in his life he gazed at her with a shadow of disapproval. She was glorious indeed to look upon; but it is the heart that counts, and Dixie had seemed a little unkind. So he lay there with the book before him, and waited for her to speak. It was the first time they had been alone together since he had left her at Chula Vista, and it was not his part to make advances after what she had told him then.

As for Dixie, she seemed suddenly embarrassed and ill at ease, though she carried it off with her usual frontier recklessness.

"Hello there, cowboy!" she said, dropping down on the steps. "Where'd you come from?"

"I came from the upper water with Brig," answered Bowles, speaking for his part with decorous politeness. "We brought down a bunch of twos."

A smile swept over Dixie Lee's face at this lapse into the vernacular, but she brushed it away as he frowned.

"Bunch of twos, eh?" she repeated. "Say, you're getting to be a regular cowboy now, ain't you?

"Where's Brig?" she inquired, when she saw that her remark displeased him; and once more he answered and fell silent.

"He's a great fellow, old Brig," she went on, settling herself comfortably against the door-sill and indicating that the conversation was on; "you seem to be pretty thick with him!"

"Yes," agreed Bowles, sitting up and laying his book aside; "I like Brigham very much."

"He's a great fellow to tell stories," continued Dixie; "always talking and laughing, too—I never did see such a good-natured man."

"Yes," assented Bowles a little doubtfully; "I guess he's awfully good-natured—but even fat folks have their troubles, you know."

"Why, what's the matter with Brig? Has he run out of chewing tobacco?"

"Well, no," said Bowles; "it's not that. I guess it's that letter you gave him."

"Letter!" repeated Dixie incredulously. "What, from his girl? Oh, he'll be all right in a day or so—who ever heard of a cowboy going into a decline? And say, talking about letters, why didn't you take that one I wrote you the other day? I had something mighty special to communicate to you in that, but you'll never get it now! I hope the boys did something to you!"

"Yes," answered Bowles serenely; "they hazed me for a day or two. You seem to have a great many admirers out here, Miss Lee."

Dixie May's eyes flashed at the evident implication, and she had a retort on her lips, but something in his manner restrained her.

"How can I help it if the boys get foolish?" she demanded severely. "And you don't want to let your Eastern ideas deceive you—it's the custom of the country out here."

"Yes, indeed," purled Bowles; "and a very pretty custom, too. Have you just come back from Chula Vista?"

"Yes, I have!" snapped Dixie. "But you don't need to get so superior about it! I guess I can do what I please, can't I?"

"Why, certainly," assented Bowles.

"Well, then, what do you want to get so supercilious for?" raged Dixie. "I don't know, there's something about the way you talk that fairly maddens me! I've a good mind to tell the boys who you are, and have them run you out of the country! Why didn't you take that letter I wrote you?"

She was angry now, and her voice was pitched high for a scolding, but Bowles showed no signs of fear.

"The letter you wrote was addressed to Samuel Houghton," he said; "and that is not my name."

"Well, what is your name, then?" demanded Dixie. "Bowles?"

For a moment Bowles gazed at her, and there was a pained look in his eyes—what if his beloved should turn out to be a scold?

"Why do you ask?" he inquired; and so gently did he say it that she faltered, as if ashamed.

"Well," she said, "I guess it isn't any of my business, is it? I don't know what I'm doing here, anyway. If there's any one thing that makes Mother furious, it's to see me hanging around the bunk-house. She thinks I——"

She rose suddenly, and shook out her skirt, but Bowles did not protest.

"You don't seem to care whether I go or not?" she pouted.

"Quite the contrary, I assure you, Miss Lee," declared Bowles earnestly. "But I'm not on my own ground now, and—well, I don't wish to take advantage of your hospitality."

"No," said Dixie with gentle irony, "nothing like that! You want to be careful how you treat these Arizona girls—they're liable to misunderstand your motives!"

Illustration:
„You want to be careful how you treat these Arizona girls!“

Bowles' eyes lighted up with a merry twinkle, but he preserved his poker face.

"Oh, I hope not!" he said; and then both of them smiled very knowingly.

"The reason I wanted to get your name," observed Dixie, sitting down and smoothing out her skirt again, "was in case you got hurt or killed. Who am I going to write to in case you go out like Dunbar? Houghton? Bowles? Or who-all? You know, I feel kind of responsible for you, considering the way you got out here, and——"

"Oh, don't think of that!" protested Bowles, coming over and sitting near her. "If I get hurt, the boys will take care of me; and if I get killed—well, it won't matter then what you do."

"Well, don't get killed," urged Dixie kindly. "And if you get hurt, Mother and I will nurse you back to health and strength."

"Oh, will you?" cried Bowles. "I'll remember that, you may be sure! But, speaking of names, has there been any one in Chula Vista inquiring for Samuel Houghton?"

"Now, you see!" exclaimed Dixie Lee triumphantly. "If you'd opened that letter I had for you, you'd have found out about it. As it is, you'll just have to keep on guessing—I'm mad!"

"I'm sorry," said Bowles. "The reason I asked was, Brig and I are planning to make a little trip somewhere, and if I thought there was any one searching for me I'd——"

"Oh, you don't need to run away!" explained Dixie hurriedly. "I'll tell you when to skip—but you don't know what you missed by not reading that letter I wrote you!"

"Well, direct the next one to Bowles, then!" he pleaded. "But, no joking, I wish you wouldn't call attention to that other name—it's likely to get me into difficulties."

"What kind of difficulties?" inquired Dixie Lee demurely; but Bowles only shook his head.

"I'm very sorry I can't tell you," he said; "but it means a great deal to me."

"Maybe I can help you," she suggested.

"Yes, indeed, you can!" assured Bowles, drawing nearer and smiling his naive smile. "Just don't tell anybody what you know, and let me have a chance. I've always been shut off from the world, you know—I've never had a chance. Just let me fight my way and see if I'm not a man. I know I'm new, and there are lots of things that come hard for me; but give me a chance to stay and maybe I'll win out. You don't know, Miss Lee, how much I treasure those stories you told me—when we were coming West on the train, you know. Don't you know, I think you have more of the feeling, more of the fine spirit of the West, than any one I have met. These cowboys seem so barren, some way; they seem to take it as a matter of course. And they all stay away from me—except Brigham. I don't get many stories now."

He paused and Dixie May eyed him curiously. He was not the same man who had traveled with her on the train. A month had made a difference with him. But there was still the boyish innocence that she liked.

"You mean stories about outlaws and Indians?" she said. "Hunting and trapping, and all that?"

"Yes!" nodded Bowles, glancing over at her appealingly. "Where does that old trapper, Bill Jump, live? You know—the one you were telling about!"

"Oh, Bill? He lives up here on the Black Mesa—anywhere between here and the New Mexico line—and he sure is one of the grandest liars that ever breathed, too. I remember one time——"

Bowles settled himself inside the doorway and drank in the magical tale. It was as if the Old West rose up before him, blotting out the barbed-wire fences and the lonely homes of the nesters and bringing back the age of romance that he sought. He questioned her eagerly, still watching her with his boyish, admiring eyes, and Dixie plunged into another. The sun, which was getting low, swung lower and a door slammed up at the big house. Then a reproachful voice came floating down, and Dixie jumped up from her seat.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed. "There's Maw—seems like I never get any peace! But, anyway, this old bear with the trap on his foot picked up Bill's gun and threw the chamber open, then he looked up into the tree where Bill was hanging and crooked his finger—like that! And Bill Jump said he knowed it jest as if that ol' b'ar spoke—he was signaling him to throw him down a cartridge, so he could put Bill out of his misery! Or that was what Bill said. But, say, I've got to be running—come up to the house to-night and let me tell you the rest of it! Oh, pshaw, we know what your motives are! Come along anyhow! And bring Brig with you! All right—good-by!"

She gave him a dizzy smile over her shoulder as she fled, and Bowles blinked his eyes to find the world so fair.

Chapter XVI

The Straw-Boss.

It is the philosophy of the poseurs in pessimism that for every happy moment we have in life we pay at a later date a greater price. Of course, any one who ever took a kid to the circus knows better, but there are times when the doctrine seems to hold. When Bowles returned to the round-up, the news of his perfidy had preceded him—he had taken advantage of his position and spent the evening at the big house! Thereupon the hotheads lowered upon him malignantly, and Hardy Atkins hunted up his high-life bottle.

The accepted function of carbon bisulphide in the great Southwest is to kill off prairie-dogs. A tablespoonful poured on a cow-chip and rolled down a dog hole will asphyxiate the entire family. The same amount poured on a man's horse will make the man think he has been shot with a pack-saddle, and that was what happened to Bowles. When he became too wary for the bottle, they resorted to other means, and finally he detected the bronco-twister with a loaded syringe in his hand.

"Now, that will do, Mr. Atkins," he observed with some asperity. "It's all right for you boys to haze me a little, but my horses are getting spoiled and I'll have to ask you to stop."

"Oho!" shouted Bar Seven and the stray men, who had sweethearts in other parts and dearly loved excitement. "He caught you at it, Hardy! Now what you goin' to do?"

"I ain't goin' to do nothin'," declared Hardy Atkins, carefully stowing his squirt-gun away. "No Hinglishman looks bad to me, and I'll high-life him whenever I like!"

"You will not!" said Henry Lee, coming up as he heard the words. "I've had enough of this foolishness, and I want you to quit right now. First thing you know that hawse will pitch into the herd and we'll have a stampede on our hands. Now, come ahead and clean out this pasture, we'll start the drive for town."

They rounded up the pastures then, one after the other, and soon the great herd of dogies was strung out on the road. At regular distances along the flanks the swing men plodded along; toward the front the two point men directed the head of

the herd; and, behind, the remainder of the men brought up the drag. They traveled slowly, sometimes swinging out into the hills and letting the cattle feed, and as they drifted along over the rock-patches the clack, clack, clack of splay-toed hoofs made a noise like rain on the roof. At intervals some stubborn two-year-old would break from the tail of the herd, some fresh-branded calf fall by the wayside, to be left for another drive; but the day of the steer is past on the lower ranges of the great Southwest, and feeders are easier to handle. So they dragged on, drifting over to the river for water and back onto the plains for the night, and many a nester's fence was laid flat as they jerked it to turn out the strays. Then, at the end of the third day, they came within sight of Chula Vista and Henry Lee rode on ahead.

"Hardy," he said as he turned his horse toward town, "I'll leave you in charge of the herd. Put them into the pens for the night, and hold the remuda out on the flats. I'll be down as soon as I find my men. And, remember, no drinking!"

He looked very hard at his straw-boss as he spoke, and Hardy Atkins answered him dutifully; but when the boss was gone he turned and winked at his partners.

"You hear me now, boys," he said. "No drinkin'! You know the rule—you cain't drink whisky and work fer Henry Lee! Umph-umm! But I hope to Gawd some of them town boys come out with a bottle!"

He smacked his lips as he spoke, and made up a funny face.

"I got three months' pay comin' to me," he remarked, and went spurring up to the front.

"I never seen the time yet," observed Buck Buchanan, as he loafed philosophically along with the drag, "that I couldn't git another job somewhere. When I've got money comin' to me, I want to spend it, by Joe!"

"Sure!" agreed Happy Jack, who had been singing songs all day. "What's the use of workin', anyway?"

"That's me!" chimed in Poker Bill. "Let's quit and draw our pay!"

"Put these cows in the pen first," said Jack, snapping his fingers and waltzing airily in his saddle.

"*Whoopee tee, yi, yo, git along, little dogies,*
It's all yore misfortune and none of my own.
Whoopee tee, yi, yo, git along, little dogies,
'Cause you know my whistle is dry as a bone."

It was a new experience to Bowles, this riding into a cow town, and he viewed with wide-eyed alarm the evidences of dissolution and revolt. Even Brigham was licking his lips and gazing at the town; and when the first bottle came out he took a long drink with the rest. Bowles excused himself, and wondered what would happen; but the half-drunken cowboy who brought out the life-saver never gave him a second look. It was not so hard to dispose of whisky in those parts.

As the herd neared town, the idle and curious came riding out to see it, and Bowles was pained to notice certain painted women, who seemed to know the boys by their first names. They rode along the herd, waving handkerchiefs and shouting greetings, and a sudden distrust of frontier morality came over him as he observed the shameless response. The shipping pens were below the town about a mile—a

barren square of whitewashed fencing, backed up to a side-track full of empty stock-cars—and as the weary cattle dragged along across the flats Hardy Atkins and a bunch of punchers cut off the leaders and whooped them on ahead. There was a jam at the gates, a break or two, and then the first timid dogie stepped fearfully into the enclosure. The smell of water in the troughs lured him on, the rest followed, and when the main herd came up it was artfully tailed on to the drag.

At last! The high gate swung to on the harvest of the long round-up, and the punchers raced their horses to be first at the waiting chuck-wagon. In an angle of the fence Gloomy Gus had unpacked his ovens and set up his fire irons, and now as they flew at their supper he surveyed them with cynical calm.

"Whar's Henry Lee?" he inquired at length; and Hardy Atkins pointed back to town with his knife.

"He's over lookin' up his buyer," he said. "I'm the boss now, Cusi; what can I do fer you?"

"Oh, you're boss now, are you?" repeated Gus, with heavy scorn. "Well, then, why don't you send some one out to relieve thet hawse wrangler? He'll be turnin' the remuda loose pretty soon, from the way he's been makin' signs."

"Aw, he'll keep!" laughed the straw-boss. "Hey, fellers, who wants the first guard to-night?"

Nobody spoke.

"Somebody's got to stand guard," he observed, running his eyes over the crowd. "First guard's the best—eight to half-past ten. Bill? Jim? Hank? Well, I'll make it Jim and Hank, anyhow—only way to keep 'em in camp. You boys know Mr. Lee's orders—no drinkin' now—I don't want to find you downtown!"

"Aw-haw-haw!" roared the crowd. That was a good one—he didn't want to find them downtown! Well, what would he be doing down there?

"Well, who's goin' to relieve us?" inquired Hank plaintively. "Last time we was down I had to stand guard all night!"

The bronco-twister ran his eyes over the crowd again, as if searching for some one.

"Where's that feller that refused a drink this evenin'?" he demanded facetiously. "He's the boy fer second guard—good and reliable—and Hinglish, too. Hinglish, I'll ask you and yore Mormon friend, Mr. Clark, to kindly stand the second guard. Bud and Bill third, and Jack and Buck fourth. I'm boss now, and I don't stand guard."

"Oh, thunder!" grumbled Brig, as he threw himself down on his bed. "I wish the boss would come back. Them rounders will stay in town all night. Let's take a little flier ourselves," he urged as Bowles lay down beside him. "We can git back in time!"

But a sudden sense of responsibility had come over Bowles as he observed how the crowd faded away, and he held Brigham to his post. At ten-thirty, in response to a hurried summons, they took a spare blanket for warmth and rode out to stand their guard.

The stars wheeled round in their courses and sank down in the west; the horses shifted about on the barren plain and made their customary efforts to escape; and

when the first cold light of dawn crept in, it showed "Hinglish" and his Mormon friend still standing their lonely vigil.

But for once in a lifetime self-sacrificing virtue got its reward, for Henry Lee came riding out with his buyer at daylight and discovered them at their post. He did not say much—in fact he did not say anything—and Brigham and Bowles did the same; but there was a difference in the air. At last Bowles had justified his existence—he had stayed with his job to the end.

There was a hurried searching of the town for Bat Wing cowboys, a straggling return of drunken and mutinous punchers, and then, with barely men enough to man the gates, the work of shipping began. By twos and threes the dogies were driven down a lane; the cattle inspector read the brands and made his tally, and the buyer passed them on or cut them back. Then, as the cutting and re-cutting was finished, the cattle were punched up the chutes and crowded into the cars. As the day wore on, more and more of the hands returned and took up the prod pole; but Henry Lee made no remarks. Even when his trusted straw-boss showed up late, he made no comment; but once back in camp he pulled his book like a pistol, and began to write out checks.

"Well, boys," he said, "you were drunk last night; I'll have to give you your time. Hardy, you're a good cow-hand, but I'll have to let you go, too. So here's your time checks; and turn your horses out. I've got to have men I can trust."

There was a heavy silence at this, for all the outfits in the country were full-handed now, and no one was looking for men. And Henry Lee was a good man to work for—he treated his hands white, fed them well, and paid the top price to boot. He also kept the best of them over winter, while others were riding the chuck-line or hanging around livery-stables in town. But nobody said a word, for they knew it would do no good; and, after he had paid them off and gone back to town, the luckless ones who had been fired drew off by themselves and talked the matter over. To be sure, they had the price of a drunk in their clothes; but they were fired and put afoot now, and town has no allurements to a cowboy unless he can ride in on a horse. So Hardy Atkins and his Texas followers lolled sulkily around the camp, sleeping fitfully in their blankets and glowering at Brigham Clark and the few careful spirits who had escaped their employer's wrath. And in particular they glowered at Bowles, the virtuous and dutiful, and hated him above all the rest for his air of conscious rectitude.

Supper that evening offered no appeal to the drink-shaken carousers, but they stayed for it all the same, hoping against hope that the boss would come back and give them another chance. But they knew him too well to think it—Henry Lee would let his whole calf crop grow up to be mavericks before he would take back his word. Still they waited, and along toward sundown, as luck would have it, he came out; and with him, riding like a queen on her spirited horse, came Dixie May. She looked them over coldly, returning short answers to their shamefaced greetings and saving a smile for the cook.

"Good-evening, Mr. Mosby," she said, pouring out a little coffee for politeness' sake. "And so these boys had to go on a drunk and get fired, did they? Well, you won't have so many to cook for now—that'll be one consolation."

"Yes, Miss Dix," agreed the cook, "but mighty little, believe me! One cowboy is jest about as ornery an' no 'count as the other—and whisky gits 'em all. They're all

alike—I been cookin' for 'em fer thirty years, off an' on, and they ain't one of 'em is worth the powder to blow 'im to—excuse me, Miss Dix. But, as I was sayin', take 'em as they come, and keep 'em out of town, and these boys is pretty fair—pretty fair; I'm sorry to see 'em go."

At this kindly word of intercession, a new light came into the eyes of the unemployed; but Dixie Lee had come on a mission, and it was not her policy to yield in a minute.

"Well, I'm not!" she declared. "If you'd listened to the amount of foolishness that I've suffered from these boys, Mr. Mosby; if you'd heard 'em say how they were going to save their wages and buy a little bunch of cows—and tell about the quarter-section of land they had their eye on—and swear, so help me God, they'd never take another drink of whisky as long as they lived—I believe you'd be glad to get rid of 'em!"

She turned and ran her eye over the crowd, and both the just and the unjust quailed before her.

"And so you were drunk, were you, Mr. Atkins?" she inquired, fixing her gaze upon the deposed straw-boss; and Hardy Atkins shot a look at her which was both confession and appeal.

"And you, Jack?" she continued severely.

"Yes, ma'am," spoke up Happy Jack, upon whom the severity of her manner was lost. "I was drunk, all right."

"Well, you don't need to be proud of it!" she observed cuttingly. "It's no distinction in this bunch. Brig, were you drunk, too?"

"No, ma'am," responded Brigham promptly.

"Oh, what's the use of talking?" scoffed Dixie, glancing at his swollen face and bloodshot eyes.

"All the same, I wasn't!" denied Brigham boldly. "I reckon you'd look kind of bug-eyed if you'd been standin' guard all night!"

"Well, what's the matter with your face then?" she demanded. "Did the ground rise up and hit you?"

"No, but an old cow did, over in the shippin' chute!" And Brigham drew himself up and grinned defiantly. It was not often that he had a chance to assume this high moral pose, and he decided to make the most of it.

"That's right," interposed Henry Lee, who so far had let his daughter do all the talking. "Brig and Bowles stood guard all night and brought up the remuda in the morning. I won't forget that, Brig," he added significantly. "I'm looking for men I can trust."

"Well, good for you, Brig!" commented Dixie May, smiling with sudden approval; and at that the other suitors fell into a black rage of jealousy and distrust. There was silence for a while, and then Happy Jack spoke up.

"Mr. Lee," he said, "I know I was drunk last night—my own fault, of course—but here's the proposition. You got to take on somebody to do yore work; what's the use of hirin' these town bums when you can git yore old hands back? That's the way we stand, and I hope you'll give us a chance."

This was a long speech for Jack, and he wiped the sweat from his brow as he waited for the answer. The rest of the unemployed rumbled their acquiescence to

the statement and watched for some sign of weakening; but Henry Lee did not change his frown.

"I'm looking for men I can trust," he said at last. "These boys here stayed in camp and were on hand to help with the shipping. Maybe some of them ain't quite as good cowboys as you are, but I can depend on them not to turn my remuda loose the first night I leave 'em alone, and I'm going to make them top hands. You fellows get the top mounts and forty-five a month," he added, glancing briefly at Brig and the faithful few, most of whom were nesters boys, and married men working for a stake; "and I want some more just like you."

"But how about us?" inquired Happy Jack after a silence. "I'll take on for a green hand, myse'f—forty dollars—and ride bronks, too. And I know that upper range like a book!"

"Sure!" murmured the rest; and once more they waited on Henry Lee.

He sat for a while studying on the matter, and then he exchanged glances with his daughter.

"If he takes you back, are you going to run it over these other hands and make a lot of trouble?" she inquired shrewdly. "Because if you are——"

A chorus of indignant denials answered this unjust accusation, and Dixie Lee's face became clear.

"Then I'd take 'em back," she said.

"No, I won't do it," rapped out Henry Lee. "But I'll tell you what I will do," he went on, as the gang lopped down despondently. "You boys have got your time checks. All right, you go up town and cash them in, and if you can pay your saloon debts and get out of town sober, I'll take you on. But if any man takes a drink, or brings out a bottle, he'll never ride for Henry Lee again—I've lost enough horses through drunken punchers. Brig, I'll leave you in charge of the outfit."

He swung up on his horse as he spoke, and Dixie rode away after him, followed by the admiring gaze of all hands and the cook. Henry Lee was a good boss, but the average Texas cow-puncher is not weak-kneed enough to court the favor of any man. Once he is fired, he takes his money and spends it philosophically; but in this case Dixie May had intervened, and rather than lose their chance with her the whole gang had taken lessons in humility.

"She's all right," observed Happy Jack, wagging his head and smiling as he watched her off. "She wraps him around her little finger."

"Wonder how she come to be down here?" inquired a new hand; and Jack answered him, with a laugh.

"Ridin' herd on the old man, of course!" he said.

"Sure!" grumbled Hardy Atkins. "The old lady is up there, too. That's the one thing I got ag'inst Henry Lee—he's been a booze-fighter and quit. That's what makes him so doggoned onreasonable!"

"They say John B. Gough and Sam Jones was reformed drunks, too," commented Poker Bill sagely; but there was one member present who did not take even a philosophical interest in the discussion. It was Brigham Clark, the new straw-boss. Through a chain of circumstances a little hard to trace, he had refrained from his customary periodical, and, behold, of a sudden he was elevated above all his fellows, and placed in a position of authority.

"Well," he broke in sharply, "it's gittin' dark—who's goin' to relieve that horse wrangler? Bill? Buck? Well, I'll put you on the first guard, anyhow—only way to save you from yorese'ves!"

"Aw, listen to the big fat stiff!" commented Buck Buchanan, who felt the need of a nap; but Brig paid no attention to his remarks.

"You boys bring them in to the pen fer a drink," he ordered, with pompous circumstance, "and hold them out on yon flat. Who wants to stand second guard? Jim? Hank?" He craned his neck about as Hardy Atkins had done the night before; and Hardy, who had been thinking about other things, sat up with a sudden scowl.

"Whar's that feller that refused a drink this evenin'?" demanded Brigham, imitating with roguish accuracy the broad Texas accent of his predecessor. "He's the boy fer second guard—good and reliable—comes from Texas, too. Mr. Atkins, I'll ask you and yore cotton-picker friend, Happy Jack, to kindly stand second guard. Bud and Bill third, and Sam and Slim fourth. I'm boss now, and I don't stand no guard!"

Chapter XVII

And His Squirrel-Story.

The upper range of the Bat Wing was a country by itself. To reach it they rode due north from Chula Vista, following an old road that had been fenced so many times that Gloomy Gus became discouraged. Twisting and turning, driving around through new-made lanes, or jerking a world of staples and laying the wire on the ground, he toiled on in the wake of the outfit, which was rounding up spare corners of the unfenced range. Behind him came the horse wrangler and his helper, doing their best to keep the remuda out of the barbed-wire, and jerking up more fence with their ropes than Gus laid down with his nail-puller. Certainly in that wide, windmill-dotted valley, the open range was a thing of the past. It was only thirty feet to water, and the nesters were settling everywhere.

"One more day like that," observed Gloomy Gus as he threw together a late supper, "and I quit!"

"Me too!" chimed in the wrangler; and the punchers felt much the same.

"A few more years like this last," remarked Henry Lee, gazing gloomily out across his former estate, "and we'll all quit. But, thank God, they can't farm the Black Mesa."

On the second day they turned east, crossing the boggy river and mounting up on a great plateau, and then Bowles saw why Henry Lee's remark was true. The Black Mesa was high and level, with a wealth of coarse grass on the flats and wooded hills behind; but hills and flats alike were covered with a layer of loose rocks that made the land a wilderness. Even the wagon road on which they traveled was a mere rut across the rock patch, and from a distance it looked like a ruined stone wall where the rocks had been thrown to both sides. And the rocks

were black, a scorched, volcanic black, with square corners and uneroded edges that gashed at the horses' ankles. Deep-cut cañons wound tortuously across the level mesa, their existence unsuspected until the rider stopped at their brink; and, hidden in their sullen depths, the scant supply of water was lost to all but the birds.

Yet to the cowboys the landscape was cheering, for there was bunch-grass between the rocks and not a house in sight. It is hard to please everybody in this world, but cowboys are easily pleased. All they want is a good horse and plenty of swing room, and a landscape gardener couldn't make it better. To Bowles the lower valley had been a wild and unsettled country, but he found that even the Black Mesa was tame to these seasoned nomads.

"Jest wait till I take you to the White Mountains," said Brig, as he rode by his side. "This country has all been fed off till they's nothin' much left but the rocks—no game nor nothin'. But the Sierra Blancas are different—that's them over that far ridge."

He pointed at a filmy point of white, half lost between the blue of the pine-clad mountains and the blue of the sky beyond, and Bowles' heart leaped up at the sight. At last he was in the Far West—that strange, elusive country of which so many speak and which is yet so hard to find—and the untrod wilderness lay before him. The Sierra Blancas, home of the deer and the bear and the wolf and the savage Apache Indians! Even in his age and time, there was still a wilderness to conquer and the terrors of the old frontier to stir the blood.

"How far is it?" he inquired, his eyes questing out the way; and when Brig told him he reached over and clutched his hand. "Brig," he cried, "I want to go there. I'd like to go right now!"

He looked across at his partner, but Brigham did not answer, and Bowles knew what was in his mind.

"Of course, now that you're made foreman——" he began; but Brig smiled a cynical smile.

"Don't you let that worry you none," he growled. "The way these Texicans is takin' on, I don't reckon I'll last very long. Hardy Atkins is the leader of this bunch, and he's bound to git his job back—I'm jest holdin' on fer spite."

"But how can he get it back?" protested Bowles. "Mr. Lee told me you were one of the best cowmen he ever knew, and you certainly know the range all right——"

"Yes, but that ain't it," put in Brig. "Here's the proposition. Henry Lee is gittin' old—he can't be his own wagon-boss forever, and he's lookin' round for a man. The man that gits the job will git more than that—he'll marry Dixie Lee."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Bowles. "Why should he?"

"Don't know why," answered Brigham doggedly. "Only that's the way it always goes—and Hardy, he wants Dixie."

"But surely, after the way he conducted himself down at Chula Vista——"

"Oh, that's nothin'," asserted Brigham.

"You think she would marry him?"

"Don't know," grumbled Brig. "She's got us all a-guessin'. All I know is, I won't last long as a straw-boss. You wait till we git up in the mountains where old Henry can't git no more hands, and then watch the fur begin to fly. Didn't they all eat dirt

to git took back fer green hands? Didn't you see 'em talkin' it over? All they got to do now is to git us fired, and then they'll be the top hands. Huh! That's easy!"

The second-in-command would say no more, but a few days gave token of the coming storm. As they pulled in at the upper ranch, where cowboys and "station-men" did duty all the year, the stray men from other outfits threw in with them again and increased their number to a scant twenty. Bar Seven was there, after a return to his own headquarters, and several of the other men; but the men who dwelt in the hills were of a different breed, with hair long and beards scrubby, and overalls greasy from lonely cooking; and they looked at Bowles askance.

"Who's that feller?" they asked; and the answer was always the same, if they asked it of a Texan.

"Oh, that's a young English dude," they said. "He's got his eye on Dixie."

Strange how these men of the frontier were so quick to read his heart—Bowles had talked with Dixie Lee only twice in a month but they had read him like a book. Or perhaps it was just plain jealousy, since they, too, had their eyes on Dixie—jealousy and a sneaking knowledge that he had a chance to win. They cast appraising glances at his expensive saddle, his silver-mounted spurs and eleven-dollar Stetson, and hated him for his prosperity; they watched him work in the corral, and scoffed at him for his horsemanship; and when he talked, they listened to his broad "a's," his soft "r's" and his purling "er's" with wonder and contempt. Not that they listened very much, for they took pains to break in on him as grown folks do when a child is speaking; but they curled their lips at his coming, and exchanged glances behind his back, and finally, as the work progressed, their hostility began to take form.

For three days the outfit lay at headquarters while fresh horses were caught and shod; and here Hardy Atkins and his followers suffered the humiliation of losing their mounts. As top hands they had taken the pick of the remuda, the fleetest runners, the gentlest night horses, the best-reined cutting horses; but now in the reapportionment they found themselves reduced to "skates and bronks." Three days of shoeing the skates, and especially the bronks, did not tend to sweeten their tempers any, and as they moved up to Warm Springs and began to rake the range the spirit of rebellion broke loose.

Warm Springs lies at the bottom of a gash in the face of the mesa, and the cow-trails lead to it for miles. Above there is no water, below it is shut in by the rim of the cañon, and the cattle file down the long trail day and night. Consequently the nearby grass is fed down to the roots, and the remuda had to be held up on the high mesa. All day the horse wrangler grazed his charges in distant swales, bringing them in for water and the horse-changing morning and noon; and at night the cowboys watched them beneath the cold stars—that is, when they kept awake.

On the second morning three horses were missing, the next day two more, and on the next eight horses more were gone and several men were practically afoot.

"Who let those horses get away?" demanded Henry Lee, as he rounded up his night herders by the corral.

"Not me!" said the members of the first guard.

"We never stopped ridin'," said the second guard.

"They was gone when we come on," said the third guard.

And the fourth guard swore they were innocent.

"Well, somebody's been asleep—that's all I know!" said Henry Lee; and he sent off two mountain men on their best mounts to trail the runaways down and bring them back. Then he listened to the mutual recriminations of the night herders, and guessed shrewdly at who was at fault. For when the night herders get to quarreling among themselves, waking each other up ahead of time, and sleeping on one hand till it slips and wakes them up, that is a sure sign and precursor of greater troubles to come, and it calls for an iron hand. Even as he was listening, a row broke out in the round corral, where the cowboys were roping their mounts.

"Turn that hawse loose!" roared Brigham, suddenly mounting up on the fence.

"I will not!" retorted the voice of Hardy Atkins from within.

"He belongs to my mount!" protested Brigham with appropriate oaths.

"I don't care whose mount he belongs to!" snarled the ex-straw-boss, dragging the horse out by the neck. "You top hands mash yore ear all night and let my hawses drift—and then expect me to walk. You bet yore boots that don't go—I'll take the best I can find. You can't put meafoot!"

"I'll put you on yore back," rumbled Brigham, dropping truculently down from his perch, "if you try to git gay with me. You may be from Bitter Crick, Texas, but you got to whip me before you break into my mount!"

"Well, he's got the Bat Wing brand on 'im," sulked Atkins; "that's all I know. And as long as they's a hawse left in the remuda——"

"Here, here!" said Henry Lee, walking in on the squabble. "What's all this about? What are you doing with Brig's hawse, Hardy? Why don't you ride your own?"

"Well, these hyer nester kids and Mormons went to sleep on guard and let my top hawses pull—now I got nothin' but bronks to ride!"

"Well, ride 'em, then!" commanded Henry Lee severely. "And, another thing, Mr. Atkins! Next time you've got a grievance, come to me—don't try to correct it yourself!"

He regarded his former straw-boss with narrowing eyes, and Atkins roped out a bronk; but in the evening he took the first occasion to pick a quarrel with Brigham. They were gathered about the fire in the scant hour between branding and first guard, and Brigham was telling a story. As was his custom, Henry Lee had pitched his tent to one side, for he never mixed with his men; and Brig had the stage to himself.

"Well, you fellers talk about gittin' lost," he was saying; "you ought to be up in that Malapai country. We had a land-sharp along—claimed to know the world by sections—and he——"

"Aw, what do you know about the Malapai country?" broke in Atkins rudely. "You cain't even lead a circle on the Black Mesa and git back to camp the same day! My hawse give out this mornin' tryin' to——"

"Say," interposed Brigham peaceably, "you know what the boss said this mornin'—if you got any grievance, tell it to him. I'm tellin' these gentlemen a story."

"A dam' lie would come nearer to it!" sneered Hardy, curling his lips with spleen; and at the word Brigham rose swiftly to his feet.

"If you're lookin' fer trouble, Mr. Atkins," he said, taking off his hat and laying it carefully to one side, "you don't need to go no further. And if you ain't," he cried,

suddenly advancing with blood in his eye, "you take back what you said, or I'll slap yore face off!"

The astounding ease with which he got a rise out of his adversary seemed to take all the fight out of Hardy Atkins, and he mumbled some vague words of apology; but Brigham was hard to mollify.

"Well, that's all right," he grumbled. "It ain't my fault if you go on a drunk and lose yore job, and it ain't my fault if the boss makes me straw—but don't you try to crowd me, Hardy Atkins, or I'll make you match yore words. The man never lived that can call me a liar and git away with it, and I'll thank you to let me alone."

He went back and sat down by the fire, puffing and panting with the violence of his emotions; but as he gazed thoughtfully into the fire and no one interrupted his mood he fell into a cynical philosophy.

"Mighty funny about these Tee-hannos," he said, glancing around at the respectful company. "They say, back in Texas, when a man gits where he can count fifty they set him to teachin' school—and when he can count up to a hundred he gits on to himse'f and leaves the cussed country. Ordinary folks kin only count to twenty—ten fingers and ten toes, like an Injun. It's sure a fine country to emigrate from."

He looked about with a superior smile, and Buck Buchanan took up the cudgels for Texas.

"They tell me, Brig," he said, "that them Mormons down on the river cain't talk no mo'—jest kinder git along by signs and a kind of sheep-blat they have."

"Nope," answered Brigham; "they is sech people, but they don't live along the Heely. Them fellers you're thinkin' of is in the goat business—they don't say baaa, like a sheep; they go maaa like a goat. I've heard tell of them, too. It seems they don't wear no pants—nothin' but shirts. They live on them goat ranches back in western Texas."

He paused and looked around for appreciation, but only the nester kids smiled.

"I was drivin' a bunch of strays down through that Mormon country one time," explained Buck Buchanan; "that's where I got the idee. That's a great country, ain't it, Brig? Lots of houses, too. I remember I stopped one time at a street crossin' and they was houses on all four corners. They was a lot of kids playin' around, and I asked one of 'em whose houses they were, and he says: 'My father's.'

"'How comes yore father to have so many houses?' I says. 'Does he rent 'em?'

"'No, sir,' the kid says, 'he lives in 'em. Don't you know him? He's the bishop!'"

A roar of laughter followed this brutal innuendo, but Brigham was not set back. His mind had become accustomed to all such jests.

"Aw, you're jealous," he grunted, and let the Gentiles rage until, as the talk ran on, he gradually assumed the lead.

"That's one thing you'll never find around a Mormon town," he began, still speaking with philosophical calm; "you'll never find no Texican. Of course, a Mormon has to work, and that bars most of 'em at the start; but, I dunno, seems like the first settlers took a prejudice ag'inst 'em. I remember my old man tellin' how it come that way—course they must be mistaken, but the Mormons think a Texan ain't got no sense.

"It seems the Mormons was the first folks to settle along the Heely, and my grandpaw was one of the leaders—he killed a lot of Injuns, believe me! But one day

when he was gittin' kinder old and feeble-like, he got a notion in his head that he wanted a squirrel-skin, and so he called in my father and said:

"'Son, you take yore rifle and go out and git me a gray squirrel; and be careful not to shoot 'im in the head, because I want the brains to tan the skin with.'

"So my father he went up in the pines and hunted around; but the only squirrel he could find was stickin' his head over the limb, and rather than not git nothin' he shot him anyhow. Well, he brought him back to the old man and he said to 'im:

"'I'm mighty sorry, Dad; the squirrels was awful scarce, and rather than not git any I had to shoot this one through the head.'

"'Oh, that's all right,' the old man says. 'You got a nice skin anyway, and I reckon we can fix it somehow. I tell you what you do. They's a bunch of Texans camped down by the lower water—you go down and kill one of them, and mebbe we can use his brains.'"

Brigham paused and looked around with squinched-up, twinkling eyes; and at last Buck Buchanan broke the dramatic silence.

"Well," he demanded roughly, "what's the joke?"

"Well, sir," ran on Brig, "you wouldn't hardly believe it, but my old man had to kill six of them Texicans to git brains enough to tan that squirrel-skin! That's why they won't take 'em into the church."

Chapter XVIII

The Rough-Riders.

Brigham Clark's squirrel-skin story was not calculated to build up the entente cordial with Texas, but Brigham was no trimmer. The only kind of fighting he knew was to stand up and strike from the shoulder, and a few cracks about Mormon marital customs had not tended to lighten the blow. Numerically he was outnumbered by the Texans, but when it came to a contest of wits he did not need any help. He went off to bed now, laughing, and to all of Bowles' chidings he turned an unheeding ear.

"Let 'em roar," he said. "It's no skin off my nose. Them fellers has been cavin' round and givin' off head long enough—I sure capped 'em in on that, all right. Well, let 'em rough-house me if they want to—they's two can play at that game. I never seen the Texan yet that looked bad to me. And if they git too gay the boss will fire the whole caboodle. I ain't lookin' fer trouble, but no bunch of ignorant Texicans can run it over me! Umph-umm!"

So the feud went on, and when Dixie rode into camp with the mail she smelled war in the very air. The men walked past each other with the wary glances of fighting dogs, and even her little comedy at the delivering of the letters failed to visibly lighten the gloom. A private interview with the cook, who carefully kept out of the ruction and gave neither side comfort nor succor, revealed the fact that the situation was serious; and with the success of the round-up at stake, Dixie May was quick to act. When her father returned to his dog tent at supper-time he

found her war-bag inside, and with a mount of horses cut out for her, Dixie Lee took on for a cowboy.

They were up on the cedar ridges of the mountains now, driving down wild steers from the upper pastures, and a woman was as good as a man. Dixie was better than most, for she had ridden those rough mesas before and could drift off a ridge like a blacktail. Her desperate rivalry in the chase fired the hearts of the most malingering, and more than one moss-headed old outlaw found himself outgeneraled and flogged into the herd. And a steer is a steer these days—he is worth as much as a horse.

Every morning as the punchers set out on the long circle Dixie May picked out a man to dare, and several prairie-bred Texans failed to follow her over the rocks. Mounted on the best horses in the remuda, knowing the ways of wild cattle and the lay of the land ahead, she took after the first puff of dust she saw and followed it till she smelled smoke. If her steer turned back, she ran him down and roped him, and if her escort did not show up by that time, she hog-tied her catch and went on. It was a wild, free life, and she threw herself into it recklessly, glorying in the unholy joy of beating them at their own game. She rode with Brigham, and Hardy Atkins; uncouth mountain men, and raw-boned nester kids; and finally, when the time was ripe, she picked out Bowles.

Bowles was mounted on his top horse, Wa-ha-lote, and he rode proudly along behind Brigham, for in the rough and tumble of cross-country running he was holding his own with the best. A bunch of wild cattle sprang up suddenly from their hiding place on a far point; for a moment they stood staring, their ears silhouetted against the sky, and the keen eyes of the straw-boss read their earmarks like a book.

"They's two Bat Wing steers in that bunch," he said. "Head 'em off, Bowles, and drive 'em down the cañon!"

Then Bowles leaned forward in his saddle and raced them for the high ground. He headed them, and they doubled to beat him back. Once more he headed them off, while the outfit went on with its circle, and just as they stopped to look him over again he saw a horse coming down on his right. It was Dixie, mounted on her favorite roan, and she motioned to him to swing around on the left. Then the riding began all over again, for the steers were wild as bucks and they knew every trail on the bench; but the shod horses were too fast for them over the rocks, and as their hoofs began to get hot from the friction they turned and dashed for the rim.

From the high ridge where the circle was led, to the bottom cañon where the hold-up herd lay, the land fell away in three benches, each a little narrower, each a little steeper at the jump-off—and Bowles and Dixie Lee went over the first pitch hot-foot on the heels of their quarry. They raced back and forth on the second terrace, trying to head the cattle down a natural trail; but now a wild, self-destroying panic came upon them and they took off over the rough ground.

"I'll dare you to follow me!" cried Dixie, turning her eager roan after them; and helter-skelter over the rough rocks, swinging and ducking under trees and jumping over boulders and bushes, she went spurring after the cattle. Behind her came Bowles, his eyes big with excitement, staring at her madcap riding with the fear of death in his heart. Down over the rough jump-off they went, the dust and

smoke from friction-burnt hoofs striking hot in their faces as they rode, and by the grace of God somehow they reached the bench below.

"Don't ride over there!" he entreated, as the cattle scampered on toward the last pitch; but Dixie laughed at him, loud and shrill.

"Will you take a dare?" she taunted, raising her quirt to strike; and before Bowles could say a word, Wa-ha-lote grabbed the bit and went after her like a rocket. Whatever his master thought, it was outside of Wa-ha-lote's simple code to let any horse give him his dust. Wild with terror and excitement, the big steers made straight for the jump-off, which was high and steep; over they went, with Dixie after them, and then, like a bolt from behind, Wa-ha-lote leaped over the rampart and went plowing down the slope. Twice he jumped as he came to dykes of rock, and Bowles stayed with him like a hurdler; then, with a lightning scramble over the loose stones, he took the trail from the roan and went pounding down the hill.

Tree limbs reached down to brush Bowles off, sharp stubs threatened momentarily to snag his legs, and boulders to dash his brains out if he fell, but the lion-hearted Wa-ha-lote had asserted his mastery and Bowles could only hang on. At the bottom of the slide they crashed through a dead-limbed cedar, sending the bone-dry sticks flying in every direction; and when Bowles swung up into the saddle he was thundering across the flat and the steers were at his bits. Vague wisps of smoke, white and smelling like a blacksmith-shop, leaped up as the harried brutes skated over the rocks, and Bowles knew that his battle was won. Once in the soft sand of the creek bed they would never turn back to the heights, for their feet were worn to the quick. But it had been a hard race—even Wa-ha-lote was slowing down, and Dixie Lee was nowhere in sight.

A sudden doubt assailed Bowles, and he tugged sharply at the bit; he pulled down to a walk and looked behind; then, as he saw no sign, he stopped short and let the cattle go. For a tense minute he listened while Wa-ha-lote puffed like a steamboat; then, with a grave look on his face, he turned and rode back up the hill.

"O Miss Lee!" he shouted. "Dixie!"

And a thin answer came from the slope above.

"Catch my horse!" it said. "He's down in the gulch!"

Bowles stared about and caught sight of the red roan's hide as he stood behind some trees; then, with his rope about its neck, he went spurring up the hill.

Dixie Lee was lying very awkwardly among the rocks at the foot of a scrubby juniper, and at the first glance Bowles knew she was hurt. Not only was her hat gone and her stout skirt ripped and torn, but her face was very pale and her lips drawn tight together.

"Horse fell with me," she said, greeting him with a fleeting smile; "hurt my knee right bad. First time I've known him to do that—say, help me out of these rocks."

Very tenderly Bowles reached down and raised her to her feet; then, with one arm about his neck, she tried to hobble away, but at the second hop she paused.

"Nope—hurts too bad," she said; "put me down."

But Bowles did nothing of the kind. He took her up in his strong young arms and carried her down the hill. He even wished it were farther, but she spied a bed

of leaves under a cedar and ordered him to put her there. Then she looked up at him curiously and for a while lay very still.

"What you got there?" she inquired, as he came back holding his hat, and Bowles showed her a crownful of water that he had brought from a pool in the gulch.

"Ah!" sighed Dixie, and drank out of it without scruple, long and deep. "Say, that's good," she said; "now pour some on my hands—they're all scratched up." He did that too, and loaned her his neck handkerchief to sop up the last of the wet.

"Well, it's a wonder you wouldn't ask a few questions," she observed at length, bathing her grimy face with the handkerchief. "'How did it happen?' or 'How're you feeling?' or something like that!"

She smiled naturally at him now, fluffing out her dark hair that hung like an Indian's in heavy braids; and Bowles' face lighted up and then flushed a rosy red.

"I see you are feeling better," he said, sitting down off to one side, and decorously regarding his wet hat, "so how did it happen?"

"Well," began Dixie, ruefully inspecting her torn hands, "all I can remember is feeling my horse going down and jerking my feet out of the stirrups—then I fetched up in that juniper. I scrambled out the minute I struck—afraid old Rufus would fall on me—and that's where I hurt my knee—I bumped it against a rock."

She felt the injured limb over carefully and shook her head.

"I'm afraid I can't travel on that for a while," she said. "So get me your coat to put under it and prop it up, and we'll talk about something pleasant. It'll be all right, I reckon, after I rest a while, but that fall certainly jarred me up.

"Say," she observed, as Bowles came back with his coat, "that was pretty good, wasn't it, what I was telling you the other day—about nursing you back to health and strength. Looks like you're the nurse, the way it turns out. But you're going to make a good one," she went on, as he tucked the coat under her knee; "I can see that. Now, most people, when you get a hurt, or a fall, or something, they come rushing up to where you're making faces and ask a lot of foolish questions—'Are you hurt?' and 'Did you fall?' and all that, until you want to kill 'em. But you haven't hardly said a word."

"No," said Bowles, blushing and looking away. "I'm awfully sorry you fell—hope I didn't make you. Is there anything more I can do?"

"Oh, that's all right," she assured him. "We all take a fall once in a while. I feel kind of weak and trifling right now—but don't go! No, I want you here for company!"

Bowles had stood up on a pretext of looking after the horses, but Dixie was firm.

"No, you stay," she said, as he explained that she might wish to be alone. "You're out West now, Bowles, and you remember what Hardy Atkins told you—'if a lady asks you to take a letter, take it!' Of course, that was none of Hardy's business, but that's the rule out here, and I want you to come back and sit down. No, not away over there—I want you right up close!"

Bowles came back as readily as a dog, but he did not sit very close. For some reason unknown to himself he assumed that she would be embarrassed, not only by their isolated position but by the intimacies which had arisen between them. Moved by a strong and humane purpose, he had gathered her up in his arms and carried her down the hill; but hardly had he felt her arm about his neck, her

breath against his cheek, and her heart against his breast, when the dimensions of his world had suddenly narrowed down, and there was only Dixie Lee and him. And now he was still dazed and breathless, afraid of himself, and not trusting in his strength—and yet he would do anything to please her.

"Come on over here," she coaxed, patting the leaves by her side, and Bowles came as near as he dared. "Now tell me some stories," she said, settling back and closing her eyes. "Ah, this will be fine—tell me something interesting, so I can forget that knee. It sure aches—when I think about it—but I believe there's something in mind-cure. Go ahead and talk. Where'd you learn to ride so well?"

"Oh, that?" beamed Bowles. "Do you think I can ride? Well, I'm not so bad, over the rocks, you know. I used to ride to the hounds. We chased foxes through the woods, leaping stone walls and five-bar gates and all that, and, really, I used to enjoy it. Nothing like cow-punching, of course, but great sport all the same. I remember once we were out at Clarendon——"

He fell into the details of a fox hunt—the first time he had spoken of his past life—and Dixie was careful not to interrupt him. Then he told of his life in the military school, where they taught boys the cavalryman's craft, and Dixie lay quiet and listened. If her knee hurt she did not know it, for she was piecing out his career. School, college, country club, one after the other he alluded to them, but even in his boyish enthusiasm he was careful to mention no names; and as he wandered on with his stories Dixie Lee wondered who he was. Certainly no inconsiderable man in his own country, and yet here he was, an ordinary hired hand, punching cows for forty-five a month. But why? And if he had followed her to the end of the world to win her heart, why did he not talk of love to her, now that they were there together? And when he had taken her in his arms, when he had carried her under the tree and pulled off her boot and tucked his coat under her knee, why had there been no caress, no look, no unnecessary attentions to show that he really cared? Dixie May opened her eyes and gazed out at him through half-closed lashes, and somehow she liked him better—he seemed to be different from the rest.

"Mr. Bowles," she said at last, "you're an awfully interesting man, but there are some things I can't understand. There's something mysterious about you. I know you must be all right, because I met you at Mrs. Melvine's, but at the same time you're hiding out like an ordinary horse-stealing Texican. What are you up to, anyway?"

"Why, I thought you knew all about that," explained Bowles, the old baffling smile coming back into his eyes. "Don't you remember, I told you about it on the train?"

"Yes, I remember, all right," answered Dixie. "But you didn't tell me very much—and then you told me different at Chula Vista. I thought I had a line on you once, but you're too deep for me. What's this I hear about a girl?"

"A girl?" repeated Bowles, with questioning gravity. "Why, what do you mean? What did you hear?"

"A girl back in New York," continued Dixie, glancing at him shrewdly as she hazarded a guess—and as she gazed he flushed and looked away.

"Whatever you have heard," he said at last, "I have nothing to be ashamed of—would you like me to get you some water?"

"Aw, Mr. Bowles," cried Dixie reproachfully, "are you trying to side-step me on this?"

"No, indeed!" replied Bowles, settling back with masterful calm. "What is it you have heard—and what would you like to know?"

He paused and regarded her expectantly, and Dixie saw that she was called. A shadow passed over her face; a shadow of annoyance, and of suspicion, perhaps, as well; but she felt the rebuke of his frankness and pursued her inquiry no further.

"Well, perhaps you are right," she said, as if answering an unspoken reproof. "It was nothing to your discredit, Mr. Bowles; and I am sure it is none of my business. I guess I'm kind of spoiled out here—I get to joshing with these cowboys until I don't know anything else. I believe I would like that drink."

Bowles leaped up promptly at the word and came back with his new hat full of water. He held it for her to drink, and as she finished and looked up she saw that his eyes were troubled.

"Oh, dear!" she cried impulsively, "have I made you any trouble? You've been so good to me here—what have I gone and done now?"

"Oh, it's not you at all," he assured her, and then his voice broke and he faltered. "But have you really heard from New York?"

"Why, no, Mr. Bowles," soothed Dixie, laying her hand on his arm. "Not a word—I don't know anything about you—I was only making it up."

"Oh!" said Bowles, and drew his arm away. He looked out at the horses for a moment, poured the water out of his hat, and turned back, his old smiling self.

"How is your knee now?" he inquired kindly. "Do you think you can ride? I suppose we ought to be going pretty soon."

Dixie glanced over at him and her heart sank—she had observed these sudden changes in Bowles before, and even his boyish smile could not lighten the veiled rebuke. When Bowles had thoughts that were anti-social he was always unusually kind, and his way of expressing disapproval was to tactfully change the subject. And now he was talking of going! Dixie scowled and felt of her knee, and rose stiffly to her feet.

"Well, if you're in such a hurry," she sulked; but Bowles was at her side in an instant.

"Oh, my dear Miss Lee!" he cried, catching her as she poised for a limp. "Please don't do that! Let me carry you, when the time comes, but we will rest as long as you please."

He passed a compelling arm about her and lowered her gently to her place; then he sat down beside her, and breathed hard as he set her free.

"Really," he murmured, "we don't seem to understand each other very well, Miss Lee!"

"That's because neither one of us is telling the truth!" observed Dixie with a certain bitterness.

They sat for a moment in silence, and then she turned about and looked him squarely in the eye.

"Mr. Bowles," she said, in measured tones, "who are you, anyway?"

"Who—me?" parried Bowles, lapsing into the vernacular. "Why, you know me! I'm Bowles, the gentleman you met at Mrs. Melvine's."

"There! You see?" commented Dixie. "You're afraid to tell your own name, and I'm——"

"Yes?" questioned Bowles.

"Well, I don't know what I'm afraid of," she went on bluntly, "but I've got something on my mind."

"Why, surely," began Bowles, apprehensively, "I—I hope I haven't given offense in any way. You were hurt, you know—and I was a little excited—and——"

"Oh, that's all right," said Dixie heartily. "You're a perfect gentleman—I always knew that. But you haven't had much to do with women, have you, Mr. Bowles?"

Her voice trailed off a little at the close, and Bowles looked up at her mystified. He thought quickly, wondering where she was leading him, and decided to tell the truth.

"Why, no, Miss Lee," he stammered, "I suppose not. I hope I haven't——"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Dixie. "I don't mean that. I was just thinking—well, I mustn't take advantage of you, then."

She favored him with one of her sudden, tantalizing smiles, and his brain whirled as he looked away.

"No," he muttered, taking a deep breath; "it wouldn't be fair, you know."

"Well, go and cinch up my horse, then," she said, "and I'll make an exception of you."

He looked up at her suddenly, startled by the way she spoke, and went to do her will.

"Now," he announced, when the horse was ready, "shall I help you while you mount?"

"Why, yes," she said, "if you think it's safe!"

And then he gathered her into his arms.

"I'll be careful," he said. But the devil tempted him—and Dixie forgot and smiled.

"Never mind," she whispered, as he lifted her to the saddle; "that was to pay you for being nurse."

Chapter XIX

A Common Brawl.

There is a madness which comes to certain people at certain times and makes them forget the whole world. In such a moment Bowles had stolen a kiss—for the first time in his life—and Dixie Lee had forgiven him. He had stolen it quickly, and she had forgiven him quickly, and then they had ridden on together without daring so much as a glance. That kiss had meant a great deal to both of them, and they needed time to think. So they rode down to the hold-up herd in silence and parted without a word.

Dixie went on to camp, to rest and care for her hurts; and Bowles, with a sad and preoccupied smile, stayed by to help with the herd. But the jealous eyes of

hate are quick to read such smiles, and as Bowles rode along on the swing he was suddenly startled out of his dreams. Hardy Atkins went out of his way to ride past him, and as he spurred his horse in against his stirrup he hissed:

"You leave my girl alone, you blankety-blank!" and went muttering on his way.

This roused Bowles from his reverie, and he began to think. If Hardy Atkins had noticed a change, there were others who would do the same. How Atkins had guessed, or what the clue had been, he could not tell; but, having been carefully brought up, Bowles knew exactly what he ought to do. Before the first rumor had run its course it was his duty as a gentleman to go to Henry Lee and make a report of the facts; then, if any exaggerated statements came to his ears later, Mr. Lee would know that his conduct had been honorable and that green-eyed envy was raising its hateful head. So, without more ado, he rode up to the point of the herd and saluted the austere boss.

"Mr. Lee," he said, as that gentleman turned upon him sharply, "I am sorry, but Miss Lee had a very bad fall this morning and she has gone ahead to camp."

"Yes, I saw her," returned the boss. "What about it?"

"Well—I was afraid she might not mention it to you, or might minimize her hurts, but as a matter of fact she fell on a steep hill, and if it hadn't been for a juniper tree she might have been seriously injured. As it is, her knee gave her quite a lot of trouble and I had to help her to mount."

"Oh!" commented Henry Lee, and glanced at him again. "Well, what is it?" he inquired, as Bowles still rode at his side.

"Excuse me," stammered Bowles, holding resolutely to his task, "I thought perhaps you might want to ride ahead and help her off her horse."

For a moment the boss looked him over, then he grunted and bowed quite formally.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Bowles," he said. "Will you call Hardy to take my place?"

He waited until Hardy Atkins had started, and then put spurs to his horse, and when the cowboys reached camp he was busy about the tent. The next day Dixie did not ride out on the round-up, and when they came back she was gone. "Back to the home ranch," the cook reported, and he added that she was not very lame; but the cow-punchers glared at Bowles as if he had crippled her for life. And not only that, but as if he had done it on purpose.

"These blankety-blank tenderfeet!" commented Hardy Atkins by the fire. "They can make an outfit more trouble than a bunch of Apache Indians. I cain't stand 'em—it's onlucky to have 'em around."

"I'd rather be short-handed, any time," observed Buck Buchanan sagely.

"Now, there's Dix," continued Hardy, with a vindictive glance at Bowles; "worth any two men in the outfit—ride anywhere—goes out with this tenderfoot and comes within an ace of gittin' killed. She raced with me, rode with Jack and Slim, and left the Straw a mile—the Hinglishman comes in behind her, crowds her outer the trail, and if it hadn't been fer that juniper she'd a-landed in them rocks."

Bowles looked up scornfully from his place and said nothing, but Brigham appeared for the defense.

"Aw, what do you know about it?" he growled. "You wasn't there. Who told you he crowded her out of the trail?"

"Well, he says so himse'f!" protested Atkins, pointing an accusing finger at Bowles. "Didn't he come into camp and tell all about it? I believe that he was tryin' to do it so he could git a chance to——"

"Mr. Atkins," said Bowles, rising to his feet and speaking tremulously, "I shall have to ask——"

But that was as far as he got. With a tiger-like spring the ex-twister was upon him, and before he could raise his hands he struck him full in the face.

"You will talk about my gal, will ye?" he shouted, as Bowles went down at the blow. "Stand up hyer, you white-livered Hinglishman; I'll learn you to butt in on my game!"

"Here! What're you tryin' to do?" demanded Brigham, leaping up hastily and confronting his old-time enemy. "You touch that boy again, and I'll slap yore dirty face off!"

"Well, he's been gittin' too important around hyer!" cried Atkins noisily. "And he's been talkin' about my gal—I won't take that from no man!"

"Huh!" sneered Brigham, drawing closer and clenching his hands. "You're mighty quick to hit a man when he ain't lookin'—why don't you take a man of yore size now and hit me?"

"I ain't got no quarrel with you!" raved Hardy Atkins. "That's the feller I'm after—he's been talkin' about my gal!"

"He has not!" replied Brigham deliberately. "He never talked about no gal, and I'll whip the man that says so—are you bad hurt, pardner?"

He knelt by the side of the prostrate Bowles, who opened his eyes and stared. Then he looked about him and raised one hand to his cheek, which was bruised and beginning to swell.

"I'll learn you to cut me out!" taunted Hardy Atkins, shaking his fist and doing a war-dance. "I'll make you hard to ketch if you try to butt in on me!"

"Aw, shut up!" snarled Brigham, lifting his partner up. "You're brave when a man ain't lookin', ain't ye? Here, ketch hold of me, pardner, and I'll take you to yore bed."

Bowles dropped down on his blankets, still nursing his aching head; but in the morning he rose up with a purposeful look in his eye. He was a long way from New York and the higher life now, and that one treacherous blow had roused his fighting blood. For the courage which prompts a man to strike in the dark, he had little if any respect, and he went straight over to Hardy Atkins the moment he saw him alone.

"Mr. Atkins," he said, "you hit me when I wasn't looking last night. Next time you won't find me so easy—but be so good as to leave Miss Lee's name out of this."

"Oho!" taunted the cow-puncher, straightening up and regarding him with a grin. "So you want some more, hey? That crack on the jaw didn't satisfy you. What's the matter with yore face this mawnin'?"

"Never you mind about my face," returned Bowles warmly. "If you are so low as to be proud of a trick like that, you are a coward, and no gentleman, and—put up your hands!"

He squared off as he spoke, falling back upon his right foot and presenting a long, menacing left; but Hardy Atkins only laughed and loosened his pistol.

"Aw, go on away," he said. "D'ye think I want to box with you? No, if you git into a fight with me you're liable to stop 'most anythin'—I'll hit you over the coco with this!"

He laid his hand on the heavy Colt's which he always wore in his shaps, and gazed upon Bowles insolently.

"You can't run no blazer over me, Mr. Willie-boy," he went on, as Bowles put down his hands. "You're out West now, where everythin' goes. If you'd happen to whip me in a fist-fight I'd git my gun and shoot you, so keep yore mouth shut unless you want to go the limit. And while we're talkin'," he drawled, "I think you might as well drift—it's goin' to be mighty onhealthy around hyer if I ketch you with Dixie again."

"I asked you to leave her name out of this," suggested Bowles, trying bravely to keep his voice from getting thin. "If you've got a quarrel with me, well and good, but certainly no gentleman——"

"Aw, go on away from me," sneered Hardy Atkins, waving him wearily aside. "You seem to think you're the only gentleman in the outfit! Go chase yoreself—you make me tired!"

The sight of grinning faces about the corral recalled Bowles to the presence of an audience and, choking with anger and chagrin, he went off to saddle his horse. Ever since his arrival Hardy Atkins had ignored him, glancing at him furtively or gazing past him with supercilious scorn. Now for the first time they had met as man to man, and in that brief minute the ex-twister had shown his true colors. He was a man of treachery and violence, and proud of it. He did not pretend to fair play nor subscribe to the rules of the game. He did not even claim to be a gentleman! There was the crux, and Bowles labored in his mind to find the key. How could he compete—in either love or war—with a man who was not a gentleman?

It was Brigham who gave the answer, and to him it was perfectly simple.

"Well," he said, as they rode back together from the circle, "he's warned you out of camp—what ye goin' to do about it?"

"Why, what can I do?" faltered Bowles, whose soul was darkened with troubles.

"Fight or git out," replied Brigham briefly.

"But he won't fight fair!" cried Bowles. "He hits me when I'm not looking; then when I offer to fight him with my hands he threatens me with a pistol. What can a man do?"

"Threaten 'im with yourn!" returned Brigham. "He won't shoot—he's one of the worst four-flushers in Arizona! He's jest runnin' it over you because he thinks you're a tenderfoot."

"How do you know he won't shoot?" inquired Bowles, to whom the whole proposition was in the nature of an enigma. "What does he carry that pistol for, then?"

"Jest to look ba-ad," sneered Brigham, "and throw a big scare into strangers. I ain't got no six-shooter, and he don't run it over me, does he? He's afraid to shoot, that's what's the matter—he knows very well the Rangers would be on his neck before he could cross the line. Don't you let these Texicans buffalo you, boy—the only time they're dangerous is when they're on a drunk."

"Then you mean," began Bowles hopefully, "if I'd struck him this morning he wouldn't have used his gun?"

"Well," admitted Brig, "he might've drawed it—and if you'd whipped him he might've taken a shot at you. But you got a gun too, ain't you?"

"Ye-es," acknowledged Bowles; "but I don't want to kill a man. I wouldn't like to shoot him with it."

"Well, then, for Gawd's sake, take it off!" roared Brigham. "If he'd shot you this mornin' he could a got off fer self-defense! Turn it over to the boss and tell him you don't want no trouble—then if Hardy shoots you he'll swing fer it!"

"But how about me?" queried Bowles.

"You're twice as likely to git shot anyway," persisted Brig, "with a gun on you. If you got to pack a gun, leave it in yore bed, where you can git it if you want it; but if the other feller sees you're heeled, and he's got a gun, it makes him nervous, and if you make a sudden move he plugs you. But if you ain't armed he don't dare to—they're awful strict out here, and these Rangers are the limit. Hardy won't shoot—you ain't afraid of 'im, are you?"

"No-o," said Bowles; "not if he'd fight fair."

"D'ye think you could whip 'im?" demanded Brigham eagerly.

"I can try," responded Bowles grimly.

"That's the talk!" cheered Brigham, leaning over to whack him on the back. "Stand up to 'im! He's nothin' but a big bluff!"

"I don't know about that," grumbled Bowles, with the affair of the morning still fresh in mind; "I'm afraid he'll hit me with his gun."

"Well, here, we'll fix that," said Brig, hastily stripping the heavy quirt from his wrist. "You turn yore pistol over to the boss and take this loaded quirt—then if Hardy offers to club you with his gun you knock his eye out with this!"

He made a vicious pass into the air with the bludgeon-like handle, holding the quirt by the lash, and passed it over to Bowles.

"Now you're heeled!" he said approvingly. "That's worse'n a gun, any time, and you kin hit 'im as hard as you please. Jest hang that on yore wrist, where it'll be handy, and turn that cussed six-shooter in."

The matter was still a little mixed in Bowles' mind, and he felt that he was treading upon new and dangerous ground, but his evil passions were still afoot and he longed gloomily for his revenge. So when they got into camp that evening he went over to Henry Lee's tent, with Brigham to act as his witness.

"Mr. Lee," he said, speaking according to instructions, "I've had a little difficulty with one of the boys, and I'd like to turn in my gun. I don't want to have any trouble."

"All right, Mr. Bowles," answered the boss very quietly. "Just throw it on my bed. What's the matter, Brig?"

"Oh, nothin' much," replied Brigham. "You saw it yorese'f—last night."

"Um," assented Henry Lee, glancing for a moment at Bowles' skinned cheek. "Well, we don't want to have any racket now, boys—not while we've got these wild cattle on our hands—and I'm much obliged. Hope you don't have any more trouble, Mr. Bowles."

He bowed them out of the tent without any more words, and they proceeded back to the camp. A significant smile went the rounds as Bowles came back from the tent, but in the morning he went to the corral as usual.

"I thought you'd got yore time," ventured Buck Buchanan, as Bowles began to saddle up; and as the word passed around that he had not, Hardy Atkins rode over to inquire.

"What's this I hear?" he said. "I thought you was goin' to quit."

"Then you were mistaken, Mr. Atkins," answered Bowles politely. "I am not."

"Then what did you see the boss fer? Makin' some kick about me?"

"Your name was not mentioned, Mr. Atkins," replied Bowles, still politely. "I simply turned over my gun to Mr. Lee and told him I'd had some trouble."

"Well, it's nothin' to what you will have!" scowled the ex-twister hatefully. "I can tell you that! And I give you till night to pull. If you don't——"

He paused with meaning emphasis and turned his horse to go, but Henry Lee had been watching him from a distance and now he came spurring in.

"Hardy," he said, "I'll have to ask you to leave Bowles strictly alone. He's turned his gun in to me and is tending to his own business, so don't let me speak to you again. D'ye understand?"

"Yes, sir!" mumbled the cow-puncher, fumbling sullenly with his saddle-strings; but his mind was not turned from his purpose, as Bowles found out that same night.

They were swinging around toward the south and west, raking the last barren ridges before they started the day-herd for home; and in the evening they camped in the open and threw their beds down anywhere. After a hasty supper by the fire, Bowles spread out his blankets, coiled up his bed-rope, and rode forth to stand the first guard. For Bowles was a top hand now, whatever his enemy might say, and he had his choice of guards. It was very dark when he came in at ten-thirty, and he was too sleepy to notice the change, but after he had slipped under his tarpaulin he felt something through the bed. It was his bed-rope, stretched carelessly across the middle, from side to side, and he grumbled for a moment to himself as he squirmed down where it would not hurt him. Then he went to sleep.

After a man has ridden hard all day and stood his guard at night, a little thing like a rope under his bed is not likely to disturb his dreams—the way the pea did the soft-sleeping True Princess—but with this particular rope it was different. Hardy Atkins had stretched it there with malice aforethought; and when, later in the night, he saddled his snorting night horse and prepared to ride out to the herd, he tied the two ends into a loop and silently stepped away with the slack. Then he took a turn around the horn, put spurs to his horse, and went plunging out into the night.

A sudden yank almost snapped Bowles in two in the middle; he woke up clutching, to find himself side-swiping the earth; then an agonizing series of bumps and jolts followed, and he fetched up against a juniper with a jar that rattled his teeth. There was a strain, a snap, and as the rope parted he heard a titter, and a horse went galloping on. It was a practical joke—Bowles realized that the moment he woke up—but the terror of that first grim nightmare wrenched his soul to the very depths. He came to, cursing and fighting, still bound by the loop of the lariat and half-buried in the wreck of the juniper. Then he jerked himself loose

and sprang up, staring about in the darkness for some enemy that he could kill. The titter of the galloping horseman gave the answer, and he knew it was Hardy Atkins. Hardy had given him till nightfall to quit camp or look out for trouble. This was the trouble.

Bowles spread out his bed as best he could and slept where he lay till dawn. Then he went to Henry Lee and said he would like his gun. His hands were bloody and torn from contact with the brush, and there was a fresh welt above one eye that gave him a sinister leer. There was no doubt about it—Bowles was mad—and after a cursory glance the boss saw he was out for blood.

"Just a moment, Mr. Bowles," he said, advancing to the fire. "Boys," he continued, addressing the smirking hands who stood there, "I make it a rule on my round-ups that nobody carries a gun. That includes you, too, Mr. Bowles," he added meaningly. "Mosby, get me a gunny-sack."

With the gunny-sack under one arm the wagon-boss went the rounds, and when he had finished his trip the sack was full of guns.

"I'll just keep these till we get back to the ranch," he observed. "And," he added, "the next man that picks on Bowles will have to walk to town. Hardy, were you in on this?"

"No, sir!" replied Atkins stoutly. "I don't know a thing about it!"

"Well, be mighty careful what you do," charged Henry Lee severely. "Brig, throw that herd on the trail—we might as well hit for the ranch."

Chapter XX

The Death of Happy Jack.

When Bowles rode back to the Bat Wing Ranch he was a hard-looking citizen. His aunt, the hypothetical Mrs. Earl-Bowles, would scarcely have recognized him; Mrs. Lee started visibly at sight of his battered face; and Dixie smiled knowingly as she glanced at his half-closed eye.

"Aha, Mr. Man," she said, "it looks like you'd been into a juniper, too!"

"Well, something like that," acknowledged Bowles, gazing lover-like into her eyes; and from that he led the conversation into other channels, less intimately associated with common brawls. For though Bowles had given way to his evil passions and had even gone so far as to call for his gun in order to beard his rival, he did not wish it known to his lady. As he contemplated her grace in a plain white dress, and the witchery of her faintest smile, it seemed indeed a profanation of the sacred Temple of Love to so much as allude to a fight. Undoubtedly in the wooings of the stone age the males had competed with clubs, but certainly for no woman like this. Love, as Bowles had learned it from the poets, was above such sordid scenes; and as he had learned it from her—when she had chastened his soul with a kiss—ah, now he could sing with old Ben Jonson and the deathless Greeks:

"*Drink to me only with thine eyes,*

And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss within the cup,
And I'll not ask for wine."

Here was the shrine at which he worshiped, and he wished no carnal thought to enter in. So he spoke to her softly and went his way, lest some one should read his heart and break the spell with jeering.

The dust of a day's hard driving was on his face; there was a red weal over one eye and a bruise on his bearded cheek, but he was a lover still. Dixie knew it by his eyes, that glowed and kindled; by his voice, whose every word veiled a hidden caress; and she greeted the others coldly from thinking of this one who had come. Then she dissembled and went down among them, but her ways were changed and she only smiled at their jests.

"Hey, Dix," challenged Hardy Atkins at last, thrusting a grimy hand down into his shap pocket, "look what I got fer ye!"

He drew out a money-order ring that he had won in a mountain poker game, and flashed the stone in the sun.

"It's a genuwine, eighteen-carat diamond," he announced. "Come over hyer and let's see which finger it fits. If it fits yore third finger, you know——"

"Well, I like your nerve," observed Dixie Lee, smiling tolerantly with Gloomy Gus. "'Come over hyer!' eh? It's a wonder you wouldn't come over here—but I don't want your old ring, so don't come."

"W'y, what's the matter?" inquired Hardy Atkins, who loved to do his courting in public. "You ain't goin' back on me, are you, Dix?"

"Well, if I went very far back on your trail," answered Dixie, "I reckon I'd find where you got that ring. What's the matter? Wouldn't she have it? Or did that other girl give it back?"

She turned away with a curl on her lips, and when he saw that she meant it, Hardy Atkins was filled with chagrin. From a man now, that would be a good joke; but from Dixie—well, somebody must have blabbed! He turned a darkly inquiring eye upon Bowles, and looked no farther; but Henry Lee had spoken, and all that rough work was barred. Still there were ways and ways, and after thinking over all the dubious tricks of the cow camp he called in his faithful friends and they went into executive session.

"Now, hyer," expounded the ex-twister, as they got together over the butchering of a beef, "the way to bump that Hinglishman off is to make a monkey of 'im—skeer 'im up and laugh 'im out o' camp. He's so stuck on himse'f he cain't stand to be showed up—what's the matter with a fake killin'? Here's lots of blood."

He cupped up a handful of blood from the viscera of the newly killed beef, and his side partners chuckled at the thought.

"Let me do the shootin', and I'll throw in with ye," rumbled Buck Buchanan.

"I'll hold the door on 'im," volunteered Poker Bill.

"Well, who's goin' to play dead?" grinned Happy Jack. "Me? All right. Git some flour to put on my face, and watch me make the fall—I done that once back on the Pecos."

So they laid their plans, very mysteriously, and when the big poker game began that night there was no one else in on the plot. Buck had the pistol he had killed

the beef with tucked away in the slack of his belt; Jack had changed to a light shirt, the better to show the blood; and Hardy Atkins was a make-up man, with bottled blood and a pinch of flour in his pockets to use when the lights went out.

The game was straight draw poker, and the prize a private horse. Ten dollars apiece was the price of a chance, and it was freeze-out at four-bits a chip. That served to draw the whole crowd, and as the contest narrowed down to Buck Buchanan and Happy Jack, the table was lined three deep.

"How many?" asked Buck, picking up the deck.

"Gimme one!" said Jack, and when he got it he looked grave and turned down his hand, the way all good poker players do when they have tried to fill a flush and failed.

"I bet ye ten!" challenged Jack.

"Go you—and ten more!" came back Buck.

"Raise ye twenty!"

"What ye got?" demanded Buck, shoving his beans to the center, and then, with a sudden roar, he leaped up and seized the stakes. "Keep yore hands off that discyard!" he bellowed, hammering furiously on the table. "You lie, you——"

Whack! came Happy Jack's hand across his face, and Buchanan grabbed for his gun. Then, as the crowd scattered wildly, he thrust out his pistol and shot a great flash of powder between Happy Jack's arm and his ribs.

"Uh!" grunted Jack, and went over backward, chair and all.

Then Hardy Atkins blew out the lamp, and the riot went on in the dark. Bowles was only one of ten frantic punchers who struggled to get out the door; Brigham Clark was one of as many more who burrowed beneath the beds; and when Hardy Atkins lit the lamp and threw the dim light on Happy Jack's wan face he was just in time to save his audience. True, the older punchers had been in fake fights before; but they had been in real ones, too—where the bullets flew wide of the mark—and this had seemed mighty real. In fact, if one were to criticize such a finished production, it was a little too real for the purpose, for the conduct of Bowles was in no wise different from the rest. There had been a little too much secrecy and not quite enough team-work about the play, but Poker-face Bill was still at his post and the victim was caught in the crowd.

"Oh, my Gawd!" moaned Hardy Atkins, kneeling down and tearing aside Jack's coat. "Are you hurt bad, Jack?"

The red splotch on his shirt gave the answer, and the room was silent as death. Then Poker Bill began to whisper and push; delighted grins were passed and stilled; and, moving in a mass, with Bowles up near the front, the crowd closed in on the corpse.

"He's dead!" rumbled Buck Buchanan, making a fierce gesture with his pistol. "I don't make no mistakes. You boys saw him cheat," he went on, approaching nearer to the crowd. "And he slapped me first! You saw that, didn't you, Bowles?"

"Oh, hush up!" cried Hardy Atkins, tragically shaking his fallen friend; and then as he worked up to the big scene where Happy Jack was to come to life and run amuck after Bowles, the door was kicked open and gloomy Gus strode in.

"What's the matter with you fellers?" he demanded, his voice trembling with indignation at the thought of his broken sleep, and then, at sight of Jack, he stopped.

"Jack's dead," said Hardy Atkins, trying hard to give Gus the wink; but the cook was staring at the corpse. Perhaps, being roused from a sound sleep, his senses were not quite as acute as usual; perhaps the play-acting was too good; be that as it may, his rage was changed to pity, and, he took the center of the stage.

"Ah, poor Jack!" he quavered, going closer and gazing down upon him. "Shot through the heart. He's dead, boys; they's no use workin' on 'im—I've seen many a man like that before."

"Well, let's try, anyway!" urged Atkins, in a desperate endeavor to get rid of him. "Go git some water, Gus! Haven't you got any whisky?"

"Oh, he's dead," mourned the cook; "they's no use troublin' him—it's all over with poor old Jack. You'll never hear him laugh no more."

A faint twitch came over the set features of the corpse at this, and Hardy Atkins leaped desperately in to shield his face.

"He was a good-hearted boy," continued Gloomy Gus, still intent upon his eulogy—and then Happy Jack broke down. First he began to twitch, then a snort escaped him, and he shook with inextinguishable laughter. A look went around the room, Brigham Clark punched Bowles with his elbow and pulled him back, and then Gus glanced down at the corpse. His peroration ceased right there, and disgust, chagrin, and anger chased themselves across his face like winds across a lake; then, with a wicked oath, he snatched the gun away from Buck and struggled to get it cocked.

"You young limb!" he raved, menacing Happy Jack with the pistol and fighting to break clear of Buck. "You'll play a trick on me, will ye—an old man and punched cows before you was born! Let go of that gun, Mr. Buchanan! I'll show the blankety-blank——" And so he raged, while the conspirators labored to soothe him, and Brig dragged Bowles outside.

Chapter XXI

A Call.

There is a regrettable but very well defined tendency in human nature which prompts the author of a miss-fire revenge to take it out on the dog. Certainly there was no more innocent party to the inveigling of Gloomy Gus than Bowles, and yet for some reason Hardy Atkins and his comrades in crime chose to gaze upon him with a frown. After laboring far into the night they had finally persuaded the cook that it was all a mistake; that no insult was intended to his years; and that it would be contrary to those high principles of Southern chivalry of which he had always been such an illustrious exponent to report the fake fight to the boss. Then they had busied themselves in the early morning with chopping wood and packing water, and similar ingratiating tasks, with the result that, when Henry Lee came down after breakfast, there was no complaint from anybody. But when he had let it pass, and started off for Chula Vista, it was cloudy in the south for Bowles.

But your true lover, with the wine of ecstasy in his veins, and haunting feminine glimpses to catch his eye, is not likely to be scanning the horizon for a cloud the size of a man's hand. Bowles' troubles began that evening when, after an arduous day in the saddle, he returned to his own social sphere. For two months and more Samuel Bowles had been a cow-hand. He had slept on the ground, he had eaten in the dirt, and when luck had gone against him he had learned to swear. But now, as he was riding past the gate, Mrs. Lee, in a charming house-gown, had waylaid him with a smile; he paused for a friendly word, and his breeding had prompted him to linger while she chatted; then she had invited him to dinner—not supper—and he had forgotten his lowly part. Forgotten also was the warning of Hardy Atkins, now so sullen in his defeat, and everything else except the lure of dainty living and the memory of a smile. So, after a hasty shave and a change to cleaner clothes, he stepped out boldly from the ranks and walked up to the big white house.

The chill and gusty days of early spring had passed and the soft warmth of May had brought out all the flowers. Along the gallery the honeysuckle and the Cherokee climbers were fragrant with the first blossoms of summer, and Bowles was glad to tarry beneath them when Mrs. Lee met him hospitably at the stoop. In the far west the Tortugas were passing through the daily miracle of sunset, and the hush of evening had settled upon all the land.

"Ah, Mrs. Lee," sighed Bowles, as he contemplated with a poet's eye the beauties of nature, "now I understand how you can live here for thirty years and never go back to New York. Such illumination—such color! And from the hill here, it is so much more glorious! Really, in spite of the loneliness, I almost envy you those thirty years!"

"Yes," admitted Mrs. Lee, leading him to a rawhide chair beneath the honeysuckle, "it is beautiful. I like it—in a way—but still, I can never forget New York. It offers so much, you know, of music and art and society; and yet—well, Henry needed me, and so I stayed. But I have tried to give my daughter what advantages I could. I have a sister, you know, living in New York—Mrs. Elwood Tupper—perhaps you know her?"

"Why, the name seems familiar," returned Bowles glibly.

"Yes, she's my sister," resumed Mrs. Lee, after glancing at him curiously. "Dixie was with her all last winter—I thought perhaps you might have met her there?"

Once more she gazed at him in that same inquiring way, and Bowles wondered if she had heard anything, but he was quick to elude the point.

"Hmm," he mused, "Tupper! No, I hardly think so. When I return, though, I shall be glad to look her up—perhaps I can convey some message from you. Your daughter must find it rather close and confining in the city, after her fine, free life in the open. Really, Mrs. Lee, I never knew what living was until I came out here! Of course, I'm very new yet——"

"Yes," agreed Mrs. Lee, who knew a few social sleights herself, "Dixie did complain of the confinement, but she——O Dixie!"

"Yes, Mother!" replied a dutiful voice from within.

"Come out on the gallery—Mr. Bowles is here. But she met some very nice people there—some of the real old families, you know—and I thought——"

The door opened at this point, and Bowles leapt to his feet in astonishment. It was a different Dixie that appeared before him—the same bewitching creature who had dazzled his eyes at the Wordsworth Club, and she wore the very same gown. And what a wonderful transformation it seemed to make in her—she was so quiet and demure now, and she greeted him in quite the proper manner.

"I was just telling Mr. Bowles, Dixie," continued Mrs. Lee, still holding to her fixed idea, "that you went out quite a little in New York—and perhaps you might have met back there."

For a moment the two eyed each other shrewdly, each guessing how much the other had said, and then Bowles opened up the way.

"Why, really, Miss Lee," he exclaimed, still gazing at her with admiring eyes, "you do look familiar in that dress! Perhaps we have met in a crush, like ships that pass in the night? May I ask at what function you wore this charming gown?"

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Bowles," returned Dixie May; "but, rather than run over the whole list and recall a winter's agony, let's take it for granted that we met. It's a fine, large place to come away from, isn't it—dear old New York? Wasn't the slush of those sidewalks something elegant? And that steam heat! My! It never gets as hot as that out here. Yes, indeed, Mother, I'm sure Mr. Bowles and I have met before; but," she added, and here her voice changed, "since he's traveling incognito, changing his name as a garment and not getting any letters from home, perhaps it's just as well not to dwell upon the matter."

"Why, Dixie, child!" protested Mrs. Lee. "What in the world do you mean?"

"Nothing at all, Mother, except that he is our guest. Shall we go in now to dinner?"

They went in, and throughout the rest of the evening Bowles was guiltily conscious of a startled mother's eyes which regarded him with anxious scrutiny at first and then became very resolute and stern. Mrs. Lee had solved her problem, whatever it was, and settled upon her duty. Bowles felt a social chill creep into the air as he rose to go, and he braced himself for some ultimatum; but his hostess did not speak her thoughts. There was no further allusion to New York, or his alias, or the fact that he had acted a lie. All those things were taken for granted, and he left with a balked feeling, as if he had failed of some purpose. Her very silence clutched at his heart, and her passive hand-touch as they parted. Dixie, too, seemed to share in the general aloofness. She had said good-night without any friendly grip of the fingers, looking at him very straight, as if to fathom his deceit.

Bowles lay awake that night and thought it out, and he saw where he had made his mistake. From the first his manner had been evasive almost to mendacity, and, with both Dixie and her mother, he had made a mystery of his past. Now the time for explanations was gone, and he was reaping his just reward. He should have taken Dixie into his confidence when they were alone beneath the cedars; he should have answered that question of hers when she asked it—but now it was too late.

"Mr. Bowles," she had said, "who are you, anyway?"

And when he had evaded her, she had never asked again. And now, through the same damnable ineptitude, he had estranged her mother and lost his welcome at the big house. All the explanations in the world would not square him now, for one

deceit follows another and his second word was no better than his first. He could see with half an eye that Mrs. Lee distrusted him. He must seem to her candid mind no less than a polite adventurer, a ne'er-do-weel young profligate from the East with intentions as dark as his past. Nor could he bring himself to blame her, for the inference was logical—if a man conceals his identity and denies his acquaintances and friends, surely there must be something shameful that he is at such pains to hide.

But the way out? That was what kept Bowles awake. Certainly, if he were a gentleman, he would stay away from the house. Nor would it be wholly honorable to waylay Dixie May and explain. And, besides, there was nothing to explain. He had references, of course, but if he gave them, his aunt would discover his whereabouts and summon him home—and then there was Christabel!

The memory of those prearranged meetings at his aunt's swept over him, and he shuddered where he lay. Dear, pretty, patient Christabel! What if she should sense this conspiracy to make him marry her and lose that friendly smile? What if she should blush as he had blushed at each chance tete-a-tete, gazing nervously into his eyes to guess if he would yield? And to wonder if that was love! Ah no, he could never do that! Rather than inflict such torture upon her he would flee to the depths of the wilderness and hide until she was married. But his safety lay only in flight, for his aunt was a resolute woman, with tears and sighs at her command, if all else failed. Yes, he must run away—that was the way out.

And it would solve all his problems at once. There would be no lame explanations to make at the house, no cheap jealousies with Hardy Atkins, no breaking of his cherished dream of seeing the West. He would move on into the White Mountains and explore their fastnesses with Brigham. Or, lacking Brigham, he would plunge into that wilderness alone.

The harsh clangor of Gloomy Gus's dishpan cut short his fitful sleep, and he rolled out of bed with his mind made up to quit. At breakfast he said nothing, bolting his food with the rest of them, and followed on to the horse corral for a private word with Brig. But right there fate played him a scurvy trick, and disrupted all his schemes, for as he stepped around behind the corral Hardy Atkins strode in upon him and made signs to certain of his friends.

"Now, lookee here, Mr. Man," he said, and he said it quietly for once, "you been four-flushin' around hyer long enough, and we give you warnin' to git. We got yore record and we know what you're after, so don't hand us out any bull. Yore name ain't Bowles and you're aimin' at Dix, but she's got too many good friends. Now we've let you off easy, so far, but Gawd he'p you if we come ag'in. Ain't that so, boys?"

"You bet it is!" answered three or four, and the rest of them looked their disdain.

But an unreasoning anger swept over Bowles at the very first word, and he returned the sneer with interest.

"Mr. Atkins," he said, "you have threatened me before, but I am not afraid of you. You cannot frighten me away."

"Oh, I cain't, cain't I?" jeered Hardy Atkins, while his friends rumbled threats from behind. "Well, poco pronto you're liable to change yore mind. You come into this country on a Hinglish trot and we thought you was a sport, but now that we know better, you got to make good or git. Ain't that so, boys?"

"You bet it is!" roared the bunch, and Atkins hitched up his shaps.

"All right," he said. "You got a job with this outfit by claimin' that you could ride. Now—you're so brave—either you ride that Dunbar hawse the way you said or we kick you out o' camp! You can take yore choice."

"Very well," said Bowles; "I'll ride the horse."

"Like hell you will!" sneered the gang in a chorus, but Bowles did not heed their words.

"Any time you put the saddle on him," he said, "I'll ride him."

At this they stood irresolute, unable to make him out. On the morning that he had ridden Wa-ha-lote he was a tenderfoot, not knowing one horse from another, but now he had seen the worst. And yet he would climb up on Dunbar!

"Come on—let's rope 'im!" urged Hardy Atkins, but he did not move out of his tracks. "No, the boss is comin' back," he said. "Let's wait till we're hyer by ourse'ves. All right, Mr. Bronco-bustin' Bowles, we'll fix you good and plenty—the first time the folks leave the house. And meantime, if you value yore health, you better stay down on low ground."

"I will go wherever I please," answered Bowles; but he stayed down on the low ground.

Chapter XXII

The Horse that Killed Dunbar.

In the Homeric simplicity of the cow camps, where the primitive emotions still rule, any soul-stirring which cannot find its expression in curses is pretty sure to seek the level of laughter. The boys were profoundly moved by Bowles' declaration of intention, but after gazing upon him for a spell in mingled incredulity and awe, their lips began to curl.

"Aw—him!" they said. "Him ride Dunbar? Umph-umm! We'll wake up some mornin' and find him gone!"

Then, as a morning or two passed and Bowles was still in his place, they began to lapse into jest.

"Old Henry will shore be s'prised when he comes back from town," observed blithesome Happy Jack. "He'll find Bowles ridin' Dunbar with a hackamore and feedin' him sugar from his hand. Big doin's soon to come, boys—boss and family goin' down to Chula Vista to-morrer."

"Well, we better hog-tie Hinglish, then," grumbled Buck Buchanan; "he'll never last till mornin'. Gittin' right close on to that time!"

"Never you mind about Hinglish," retorted Brigham Clark, whose loyalty had been fanned to a flame. "If it was you, Buck Buchanan, we couldn't see you fer dust right now. They ain't a man of ye dares to say he'd ride Dunbar, let alone the doin' of it. Will you ride him second if he throws Bowles off? Well, keep yore face shut, then! The whole bunch of ye ought to be canned fer tryin' to git 'im killed!"

"Well, let 'im go on away, then!" burst out Hardy Atkins. "We never told 'im to ride Dunbar—we told 'im to quit his four-flushin' and either make good or git. There's the road down there—let 'im take to it!"

He jerked an imperious hand at Bowles, who answered him with a scowl.

"If you will kindly mind your own business, Mr. Atkins," he purled, "I shall certainly be greatly obliged."

He gave each word the Harvard accent and tipped it off with venom, for Bowles was losing his repose. In fact, he was mad, mad all over, and at every remark he bristled like a dog. A concatenation of circumstances had thrown him into the company of these Texas brawlers, but he aimed to show by every means in his power his absolute contempt for their trickery and his determination to stand on his rights. He had said he would ride Dunbar, and that was enough—he had given his word as a gentleman. Therefore, he resented their insinuations and desired only to be left alone. Certainly he had enough on his mind to keep him occupied without responding to ill-natured remarks.

Fate was piling things up on poor Bowles, and he earnestly longed for the end. There is a cynic's saying that every time a man gets into trouble his girl goes back on him, just to carry out the run of luck; and while of course it isn't true, it seemed that way to Bowles. Perhaps his own manner had had something to do with it, but, the morning after his rebuff, Dixie greeted him almost as a stranger, and, falling back shortly afterward into her old carefree way of talking, she began to josh with the boys. Then she took a long ride with Brigham, a ride that left him all lit up with enthusiasm and made him want to talk about love. As a matter of fact, Dixie had sensed something big in the air and was anxiously ferreting it out, but Bowles did not know about that. All he knew was that he disapproved of her conduct, and wondered vaguely what her mother would say. Not that it was any of his business, but he wondered all the same; and, wondering, shook his head and sighed.

But three days of flirting and sleuthing brought nothing to Dixie's net. From the cook down, the outfit was a solid phalanx against her—they would talk and smile but they never showed their hand. One clue and only one she had—there seemed to be an unusual interest in when she was going to town. First on one pretext and then on another they inquired casually about the date, and if her folks were going along too. So, whatever the deviltry was, it was something that called for secrecy—and it was due on the day they left home. She looked them over as they gathered about the evening fire, and smoothed her hair down thoughtfully—and the next morning she started for town.

The sale of his steers was making Henry Lee a lot of trouble—and the holding of them as well. Not being able to find a buyer at his price, he set the cowboys to fence mending—lest the outlaws should breach the wires—and went back and forth to town. And this morning his wife went with him, sitting close behind the grays, with Dixie riding fast behind. Their dust changed to haze on the horizon before any one moved a hand, and then Hardy Atkins turned on Bowles.

"All right, Mr. Bowles," he said. "Here's where we see yore hand. I'll saddle that hawse if you'll ride 'im, but don't make me that trouble fer nothin', because if you do——"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Bowles, whose nerves were worn to a frazzle. "What's the use of talking about it? Put the saddle on him!"

"Holy Jehu!" whistled Atkins. "Listen to the boy talk, will you? Must have somethin' on his mind—what?"

"Well, quit yore foolin'!" put in Brigham abruptly. "We'll all git fired fer this, and him liable to git killed to boot, so hurry up and let's have it over with!"

"I'll go ye!" laughed the ex-twister, skipping off with a sprightly step. "Come on, boys; it'll take the bunch of us—but I'll saddle old Dunbar or die! 'O-oh, hit's not the 'unting that 'urts the 'orse's 'oofs; hit's the 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the 'ard 'ighway!' E-e-e—hoo!"

He laughed and cut another caper as he ended this bald refrain, and Brigham glowered at him balefully.

"'Hit's!'" he quoted. "'Hit's!' Listen to the ignorant cracker! I never seen a Texican yet that could talk the straight U. S.! But go on now, you low-flung cotton-pickers, and I'll fix Bowles fer his ridin'!"

They hustled away as he spoke, the best of them to wrangle Dunbar, and the rest to admire the sight. Here was an event that would go down in Bat Wing history, and only the cook stayed away. Life had been stale, flat, and unprofitable to Gloomy Gus since he delivered the oration over Happy Jack, and the very care with which all hands refrained from speaking of it showed how poignant the joke had been. Faces which had looked pleasant to him before were repulsive now, and in this last assay on Bowles he saw but a recrudescence of the horse-play which had worked such havoc with his own pride. Therefore, he was morose and sullen and stayed with his pots and pans.

"I want to warn you, Mr. Bowles," he called, as Bowles came, full-rigged, from the bunk-house. "I want to give you warnin'—thet hawse is dangerous!"

"All right, Mr. Mosby," answered Bowles absently, as he started for the round corral.

"He done killed a man!" croaked Gloomy Gus. "A right good cow-puncher, too—I knowed him well. Jim Dunbar—the top rider of the outfit. Don't say I never warned you, now—keep off that hawse!"

"All right, Mr. Mosby," responded Bowles, but he never missed a stride. The time had come to show himself a man, and, like an athlete who goes forth to win, his thoughts were on the battle.

"You want to set him limber," reiterated Brigham in his ear. "Ride 'im like a drunk man, and whip 'im at every jump—it gives you somethin' to do. Grab 'im with yore spurs every time he lights; and look out he don't bite yore legs. Here, take my quirt—it's heavier—and if he starts to go over backwards, hit 'im hard between the ears. You kin ride 'im, pardner, I know it! Jest keep cool and don't get stiff!"

"All right, Brig," muttered Bowles; "all right!" But his eyes were on the corral.

A cloud of dust rose on the still morning air like smoke from some red-burning fire, and through the poles of the fence he could see horses running like mad, and men with trailing ropes. Then, as the stampede rose to a thunder of feet, he heard a shrill yell of triumph, and scrambling men jerked the bars from the gate. The current of galloping slackened, it paused, and the leaders shot out the gap with a sea of high-flung heads behind. When the dust of their outrush had settled, there

was only one horse left inside—the horse that killed Dunbar—and he lay grunting in the dirt.

"Fetch me that hackamore!" yelled Hardy Atkins from where he knelt on the brute's straining neck. "Now bring me that well-rope—we'll tie up his dad-burned leg!"

They gave him the ropes as he called for them, and he rigged them with masterful hands—first the rough-twisted hackamore, to go over his head and cut off his breath; then the two-inch well-rope, to hang from his neck and serve later to noose his hind foot. Then all hands tailed on to the throw-rope; they swayed back as he rose to his feet; and when Dunbar went to the end of it, the heave they gave threw him flat. He leaped up and flew back on his haunches, and the rope halter cut off his breath. His sides heaved as he struggled against it; his eyes bulged big and he shook his head; then, with a final paroxysm, he sank to his knees and they slackened away on the rope. A single mighty breath, and he was up on his feet and fighting; and they choked him down again. Then Hardy Atkins stepped in behind and picked up the end of the shoulder rope, where it dragged between his legs, and drew the loop up to his hocks. A jerk—a kick at the burn—and Dunbar was put on three legs. He fought, because that was his nature, but it was in vain; they trussed his foot up high, tied the rope's end to the neck loop, and clapped a broad blind over his eyes. So Dunbar was conquered, and while he squealed and cow-kicked, they lashed Bowles' saddle on his bowed-up back and slipped the bit between his teeth.

There he stood at last, old Dunbar the man-killer, sweating and trembling and cringing his head to the blind, and Bowles jumped down off the fence.

"All right," he said, "you can let down his foot. I'll pull up the blinder myself."

"Say yore prayers first, Mr. Man," gritted Atkins, lolling and mopping his face. "If he's half as good as his promise, you'll never git off alive!"

"Very likely," observed Bowles grimly. "You can let his foot down now."

"Hey! Git a move on!" yelled a cow-puncher up on the fence. "They's somebody comin' up the road!"

"Aw, let 'em come," drawled Atkins carelessly. "They're hurryin' up to see the show. Step up and look 'im over!" he grinned at Bowles. "No rush—you got lots of time!"

"Let his foot down!" snarled Bowles, his nerves giving way to anger. "I'm not——"

"It's Dix!" clamored the cow-puncher on the fence-top. "It's Dix!"

There was a rush for the fence to make certain, and as Dixie Lee dashed in through the horse lot, Hardy Atkins threw down his hat and cursed. Then he stood irresolute, gazing first at Bowles and then at the fence, until suddenly she slipped through the bars and came striding across the corral.

"Oho, Hardy Atkins," she panted, as she tapped at her boot with a quirt. "So this is what you were up to—riding horses while Dad went to town! Didn't he tell you to keep off that Dunbar horse? Well, then, you just——"

She paused as she sensed the tense silence, and then she saw Bowles, walking resolutely up to the horse. In a flash it all came clear to her—the feud, the fights, and now this compact to ride.

"Mr. Bowles!" she cried, raising her voice in a sudden command—but before she could get out the words Hardy Atkins laid his hand on her arm.

"You go on back to the house!" he said, fixing her with his horse-taming eyes. "You go back where you belong! I'm doin' this!"

"You let go of me!" stormed Dixie Lee, making a savage pass at him with her quirt—and then a great shout drowned their quarrel and made them forget everything but Bowles.

The obsession of days of brooding had laid hold upon him and left him with a single, fixed idea—to ride Dunbar or die. And to him, no less than to Hardy Atkins, the coming of Dixie Lee was a disappointment. For a minute, he too had stood irresolute; then, with the simplicity of madness, he went straight to the blindfolded horse and began to lower his foot. As the quarrel sprang up, he gathered his reins; without looking back, he hooked his stirrup; and then, very gently, he rose to the saddle. Then the shout rang out, and he reached down and twitched up the blind.

Gazing out from beneath the band which had held him in utter darkness, the deep-set rattlesnake eye of Dunbar rolled hatefully at the man on his back. He crooked his neck and twisted his malformed head, and Bowles felt him swelling like a lizard between his knees—then, with a squeal, he bared his teeth and snapped at his leg like a dog. The next moment his head went down and he rose in a series of buck-jumps, whirling sideways, turning half-way round, and landing with a jolt. And at every jolt Bowles' head snapped back and his muscles grew stiff at the jar. But just as the world began to grow black, and he felt himself shaken in his seat, the trailing neck rope lapped Dunbar about the hind legs and he paused to kick himself free.

It was only a moment's respite, but it heartened the rider mightily. He caught the stirrup that he had lost, wiped the mist from his eyes, and settled himself deep in the saddle.

"Good boy! Stay with 'im!" yelled the maniacs on the fence-posts; and then old Dunbar broke loose. The man never lived that could ride him—Bowles realized that as he clutched for the horn—and then his pride rose in him and he sat limber and swung the quirt. One, two, three times, he felt himself jarred to the center, and the blood burst suddenly from his mouth and nose and splashed in a crimson flood. He had no knowledge of what was happening now, for he could not see; and then, with a heart-breaking wrench, he felt himself hurled from the saddle and sent tumbling heels over head. He struck, and the corral dirt rose in his face; there was a cloud before him, a mist; and then, as the dizziness vanished, he beheld the man-killer charging at him through the dust with all his teeth agleam.

Illustration:
The man-killer charged at him through the dust.

"Look out!" yelled the crowd on the fence-top. "Look out!"

And Bowles scrambled up and fell over to one side. His knees were weak; they would not bear him; and through the dust cloud he saw Dunbar slide and turn again. Then of a sudden he was in a tangle of legs and stirrups and striking feet, and somebody grabbed him by the arm. Three pistol shots rang out above him; he was snaked violently aside; and old Dunbar went down like a log. Somebody had killed him, that was certain; but it was not Brigham, for he could tell by the characteristic cursing that it was his partner who had pulled him out and was

dragging him across the corral. He blinked and opened his eyes as he fetched up against the fence—and there was Dixie Lee, with a big, smoking pistol in her hand, striding after him out of the dust.

She looked down at him, her eyes blazing with anger; and then, snapping the empty cartridges out of the Colt's, she handed it back to a puncher.

"Well," she said, "I hope you boys are satisfied now!" And without a second look at Brigham, Bowles, Hardy Atkins, or the remains of Dunbar, she turned and strode back to the house.

Chapter XXIII

The Custom of the Country.

When Bat Wing Bowles got up out of the dirt he was shaken in body and spirit. His corporeal frame felt as if it had been passed through a carpet-beater, and he had lost some of his most precious illusions. Certainly, if there was any way by which a tenderfoot might hope to achieve a little hard-earned fame in the Far West, it was not by riding bronks; and now, before he could wipe the blood from his nose, they were blaming him for all their troubles.

"The blank-blanked greenhorn!" cursed Hardy Atkins, pacing to and fro and gazing at the hulk of Dunbar. "I tol' 'im to keep off that hawse! Never would've let 'im rode 'im—not for a thousand dollars! And then, the minute my back's turned—and Dix right there to copper the play—he goes and pulls off this! But I don't care—I never done nothin'! You boys seen 'im—he done it himse'f!"

And then, all the anger and blood-lust that had been in Bowles' heart for days went suddenly to his right hand, and, putting his shoulder behind it, he smote the ex-twister on the jaw. It was a wicked blow, very much like the one he had received himself, and it laid the false cow-puncher low. He came up reaching for his gun, and Bowles knocked him down again, and took the gun away. Then he passed it on to Brigham, and offered to fight him some more—or anybody! A raging devil of combat seemed to possess him, and he shouted for war, and more war. The cowboys drew away from him as from a man who has lost his right mind, and it was not until Brigham had cajoled him into dipping his hot head into the horse-trough that Bowles left off his raving. A drink of Mr. Mosby's strong coffee, and a rest on his bed by the sheds, and his sanity was completely restored—but his illusions were lost forever!

Never again would Samuel Bowles try to beat the cow-puncher at his own game; never would he mount a wild horse; and never would he put faith in womankind. Not out West, anyway. To be sure, Dixie Lee had saved him from the man-killer, but she had done it in such a way as to injure his pride irreparably. And if anybody had cooled his fevered brow after the accident, it certainly was not Dixie, but Brigham Clark, when he ducked his head in the horse-trough. A sudden aversion to his surroundings—a stern dislike for sentiment and the Bat Wing—

came over Bowles as he lay moping in his blankets, and, rising on his elbow, he called to Brigham.

"Brig," he said, "I'm going to quit this accursed ranch—would you mind catching my private horse?"

"No, ner mine neither!" fulminated Brig. "I jest been waitin' fer ye to say the word—been ready myse'f fer a week!"

He hopped on his horse as he spoke, and rode out into the pasture, and as he returned with their private mounts Gloomy Gus came over from the fire.

"What ye goin' to do, Brig," he inquired; "quit?"

"Yep," answered Brig, as he lashed their beds on his spare horse; "gittin' too bad fer me. Next thing you know, somebody'd git killed."

"That's right," agreed Gus gloomily; "gittin' pretty bad around hyer. Cow-punchin' ain't what it used to be. Well, I'm sorry to see you go."

He put them up a lunch and watched them off, and then turned back to his pots and kettles, grumbling and shaking his head.

That was their only farewell, but as they rode out the gate, Dixie Lee appeared at the big house door and looked after them as they passed. Their mounts alone told the story of their departure, and their beds on the horse behind; but though she knew they were quitting, she stood silent and made no sign.

"Want to say good-by?" inquired Brig, glancing up at her from under his hat, but Bowles did not reply. A deadly apathy had succeeded his passion, and he was sullen and incapable of higher thoughts. All he wanted now was to get away—after that he could think what to do.

They turned their horses' heads toward Chula Vista, where they must go to draw their time, and after they had ridden a mile Bowles suddenly turned in his saddle—but Dixie had passed inside. A deep and melancholy sadness came over him now, and he sighed as he slumped down in his seat, but Brigham did not notice his silence. At noon they ate as they rode, getting a drink at a nester's windmill, and at night they camped by a well. Then it was that Bowles woke up from his brooding and saw that he was not alone in his mood—Brigham, too, was downcast and wrapt up in his thoughts. His mind ran quickly back to ascertain the cause, and he remembered the cherished job.

For one short, eventful month Brigham Clark had been a boss. A straw-boss, to be sure, but still a boss—and now he had lost his job. Never again, perhaps, would he rise to the proud eminence of a "straw"—and yet he had quit his place instantly to throw in his lot with him. A wave of compassion and self-reproach swept over Bowles at the thought, and he forgot his own ugly mood.

"Brig," he said, as they sat close to their tiny fire, "I'm sorry you had to quit. If it hadn't been for me, and Hardy Atkins, you'd be back there now, on your job. It might have led to something better, too. Mr. Lee often said——"

"Aw, fergit it," grumbled Brig morosely. "I didn't want the job. What's the use of bein' a puncher, anyway? They's nothin' in it but hard work. I've got a good mind to hike back to the Gila and go to pitchin' hay."

"Well, if I'm in your way at all," urged Bowles, "don't hesitate to say so. I only proposed this White Mountain trip——"

"Oh, that's all right," broke in Brig. "I'll be glad to git away from it all—git where they ain't no girls, nor mail, nor nothin'. Up there in them big pine trees where a

man can fergit his troubles. But I want to go back past the Bat Wing. I told Dix all about it last week, and I shore want to bid her good-by. There's a good girl—Dix—but she can't understand. She says if I had any nerve I'd go and take a chance—marry the girl and wait and see what happened to me—my girl down on the river, you know."

Bowles nodded gravely and waited for him to go on. It was a month since Brigham had spoken of his girl, and he had never discussed the affair since that first rush of confidences, until now suddenly he dived into the midst of it.

"No," continued Brig, gazing mournfully at his dead cigarette; "Dix is all right, but she don't know them Mormons like I do. She don't know what they're liable to do. This feller that's tryin' to marry my girl is the bishop's own son—he's that feller I beat up so bad when I took to the hills a while back—and he's bound to do me dirt. My girl won't marry me, nohow—not lessen I become a Mormon—and shore as you're settin' there, boy, if I take that gal from the bishop's son, I'm elected to go on a mission!

"I know it! Hain't the old man got it in fer me? And then what's to become of my wife? Am I goin' to leave her fer two years and that dastard a-hangin' around? Not on yore life—if they summoned me fer a mission, I'd either take my wife along or I'd kill that bishop's son—one or the other. But that's the worst of it—the bishop's kid is on the spot, and I'm hidin' out like a coyote. My girl keeps a-writin' like she never gets no letters, and beggin' me to come back and be good! But I can't do it—that's all—I been a renegade too long."

"Well," suggested Bowles, after a long pause, "perhaps we could go by that way. Maybe her folks are keeping your letters from her, or something like that. If there is anything I can do for you, Brig, don't hesitate to ask for it. I might go around and see her for you—or if you need money——"

"No," protested Brigham petulantly; "money won't buy me nothin' with her. I'm up ag'in the whole Mormon church—and if you knew half of what I do about 'em, you'd know that you can't buck these bishops. The Mormon folks is fine people—they'll feed you, and help you, and do anything in the world fer you—but them priests and apostles and bishops—umph-umm! The more you know about 'em, the worse it scares you up—and I'm shore down on their black books. No, pardner, I ain't got a chanc'st, so let's fergit it. I talked it all over with Dix, and she kinder heartened me up; but it ain't no use. My girl don't like me enough to cut loose and quit her people, and I won't turn Mormon fer nobody—so there you are. Come on, let's go to bed!"

It was a hard and tragic problem, and long after the fatalistic Brig had gone to sleep, Bowles lay awake and tried to find a way out. His own petty griefs seemed sordid by the side of it, and all the way to town he turned it over in his mind. But, now that he had dismissed it forever, Brigham Clark became his old carefree self again.

"I'll tell you what we'll do!" he exclaimed, as they talked of their trip to the hills. "We'll hunt up old Bill Jump, and show him the latest in lies. I betcher I can make that old feller ashamed of himse'f—he's jest one of these here common, long-haired liars that don't know nothin' but to go you one better, anyway. But you wait till I pull that Hippodrome stuff on 'im—I betcher that'll make his jaw drop. Never did git to spring that on the boys—say, tell me that ag'in about the clown that fished

up bulldogs outer the lake—and them elephants comin' over the waterfall! Yes, sir; if old Bill is up in them White Mountains, we'll certainly make him look sick!"

It was a glorious thing to contemplate, and, once in town, they made haste to lay in their supplies; but when Brigham came back from his interview with the boss Bowles could see that his enthusiasm had been shaken. For reasons of his own, Bowles had preferred not to meet the Lees, and he had asked Brig to convey his regrets and a release for his two months' pay. If eighty dollars would compensate for the defunct Dunbar, Mr. Bowles was satisfied; otherwise, he would be glad to meet the difference. But the trouble in Brigham's eye was not one of dollars and cents—he had something big on his mind.

"Say," he said, as he beckoned Bowles to a corner of the corral, "what d'ye think Mrs. Lee sprung on me when I went around fer my pay? And, by the way, they was a deputy sheriff inquirin' fer you when I come out by the desk, so come away from that gate—but what d'ye think she said?"

"Why, I'm sure I can't imagine," answered Bowles, with his old-time calm. "What was it?"

"Well, she had a big yeller telegraph in her hand that she was kinder wavin' around—I never did find out what it was all about—but when I come in to the hotel she flew at me like and says:

"'Mr. Clark, do you know who that young man is you're travelin' with?'

"Well, sir, the way she said it made me mad clean through, and I says to her:

"'No, Mrs. Lee, I don't—and, what's more, I don't care! He's a good pardner, that's all I know—and that's all I want to know!'

"And then I turned around and walked out. I don't know what them Lees have got to be so proud about, the way old Henry used to cave around, but I showed her, by grab, they was one puncher she couldn't run it over! She always did make me mad," observed Brig, as he stole quiet glances at his friend, "but I knowed mighty well you wasn't no crookand—and I don't care what you done!"

"Well, thank you just as much—I haven't done anything, Brig," answered Bowles with a reassuring smile. "But," he added, "that's no reason for not getting out of town."

They packed their horse hurriedly, and Bowles rode on ahead, but once on the open prairie he gave way to a hearty laugh.

"Brig," he said, "what in the world do you think I've done?"

"Well, I dunno," mumbled Brig, looking him over shrewdly. "Of course, I knowed all along they was nothin' to that Christabel talk—stands to reason a man wouldn't leave home for a little thing like that. About that aunt, now, that sounds a little more likely—but I've knowed fellers that come out here jest fer fun."

"Yes, but this deputy sheriff—and all that!"

"We-ell," drawled Brigham, with a sly twinkle in his eye, "I heeard a little more from him than what I told you at the first!"

"Oh, indeed! And what else did you hear?"

"Well——" Brig stopped and stuck his tongue in his cheek roguishly. "He said it was a woman that wanted you!"

"My aunt!" exclaimed Bowles, striking his leg; but Brig only spat and grinned.

"Sure!" he said, and grinned again.

"I have it!" cried Bowles. "Mrs. Lee wrote back and told her sister I was here—and then my aunt began telegraphing! That telegram Mrs. Lee had was from her!"

"Sure thing," agreed Brig; and Bowles looked up to find him smirking.

"Well, what's the matter?" he demanded. "Say, you're pretty smart, aren't you, Brig?" he observed, with pitying scorn. "They don't put one over on you very often, do they?"

"No, indeedy!" swaggered Brigham; and then they both laughed—to themselves. But the jest put an effectual end to the discussion, since Brigham did not know what it was he was supposed to have discovered, and Bowles took no pains to enlighten him. It was enough that Brig considered him a very gay dog indeed, and he did not deny the soft impeachment. So, each with his satisfied smile, they jogged along across the plains, dragging their pack animal behind them and heading for the Bat Wing.

All that day they rode on through the mellow sunshine, and the next morning found them still on their way; but just as the well-remembered ranch came into view there was a rattle of wheels from behind and they swung out to give Henry Lee the road. He was driving the fiery grays, and they fought gamely against the delay, but he pulled them down to a walk while he handed Bowles a note.

"Telegram for you, Mr. Bowles," he said. "Brig, stop at the ranch when you go by—I want to talk with you."

There was much more that might have been said, and Mrs. Lee smiled approvingly at Bowles, but the grays were within sight of the haystack and they cut the talk short with a bolt. Then Bowles glanced through the telegram and thrust it into his shirt.

"My aunt——" he began, and as the grin on Brig's face widened, he stopped short and fell into a sulk. "No use telling you anything, Brig," he said at last; "you can guess by the color of my eye."

"Sure!" said Brig, after a moment of baffled silence. "Yore aunt seems to think a whole lot of you. And, speakin' about women-folks, what's this comin' down off the hill?"

He nodded at the foothills to the west, and as Bowles gazed he saw Dixie Lee coming down the broad slope like an arrow. She was riding Wa-ha-lote, too, and at sight of that noble charger the heart of Bat Wing Bowles became sad—or perhaps it was at sight of Dixie. However that may be, he continued on his way with melancholy resignation; while Brig viewed her coming with alarm.

"Here's where I ketch hell fer somethin'!" he muttered, as she sighted him from afar; and when she rode up and faced him he hung his head like a truant.

"You Brig!" she said at last, whipping the hair from her eyes with one hand, "you haven't got git-up enough in you to win an Indian squaw! You'll make a lovely husband for somebody, and that's a fact—the way you do your courting. Who do you think is up to the big house waiting for you?"

"Huh?" demanded Brig, now suddenly all attention.

"Well, she's been there for more than a day—while you were out shooting prairie-dogs. What she sees in you is more than I can say, but——"

"Who're ye talkin' about?" barked Brigham, throwing loose his leading-rope.

"I'm talking about your girl," answered Dixie with Spartan directness. "Here, I'll lead your pack—go ahead and show her your dust."

"I'll do that," said Brig, leaning forward as she spoke; and, passing over the rope, he went spurring up the road.

Dixie Lee gave Bowles a level look from beneath her tumbled hair, and touched Wa-ha-lote with the spur. Her manner seemed to be a disclaimer of any responsibility for their being left together, and yet somehow it was very obvious that the stage had been set for an interview. But if Dixie had any intentions, she concealed them effectually, and her manner was one of good-natured tolerance.

"Well, look at that crazy fool ride," she observed, as Brig disappeared in his own dust. "You'd think from the way he travels he was the keenest lover in the world." She paused here and laughed to herself.

"Yes, indeed!" responded Bowles, with a certain brotherly pride. "Old Brig thinks a lot of that girl."

"Well, maybe he does," conceded Dixie; "but he certainly makes me provoked. I declare, the way some of these men——" she paused again and bit her lip. Mr. Bowles was one of those men, too. "I reckon it's all right," she continued resignedly; "but when a woman has to ride clear over to the Gila, and propose for a man, and steal his girl for him, and then round him up and send him in, I guess she has some excuse to speak her mind. Don't you think so, Mr. Bowles? Well, then, if your friend Brigham had had his way, he would have hit for the summit of the White Mountains, and his girl would have been married to a Mormon! It makes me mad, Mr. Bowles, I declare it does! The idea of leaving that poor little girl over there and never going near her, when all the time she was begging him to come back, and her folks were reading her letters. She couldn't write it to him—she had to tell him—and he never showed up at all. Please don't apologize for him, Mr. Bowles; I'm sure there's not a word to be said."

Mr. Bowles bowed his head and felt very humble indeed, as if he, too, in some inexplicable way, had erred and been rebuked.

"And now," said Dixie at last, "Father'll make Mr. Brig his wagon-boss, and they'll get married and live at the ranch. Simple, isn't it?"

"Why, it seems so," admitted Bowles; "but how do you know he will?"

"How do I know?" repeated Dixie, rolling her eyes on him. "Why, Mr. Bowles, have you been around the Bat Wing for two months and failed to note who was boss? Right after you and Brigham Clark left I went down and fired that Hardy Atkins—so you don't need to be bashful about coming back."

Her voice trailed off a little as she ended, and Bowles started and looked at the ground. New worlds and vistas appeared before him, and visions and sudden dreams—and then he was back by her side, and the road was passing by.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. "It's my own fault—I should have explained at the beginning. But now your mother has written to her sister, and she has told my aunt, and so I've got to move on. She's telegraphing already." He showed her the yellow message and slipped it back into his pocket. "And there was a deputy sheriff inquiring for me," he added bitterly.

"Oh, dear!" pouted Dixie, yanking at the reluctant pack-horse. "I just knew she'd do it. Mother means well, but she's a New Yorker, and—well, I hope she's satisfied!"

"Yes, I hope so too," added Bowles. "I never did have anything to be ashamed of, but—do you know who I am?"

"No, I don't," answered Dixie May. "And I don't care, either," she added, glancing across at him with clear-seeing eyes. "I always knew you were a gentleman, and—say, what's the matter with that pack?"

She dismounted quickly as she spoke, and Bowles dropped off to help. Then, after the ropes had been tightened, they stood silent within the circle of their horses.

"Mr. Bowles," began Dixie, leaning one arm on the pack and looking thoughtfully away, "being the man you are, you—you wouldn't compel a lady to apologize to you, would you?"

"Why no, no—certainly not!" gasped Bowles, alarmed by a mistiness in her eyes.

"Because if that's what you're going away for——"

"Oh, my dear Miss Lee!" protested Bowles, now suddenly stirred to the depths. "Don't think of it—not for a moment! No, indeed! I will confess that I was a little hurt by your—but that's all right! That's all right! You don't know my aunt, do you, Miss Lee? I can't explain it to you, but—well, she's a very determined woman, in her way, and—well, she wants me to come home."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and so I'd better move on. I'm sorry that Brig can't go along with me, but—well, I can go alone. Do you remember one time, when we were coming West, I spoke about the spirit of the country—the spirit of the West? Well, I have found it—it is to move on!"

"And never come back?" inquired Dixie quickly.

"Well, something like that," admitted Bowles.

"Yes, I do remember that," responded Dixie, with a reminiscent smile. "I remember it well. We were alone on the train and we said all kinds of things—I didn't know you very well then. I remember you told me once, if I'd help you find the Far West, you'd be my faithful knight—and all that. And I helped you, too, didn't I?"

"Why, yes!" said Bowles, puzzled by her air.

"Well, what about being my knight?" demanded Dixie, with sudden frankness. "You've done well out here, Mr. Bowles, but there's one thing I'm disappointed in—you don't keep the customs of the country!"

"Why, what do you mean, Miss Lee?" inquired Bowles.

A sudden smile illuminated Dixie's face—the same smile that had taken possession of him when he had forgotten and stolen a kiss—and then she turned away and blushed.

"Well," she said, "you're the first Bat Wing man that has gone away without—without proposing to me!"

She glanced at him defiantly and folded her arms—and Bowles felt his reason eclipsed, and the world go dark before him. A thousand riotous thoughts clamored suddenly for recognition, and his brain reeled at the shock. Then he opened his eyes, and she was still smiling at him, but the smile had a twinkle of mischief in it. The memory of her legion of suitors came over him now, and her carefree, jesting ways, and he became of a sudden calm. They had all proposed, and she had led them on, and then she had told them no. But she should never deal that ignominy to him. If she scorned his humble suit and desired only to add his scalp to the

rest, he would escape at least with his pride—he would never let her say he had proposed.

"Ah, you must excuse me, Miss Lee," he said, speaking with a formal restraint. "Much as I value your happiness, I—I cannot observe this—custom of the country!"

He spat the words out bitterly, and closed his lips—as if there was more he might say. But Dixie did not lose her smile.

"Maybe I'd accept you," she suggested with a roguish twinkle, and once more he gazed into her eyes to read there if she was his friend. But a woman's eyes are deceptive, and hers spoke of many things—she smiled, the old dazzling smile, but there was mischief in the depths. He sighed and drew away.

"Ah, no," he said, "you cannot understand." Then, as she waited, his heart turned to bitterness and he spoke on as the thoughts came. "Really, Miss Lee, it pains me—I cannot believe it. What is one man, more or less, that you should hurt me like this? Dixie"—he raised his downcast eyes and regarded her reproachfully—"I have dreamed about you. I have worshiped you from afar—I have fought my way to be near you. You don't know how it would pain me—after all I have hoped—to have you——"

"Aw, Bowles," chided Dixie, reaching out her hand, "can't you see that I want you?"

And then Bowles' dream came true.