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Painting by Paul Branson

Beginning **THE PLUNDERER**—By Henry Oyen

THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER

XVIII (Continued)

ATSUNSET Wade was pacing the aspen grove on the hill. There was sunlight and shade under the trees, a rosy gold on the sage slopes, a purple and violet veil between the black ranges and the sinking sun.

Twilight fell. The stars came out white and clear. Night cloaked the valley with dark shadows and the hills with its obscurity. The blue vault overhead deepened and darkened. The hunter patrolled his beat and hours were moments to him. He heard the low hum of the insects, the murmur of running water, the rustle of the wind. A coyote cut the keen air with high-keyed staccato cry. The owls hooted with dismal and weird plaint one to the other. Then a wolf mourned. But these sounds only accentuated the loneliness and wildness of the silent night.

Wade was now in passionate strife with the encroaching mood that was a mocker of his idealism.

Of what avail were Columbine's high sense of duty, Moore's fine manhood, the many victories they had won over the headlong and imperious desires of love? What avail were Wade's good offices, his spiritual teaching, his eternal hope in the order of circumstances working out to good? These beautiful characteristics of virtue were not so strong as the unchangeable passion of old Bellounds and the vicious depravity of his son. Wade could not imagine himself a god proving that the wages of sin was death. Yet in his life he had often been an impassive destiny, meting out terrible consequences. Here he was incalculably involved. This was the cumulative end of years of mounting plots, tangled and woven into the web of his pain and his remorse and his ideal. But hope was dying. That was his strife—realization against the morbid clairvoyance of his mind. He could not help Jack Bellounds to be a better man. He could not inspire the old rancher to a forgetfulness of selfish and blinded aims. He could not prove to Moore the truth of the reward that came from unflinching hope and unassailable virtue. He could not save Columbine with his ideals.

The gray of the dawn stole over the eastern range, and before its opaque gloom the blackness of night retreated, until valley and slope and grove were shrouded in spectral light, where all seemed unreal.

And with it the gray-gloomed giant of Wade's mind, the morbid and brooding spell, had gained its long-encroaching ascendancy. He had again found the man to whom he must tell his story. Tragic and irrevocable decree! It was his life that forced him, his crime, his remorse, his agony, his endless striving. How true had been his steps! They had led, by devious and tortuous paths, to the home of his daughter.

Bent Wade—man of misery—who could find no peace on earth—whose presence unknit the tranquil lives of people and poisoned their blood and marked them for doom! Wherever he wandered there followed the curse! Always this had been so. He was the harbinger of catastrophe.

The fiends of the past mocked him like wicked ghouls, voiceless and dim. The faces of the men he had killed were round him in the gray gloom, pale, drifting visages of distortion, accusing him, claiming him. Likewise, these gleams of faces were spectres of his mind, a procession eternal, mournful and silent, wending their way on and on through the regions of his thought. All were united, all drove him, all put him on the trail of catastrophe. They fore-shadowed the future, they inclosed events, they lured him with his endless illusions. He was in the vortex of a vast whirlpool,

not of water or of wind, but of life. Alas! He seemed indeed the very current of that whirlpool, a monstrous force round which evil circled and lurked and conquered. Wade—who had the ill-omened croak of the raven—Wade—who bent his driven steps toward hell!

In the brilliant sunlight of the summer morning Wade bent his resistless steps down toward White Slides Ranch. The pendulum had swung. The hours were propitious. Seemingly, events that already cast their shadows waited for him. He saw Jack Bellounds going out on the fast and furious ride which had become his morning habit.

Columbine intercepted Wade. The shade of woe and tragedy in her face was the same as he had pictured there in his gloomy vigil of the night. Her voice shook as she addressed him.

By Zane Grey

Author of "Wildfire," "The Desert of Wheat," "Riders of the Purple Sage," Etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK B. HOFFMAN

Wade stretched forth a lean and quivering hand that seemed the symbol of presaged and tragic truth.

"Listen, Bellounds, an' I'll tell you. . . . No use tryin' to hatch a rotten egg! There's no good in your son. His good intentions he paraded for virtues, believin' himself that he'd changed. But a flip of the wind made him Buster Jack again. . . . Collie would sacrifice her life for duty to you—whom she loves as her father. Wils Moore sacrificed his honor for Collie—rather than let you learn the truth. . . . But they call me Hell-Bent Wade, an' I will tell you!"

"I'll tell you. . . ." went on the remorseless voice. "I watched your Buster Jack. I watched him gamble an' drink. I trailed him. I found the little circles an'

"Aw no! . . . He was just rude—tryin' to be masterful. . . . An' the lass's like a wild filly. She needs a tamin' down."

"Wha-at? . . . Let go that bridle!" he ejaculated.

Wade held it fast, while he gazed up into the prominent eyes, where fear shone and struggled with intolerance and arrogance and quickening gleams of thought. "You an' I have somethin' to talk over," said the hunter.

Bellounds shrank from the low cold even voice that evidently reminded him of the last time he had heard it.

"No, we haven't," he declared quickly. He seemed to gather assurance with his spoken thought, and conscious fear left him. "Wade, you took advantage of me that day—when you made me swear things. I've changed my mind. . . . And as for that deal with the rustlers, I've got my story. It's as good as yours. I've been waiting for you to tell my father. You've got some reason for not telling him. I've a hunch it's Collie. I'm on to you, and I've got my nerve back. You can —"

He had grown excited, when Wade interrupted him. "Will you get off that horse?"

"No, I won't," replied Bellounds bluntly.

With swift and powerful lunge Wade pulled Bellounds down, sliding him shoulders first into the grass. The released horse shied again and moved away. Buster Jack raised himself upon his elbow, pale with rage and alarm. Wade kicked him, not with any violence.

"Get up!" he ordered.

The kick had brought out the rage in Bellounds at the expense of the amaze and alarm.

"Did you kick me?" he shouted.

"Buster, I was only handin' you a bunch of flowers—some columbines, as your taste runs," replied Wade contemptuously.

"I'll—I'll —" returned Buster Jack wildly, bursting for expression. His hand went to his gun. "Go ahead, Buster. Throw your gun on me. That'll save, maybe, a lot of talk."

It was then Jack Bellounds' face turned livid. Comprehension had dawned upon him.

"You—you want me to fight you?" he queried in hoarse accents.

"I reckon that's what I meant."

No affront, no insult, no blow could have affected Buster Jack as that sudden knowledge.

"Why—why—you're crazy. Me fight you—a gunman," he stammered. "No—no. It wouldn't be fair. Not an even break! . . . No, I'd have no chance on earth!"

"I'll give you first shot," went on Wade in his strange monotonous voice.

Buster Jack's eyes dilated. He gasped huskily. He pulled his gun, but actually did not have strength or courage enough to raise it. His arm shook so that the gun rattled against his chaps.

"No nerve, hey? Not half a man! . . . Buster Jack, why don't you finish game? Make up for your low-down tricks. At the last try to be worthy of your dad. In his day he was a real man. . . . Let him have the consolation that you faced Hell-Bent Wade an' died in your boots!"

"I—can't—fight you!" panted Bellounds. "I know now! . . . I saw you throw a gun! It wouldn't be fair!"

"But I'll make you fight me," returned Wade in steely tones. "I'm givin' you a chance to dig up a little manhood. Askin' you to meet me, man to man! Handin' you a little the best of it to make the odds even! . . . Once more will you be game?"

"Wade, I'll not fight. I'm goin' —" replied Bellounds, and he moved as if to turn.

"Halt!" . . . Wade leaped at the white Bellounds. "If you run I'll break a leg for you—an' then I'll beat your

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"Buster Jack, You're the Man Who Must Hear My Story. . . . I'll Tell You"

"My friend, I was coming to you. . . . Oh, I can bear no more!"

Her hair was disheveled, her dress disordered, the hands she tremblingly held out bore discolored marks. Wade led her into the seclusion of the willow trail.

"Oh, Ben! . . . He fought me—like—a beast!" she panted.

"Collie, you needn't tell me more," said Wade gently. "Go up to Wils. Tell him."

"I want to see Wils. I need to—I must. But I'm afraid. . . . Oh, it will make things worse!"

"Go!"

She turned away, actuated by more than her will.

"Collie!" came the call, piercingly and strangely, after her. Bewildered, startled by the wildness of that cry she wheeled. But Wade was gone. The shaking of the willows attested to his hurry.

Old Bellounds braced his huge shoulders against the wall in the attitude of a man driven to his last stand.

"Ahuh!" he rolled sonorously. "So hyar you are again? . . . Wal, tell your worst, Hell-Bent Wade, an' let's have an end to your croakin'."

Bellounds had fortified himself, not with convictions or with illusions, but with the last desperate courage of a man true to himself.

"I'll tell you —" began the hunter.

And the rancher threw up his hands, in a mockery that was furious, yet with outward shrinking.

"Just now when Buster Jack fought with Collie he meant bad by her!"

the crooked horse tracks—made to trap Wils Moore. . . . A cunnin' trick! . . . Burley suspects a nigger in the woodpile. Wils Moore knows the truth. He lied for Collie's sake an' yours. He'd have stood the trial—an' gone to jail to save Collie from what she dreaded. . . . Bellounds, your son was in the cabin gamblin' with the rustlers when I cornered them. . . . I offered to keep Jack's secret if he'd swear to give Collie up. He swore on his knees, beggin' in her name! . . . An' he comes back to bully her, an' worse. . . . Buster Jack! . . . He's the thorn in your heart, Bellounds. He's the rustler who stole your cattle! . . . Your pet son—a sneakin' thief!"

XIX

JACK BELLOUNDS came riding down the valley trail. His horse was in a lather of sweat. Both hair and blood showed on the long spurs this son of a great pioneer used in his pleasure rides.

At a point where the trail met the brook there were thick willow patches with open grassy spots between. As Bellounds reached this place a man stepped out of the willows and laid hold of the bridle. The horse shied and tried to plunge, but an iron arm held him.

"Get down, Buster," ordered the man. It was Wade.

Bellounds had given as sharp a start as his horse. He was sober, though the heated red tinge of his face gave indication of a recent use of the bottle. That color quickly receded. Events of the last month had left traces of the hardening and lowering of Jack Bellounds' nature.

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miserable brains out! . . . Have you no sense? Can't you recognize what's comin'? . . . I'm goin' to kill you, Buster Jack!"

"My God!" whispered the other, understanding fully at last.

"Here's where you pay for your dirty work. The time comes to every man. You've a choice, not to live—for you'll never get away from Hell-Bent Wade—but to rise above yourself at last."

"But what for? Why do you want to kill me? I never harmed you."

"Columbine is my daughter!" replied the hunter.

"Ah!" breathed Bellounds.

"She loves Wils Moore, who's as white a man as you are black."

Across the pallid convulsed face of Bellounds spread a slow dull crimson.

"Aha, Buster Jack! I struck home there," flashed Wade, his voice rising. "That give your eyes the ugly look. . . . I hate them lyin' bulgin' eyes of yours. An' when my time comes to shoot I'm goin' to put them both out."

"Wade, you'll have to kill me, if you ever expect that clubfoot Moore to get Collie!"

"He'll get her," replied Wade triumphantly. "Collie's with him now. I sent her. I told her to tell Wils how you tried to force her —"

Bellounds began to shake all over. A torture of jealous hate and deadly terror convulsed him.

"Buster, did you ever think you'd get her kisses—as Wils's gettin' right now?" queried the hunter. "The conceit of some men! . . . Why, you poor, weak-minded, cowardly pet of a blinded old man—you conceited ass—you selfish an' spoiled boy! . . . Collie never had any use for you. An' now she hates you."

"It was you who made her!" yelled Bellounds, foaming at the mouth.

"Sure," went on the deliberate voice, ringing with scorn. "An' only a little while ago she called you a dog. . . . I reckon she meant a different kind of a dog than the hounds over there. For to say they were like you would be an insult to them. . . . Sure she hates you, an' I'll gamble right now she's got her arms round Wils' neck!"

Bellounds hissed.

"Well, you've got a gun in your hand," went on the taunting voice. "Ahuh! . . . Have it your way. I'm warmin' up now an' I'd like to tell you . . ."

"Shut up!" interrupted the other frantically. The blood in him was rising to a fever heat. But fear still clamped him. He could not raise the gun, and he seemed in agony.

"Your father knows you're a thief," declared Wade with remorseless, deliberate intent. "I told him how I watched you—trailed you—an' learned the plot you hatched against Wils Moore. . . . Buster Jack busted himself at last, stealin' his own father's cattle. . . . I've seen some ragin' men in my day, but Old Bill had them beaten. You've disgraced him—broken his heart—embittered the end of his life. . . . An' he'd mean for you what I mean now!"

"He'd never—harm me!" gasped Buster Jack, shuddering.

"He'd kill you—you white-livered pup!" cried Wade. "Kill you before he'd let you go to worse dishonor! . . . An' I'm goin' to save him stainin' his hands."

"I'll kill you!" burst out Bellounds, ending in a shriek. But this was not the temper that produced heedless action in him. It was hate. He could not raise the gun. His intelligence still dominated his will. Yet fury had mitigated his terror.

"You'll be doin' me a service, Buster. . . . But you're mighty slow at startin'." I reckon I'll have to play my last trumps to make you fight. Oh, I can tell you! . . . Bellounds, there're dead men callin' me now. Callin' me not to murder you in cold blood! I killed one man once—a man who wouldn't fight—an innocent man! I killed him with my bare hands, an' if I tell you my story—an' how I killed him—an' that I'll do the same for you. . . . You'll save me that, Buster. No man with a gun in his hands could face what he knew. . . . But save me more. Save me the tellin'!"

"No! No! I won't listen!"

"Maybe I won't have to," replied Wade mournfully. He paused, breathing heavily. The somber calm was gone.

Bellounds lowered the half-raised gun, instantly answering to the strange break in Wade's strained dominance.

"Don't tell me—any more! I'll not listen! . . . I won't fight! Wade, you're crazy! Let me off an' I swear —"

"Buster, I told Collie you were three years in jail!" suddenly interrupted Wade.

A mortal blow dealt Bellounds would not have caused such a shock of amaze, of torture. The secret of the punishment meted out to him by his father! The hideous thing which instead of reforming had ruined him! All of hell was expressed in his burning eyes.

"Ahuh! . . . I've known it long!" cried Wade tragically. "Buster Jack, you're the man who must hear my story. . . . I'll tell you. . . ."

In the aspen grove up the slope of Sage Valley Columbine and Wilson were sitting on a log. Whatever had been their discourse it had left Moore with head bowed in his hands, and with Columbine staring with sad eyes that did not see what they looked at. Columbine's mind then seemed a dull blank. Suddenly she started.

"Wils!" she cried. "Did you hear anything?"

"No," he replied, wearily raising his head.

"I thought I heard a shot," said Columbine. "It—it sort of made me jump. I'm nervous."

Scarcely had she finished speaking when two clear deep detonations rang out. Gunshots!

"There! . . . Oh, Wils! Did you hear?" "Hear!" whispered Moore. He grew singularly white. "Yes—yes! . . . Collie —"

"Wils," she interrupted wildly as she began to shake, "just a little bit ago I saw Jack riding down the trail!"

"Collie! . . . Those two shots came from Wade's gun! I'd know it among a thousand! . . . Are you sure you heard a shot before?"

"Oh, something dreadful has happened! Yes, I'm sure. Perfectly sure. A shot not so loud or heavy."

Moore stared aghast at Columbine. "Maybe that's what Wade meant. I never saw through him."

"Collie, I'll ride down there. I'm afraid something has happened. . . . I never understood him! . . . I forgot he was Hell-Bent Wade! If there's been a—fight or any trouble—I'll ride back and meet you."

Then he rode down the trail. Moore did not return to meet her. His white horse grazed in the pasture opposite the first clump of willows, where Sage Valley merged into the larger valley. Then she saw other horses, among them Lem Billings' bay mustang. Columbine faltered on. When suddenly she recognized the horse Jack had ridden—a sorrel, spent and foam-covered, standing saddled, with bridle down and riderless—then certainty of something awful clamped her with horror. Men's husky voices reached her throbbing ears. Someone was running. Footsteps thudded and died away. Then she saw Lem Billings come out of the willows, look her way and hurry toward her. His awkward cowboy gait seemed too slow for his earnestness. Columbine felt the piercing gaze of his eyes as her own became dim.

"Miss Collie, thar's been—a turrible fight!" he panted.

"Oh, Lem! . . . I know. It was Ben—and Jack," she cried.

"Shore. Your hunch's correct. An' it couldn't be no wuss!"

Columbine tried to see his face, the meaning that must have accompanied his hoarse voice; but she seemed going blind.

"Then—then —" she whispered, reaching out for Lem.

"Hyar, Miss Collie," he said in great concern, as he took kind and gentle hold of her. "Reckon you'd better wait. Let me take you home."

"Yes. But tell—tell me first," she cried frantically. She could not bear suspense and she felt her senses slipping away from her.

"Who'd ever have thought such hell would come to White Slides!" exclaimed Lem with strong emotion. "Miss Collie, I'm powerful sorry fer you. But mebbe it's best so. . . . They're both dead! . . . Wade just died with his head on Wils' lap. But Jack never knowed what hit him. He was shot plumb center—both his eyes shot out! . . . Wade was shot low down. . . . Montana an' me agree thet Jack throwed his gun first an' Wade killed him after bein' mortal shot himself."

Late that afternoon, as Columbine lay upon her bed, the strange stillness of the house was disturbed by a heavy tread. It passed out of the living room and came down the porch toward her door. Then followed a knock.

"Dad!" she called, swiftly rising. Bellounds entered, leaving the door ajar. The sunlight streamed in.

"Wal, Collie, I see you're bracin' up," he said.

"Oh, yes, dad, I'm—I'm all right," she replied, eager to help or comfort him.

The old rancher seemed different from the man of the past months. The pallor of a great shock, the havoc of spent passion, the agony of terrible hours showed in his face. But Old Bill Bellounds had come into his own again—back to the calm iron pioneer who had lived all events, over whom storm of years had broken, whose great spirit had accepted this crowning catastrophe as it had all the others, who saw his own life clearly, now that its bitterest lesson was told.

"Are you strong to bear another shock, my lass, an' bear it now—so to make an end—so to-morrow we can begin anew?" he asked, with the voice she had not heard for many a day. It was the voice that told of consideration for her.

"Yes, dad," she replied, going to him.

"Wal, come with me. I want you to see Wade."

He led her out upon the porch and thence into the living room, and from there into the room where lay the two dead men, one on each side. Blankets covered the prone quiet forms.

Columbine had meant to beg to see Wade once before he was laid away forever. She dreaded the ordeal, yet strangely longed for it. And here she was self-contained, ready for some nameless shock and uplift, which she divined was coming as she had divined the change in Bellounds.

Then he stripped back the blanket, disclosing Wade's face. Columbine thrilled to the core of her heart. Death was there, white and cold and merciless, but as it had released the tragic soul the instant of deliverance had been stamped on the rugged cadaverous visage by a beautiful light. Not of peace, nor of joy, nor grief, but of hope! Hope had been the last emotion of Hell-Bent Wade.

"Collie, listen," said the old rancher, in deep and trembling tones. "When a man's dead, what he's been comes to us with startlin' truth. Wade was the whitest man I ever knew. He had a queer idee—a twist in his mind—an' it was thet his steps were bent toward hell. He imagined thet everywhere he traveled there he fetched hell. But he was wrong. His own trouble led him to the trouble of others. He saw through life. An' he was as big in his hope fer the good as he was terrible in his dealin' with the bad. I never saw his like. . . ."

"He loved you, Collie, better than you ever knew. Better than Jack or Wils or me! You know what the Bible says about him who gives his life fer his friend. Wal, Wade was my friend, an' Jack's. Only we never could see! . . . An' he was Wils' friend. An' to you he must have been more than words can tell. . . . We all know what child's play it would have been fer Wade to kill Jack without bein' hurt himself. But he wouldn't do it. So he spared me an' Jack, an' I reckon himself. Somehow he made Jack fight an' die like a man. God only knows how he did that. But it saved me from—from hell—an' you an' Wils from misery. . . . Wade could have taken you from me an' Jack. He had only to tell you his secret. An' he wouldn't. He saw how you loved me as if you were my real child. . . . But Collie, lass, it was he who was your father!"

With bursting heart Columbine fell upon her knees beside that cold still form.

Bellounds softly left the room and closed the door behind him.

XX

OCTOBER was prodigal with her colors that autumn. The frosts came late, so that the leaves did not gradually change their green. One day, as if by magic, there was gold among the green, and in another there were purple and red. Then the hill-tops blazed with their crowns of aspen groves; and the slopes of sage shone mel-low gray in the sunlight; and the vines on the stone fences straggled away in lines of bronze; and the patches of ferns under the cliffs faded fast; and the great rock

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She Threw Her Arms Round Wils and Buried Her Head on His Shoulder



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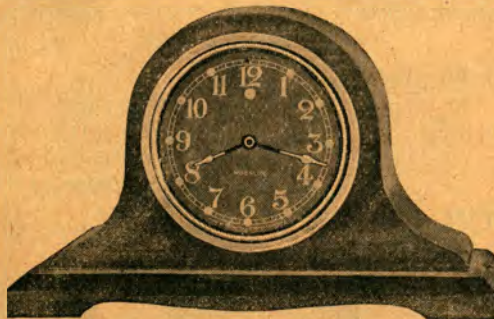
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transfer its members free of charge back to Flora City; and one week from to-day we will resume our trip up the beautiful Chokohatchee to the Paradise Colony. Let us not grieve too much, good friends, over the slight delay. 'What doth it profit a man if he gain the world and lose his soul.'

"A week at beautiful, tropical Flora City! A week in which to feast our souls on the enchantment of Southern Florida! Friends, I think we may congratulate ourselves; and we start back in fifteen minutes."

"Let us not allow this little inconvenience which we have experienced to disturb our equanimity."

"Let's have that agin," growled a fat gentleman. "You say we can't get up the river, hey? Well, what's the matter with driving up?"

"The magnificent oiled road which is going to bring thousands of visitors to our Colony has not quite been built down to the mouth of the river here," was Granger's suavely regretful reply.

"All right. We'll walk up to where she begins. Ain't no cripples aboard, far's I can see."

"The one bad piece of land in the district unfortunately lies near the mouth of the river. It is a small swamp—only a small one—then the fair uplands of our Colony begin. But until the road is built across it the river is the only means of travel inland and that, as I sorrowfully tell you, is blocked."

"Come; let us forget our business, our future wealth, for the time being and revel in subtropical joys at Flora City. The land will remain. Each day sees an increase in its value. Good friends, we're getting ready to sail. All aboard for beautiful Flora City."

"Slick enough!" chuckled Higgins, where he and Payne were standing in the background. "I'll say he does it well. Now let's step up there and tell him how many kinds of a liar he is."

"Hold on," muttered Roger. "I'm here to get some business done; I'm here to get up the river and see that land."

"Sure."

"This boat isn't going up, there's no question of that; calling him a liar wouldn't send the boat upstream."

"Not an inch."

"And it would warn them that we were onto the fact that boats can go up, and that we intend to go."

"Oh, you intend to go, do you? How, for instance?"

"That tub, the Cormorant, is going up. I don't know when, but that's where she's bound. I'm going on her."

Higgins made no reply.

"You don't want to tackle it, I see."

"No, you don't see anything of the sort," retorted Higgins. "I'm going with you all right; I've made up my mind to that. I was just trying to figure how we are going to work it. You're right; if we tell 'em we're staying here, the Cormorant won't go up. There's something slick going on round here so we've got to be slickers ourselves. We've got to sneak on 'em."

"Sneak? What for? I've got a right to go up and look at the land I've paid money on."

"Sure, so has that flock of suckers on the boat; but you don't see them going, do you?"

"I wonder if the whole crowd demanded to be taken up —?"

"Pooh! They're sheep and Granger's got them hypnotized. You say one word against the Colony and you'd be an out-cast among 'em. No; we've got to let them go."

Roger agreed.

"And we've got to pretend to go along to Flora City," he added. "I don't like to sneak. It goes against my grain; but business is business. Come on, Higgins. Next trip in a week, Mr. Granger. Good enough. We're going to our stateroom and catch up some sleep. Wake us at peril of your life."

He led the way swiftly to the stateroom, grasped his bag and Higgins', locked the door and hurried aft out of sight of the people gathered forward.

"Come on," he whispered, throwing a leg over the railing.

Higgins, peering after him, saw the young man untying the rowboat which was fastened to the dock beneath the Swastika's stern.

"You certainly see a lot of things and work fast, when you get a-going," whispered the engineer as he let himself down into the boat. "Now where to?"

"Just round that bunch of mangroves and out of sight of the Swastika's decks. Grab that oar and paddle. Easy—but work fast!"

A minute or two of swift anxious paddling and they had whisked the boat down the shore, round the mangrove promontory into the seclusion of a tiny bay. And then:

"Hell!" said Higgins.

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The Mysterious Rider

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slides and black timbered reaches stood out in their somber shades.

Wade's last few whispered words to Moore had been interpreted that the hunter desired to be buried among the columbines in the aspen grove on the slope above Sage Valley. Here, then, had been made his grave.

One day Bellounds sent Columbine to fetch Moore down to White Slides. No restraint attended his greeting to the cowboy.

"Wils, I reckon I'd be glad if you'd take your old job as foreman of White Slides," he said.

"Are you asking me?" queried Moore eagerly.

"Wal, I reckon so."

"Yes, I'll come," replied the cowboy.

"What'll your dad say?"

"I don't know. That worries me. He's coming to visit me. I heard from him again lately and he means to take stage for Kremmling soon."

"Wal, I reckon you young folks had better ride down to Kremmlin' an' get married."

"Say, I hope I ain't intrudin' my wishes on a young couple that's got over dyin' fer each other," dryly continued Bellounds.

"Dad!" cried Columbine, and then she threw her arms round Wils and buried her head on his shoulder.

"Wal, wal, I reckon that answers that," the old man said. "Moore, she's yours, with my blessin', an' all I have. . . . An' you must understand I'm glad things have worked out to your good an' to Col-lie's happiness. . . . Life's not over fer

me yet. But I reckon the storms are past. I'm wantin' peace an' quiet now, with grandchildren round me, in my old age. . . . So ride along to Kremmlin' an' hurry home."

The evening of the day Columbine came home to White Slides, the bride of Wilson Moore, she slipped away and climbed to the aspen grove on the hill to spend a little while beside the grave of her father.

Under the aspens it was silent and lonely and sad. The leaves quivered without any sound of rustling. Columbine's heart was full of a happiness that she longed to express somehow, there beside this lonely grave. It was what she owed the strange man who slept here in the shadows. Grief abided with her, and always there would be an eternal remorse and regret. Yet she had loved him. She had been his, all unconsciously. His life had been terrible, but it had been great.

Her father! After all, how closely had she been linked to the past! How closely protected even in the hours of most helpless despair! Thus she understood him. Love was the food of life, hope was its spirituality, and beauty was its reward, to the seeing eye. Wade had lived these great virtues even while he had earned a tragic name.

"I will live them. I will have faith and hope and love, for I am his daughter," she said. A faint cool breeze strayed through the aspens, rustling the leaves whisperingly; and the slender columbines, gleaming pale in the twilight, lifted their sweet faces.

(THE END)



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CHAFF

Its Lack

"BOSS, there's something wrong with this fillum, 'The Obsession of Oscar Oglesby'!" said the machine operator of the Majestic Movie Palace at Grudge, addressing the proprietor of the temple of flicker. "I've just gone over the whole nine reels of it; something's missing. There's the title, the foreword, the preface, 'Story by So-and-so,' 'Scenario by Such-a-one,' 'Direction of What's-his-name,' 'Assisted by What-d'ye-call-him,' 'Photography by Tutherfeller,' 'Passed by National Board of Censorship,' and leaders, subtitles and explanations galore, but I'll be jiggered if I can find any picture!"

"The Golconda, over at Bigville, had it yesterday," wrathfully returned the magnate, "and them infernal thieves cut out a couple of hundred feet of the fillum; that's just what happened!"

His Exhausting Existence

"OLD Uncle Ramsbottom has a pretty hard time of it," sympathetically said the landlord of the tavern at Grudge. "He likes to set out on the porch here, where he can listen to the drummers telling the latest news and stories. And if he stays here he can see what is going on in a general way as well as he can if he is down at the post office. But he don't find it as cool there as 'tis under the trees in the courthouse square, where he can enjoy all the farm news and horse talk. But if he stays there he can't see the trains come in. So the poor old feller is just about wore out from gravitating betwixt them various p'int of interest, interspersed with crawling home when he gets hungry."

Ancient Ebon Joseph and Others

WE STILL recall that olden song, lugubrious and slow,
The sad and solemn come-ye-all of "Old Black Joe";
"I'm coming! I'm coming! And my head is bending low —"
Alas! He never came to hand, because he moved too slow.
And all about us in this life we find them just the same,
Ancient Ebon Joseph, Smith, or poor old What's-his-name.
They are always coming, coming. Oh, how they strain and strive!
But somehow they unwindlass and never quite arrive.
We tire of gents who're going to do; our welcome's much more warm
For those who are not promising, but actually perform.

—Tennyson J. Daft.

A Good Reason

MOTORIST (blocked by load of hay):
I say, there, pull out and let me by.
You seemed in a hurry to let that other fellow's carriage get past.
DRIVER: That's cause his horse wuz eatin' my hay!

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"Well! Even This Place Seems to Have Gone Dry Too!"

How it Happens

THE old home paper every once in a while announces that Gid Gringle is doing well selling farm implements on the road, or that as soon as Harve Dawdy was mustered out of the service he got a fine job in a wholesale house in the city, or that Freck Tulliver is making good in

the position he accepted up at Bigville, and almost invariably it rears back and asks us to observe that the Pruntytown boys always cut a mighty creditable figure wherever they go. And another old home paper in a different village says practically the same thing about its town's sons, and yet another and another—pick up the weekly from any old home town and you will find similar references to the lads who have gone from there out into the big world.

It is all true too. And it is so because everywhere the good jobs are waiting for the steady, reliable boys from the old home towns, and the boys who go to fill them know that the home paper is keeping its eye right on its stepsons and is expecting them to make good. And, of course, they just naturally feel compelled to live up to its high opinions of them.

The City Farmer

I'D LOVE to raise potatoes here,
But find I can't do that.
Potatoes must be grown in hills,
And my back yard is flat.

—TENNYSON J. DAFT.

The Way He Does

LITTLE drops of water, little grains of sand,
Make a wondrous picture 'neath the boomer's hand.
He uses many adjectives and clatter from the band,
And sells the mess to suckers for first-class orange land.

Embarrassing

"WELL, no, there hasn't been much of anything of interest going on lately," said the landlord of the Petunia Tavern. "It is pretty blame' slow, just now, and—Come to think, though, Doctor Slash, who has just come out of the Army, and Claud Pertwhistle, the bank clerk, had some words day before yesterday, and doc kicked Claud pretty nigh halfway across town; clear over to the other side of the railroad, in fact."

"That must have been extremely embarrassing to Claud," commented the washing-machine agent, who was fairly well acquainted in the hamlet by reason of frequent visits.

"Twas so! Claud prides himself on having blond hair and coming from a prominent old family, and never, if he can help it, associates with common folks—like the draymen, odd-jobbers, grass-cutters, and so forth, that live over on the other side of the track."

Why doesn't Your Boy Like His School

THE average boy hates school. He sees no reason for it. He seldom goes beyond second year in high school. Fathers, mothers: what wouldn't you give to show your boys in a boy-natural way just how much school really means to them! The publishers of THE AMERICAN BOY assigned William Heylinger, a favorite writer with their 500,000 boy readers, to do just this. After a year spent with practical educators everywhere he has written "High Benton", about a boy who first hated school and why he came to like it. This great story starts in the September issue of

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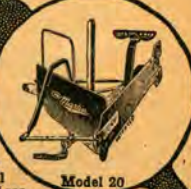
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