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CONGRESS AND THE PACKERS

THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER

XV (Continued)

MOORE could not speak. Wade held Columbine's hand in both of his. "Worst! Now, Collie, that's a terrible word. I've heard it many times. An' all my life the worst's been comin'. An' it hasn't come yet. You—only twenty years old—talkin' wild—the worst has come! . . . Tell me your trouble now an' I'll tell you where you're wrong."

"Jack's a thief—a cattle thief!" rang Columbine's voice, high and clear.

"Ahuh! Well, go on," said Wade.

"Jack has taken money from rustlers—for cattle stolen from his father!"

Wade felt the lift of her passion and he vibrated to it.

"Reckon that's no news to me," he replied.

Then she quivered up to a strong and passionate delivery of the thing that had transformed her.

"I'm going to marry Jack Bellounds!"

Wilson Moore leaped toward her with a cry, to be held back by Wade's hand. "Now, Collie," he soothed, "tell us all about it."

Columbine, still upheld by the strength of her spirit, related how she had ridden out the day before, early in the afternoon, in the hope of meeting Wade. She rode over the sage hills, along the edges of the aspen benches, everywhere that she might expect to meet or see the hunter; but as he did not appear and as she was greatly desirous of talking with him, she went on up into the woods, following the line of the Buffalo Park trail, though keeping aside from it. She rode very slowly and cautiously, remembering Wade's instructions. In this way she ascended the aspen benches and the spruce-bordered ridges, and then the first rise of the black forest. Finally she had gone farther than ever before, and farther than was wise.

When she was about to turn back she heard the thud of hoofs ahead of her. Pronto shot up his ears. Alarmed and anxious, Columbine swiftly gazed about her. It would not do for her to be seen. Yet, on the other hand, the chances were that the approaching horse carried Wade. It was lucky that she was on Pronto, for he could be trusted to stand still and not neigh. Columbine rode into a thick clump of spruces that had long shelving branches reaching down. Here she hid, holding Pronto motionless.

Presently the sound of hoofs denoted the approach of several horses. That augmented Columbine's anxiety. Peering out of her covert she espied three horsemen trotting along the trail, and one of them was Jack Bellounds. They appeared to be in strong argument, judging from gestures and emphatic movements of their heads. As chance would have it they halted their horses not half a dozen rods from Columbine's place of concealment. The two men with Bellounds were rough-looking, one of them, evidently a leader, having a dark face disfigured by a horrible scar.

Naturally they did not talk loud and Columbine had to strain her ears to catch anything. But a word distinguished here and there and accompanying actions made transparent the meaning of their presence and argument. The big man refused to ride any farther. Evidently he had come so far without realizing it. His importunities were for "more head of stock." His scorn was for a "measly little bunch, not worth the risk." His anger was for Bellounds' foolhardiness in "leavin' a trail." Bellounds had little to say and most of that was spoken in a tone too low to be heard. His manner seemed indifferent, even reckless. But he wanted "money." The scar-faced man's name was Smith. Then Columbine gathered from Smith's dogged and forceful gestures and his words "no money" and "bigger bunch" that he was unwilling to pay what had been agreed upon unless Bellounds promised to bring a larger number of cattle. Here Bellounds roundly cursed the rustler and apparently argued that course "next to impossible." Smith made a sweeping movement with his arm, pointing south, indicating some place afar, and part of his speech was "Gore Peak."

The little man, companion of Smith, got into the argument, and dismounting from his horse he made marks upon the smooth earth of the trail. He was drawing a rude map showing direction and locality. At length when Bellounds nodded, as if convinced or now informed, this third member of the party remounted and seemed to have no

The Two Men Were Rough-Looking. One of Them, Evidently a Leader, Having a Dark Face Disfigured by a Horrible Scar

more to say. Bellounds pondered sullenly. He snatched a switch from off a bough overhead and flicked his boot and stirrup with it, an action that made his horse restive. Smith leered and spoke derisively, of which speech Columbine heard: "Aw hell!" and "yellow streak" and "no one'd ever" and "son of Bill Bellounds" and "rustlin' stock."

Then this scar-faced man drew out a buckskin bag. Either the contempt or the gold, or both, overbalanced vacillation in the weak mind of Jack Bellounds, for he lifted his head, showing his face pale and malignant, and without trace of shame or compunction he snatched the bag of gold, shouted a hoarse "All right," and wheeling the white mustang he spurred away, quickly disappearing.

The rustlers sat their horses, gazing down the trail, and Smith wagged his dark head doubtfully. Then he spoke distinctly: "I ain't a-trustin' that Bellounds pup!" and his comrade replied: "Boss, we ain't stealin' the stock, so what th' hell!" Then they turned their horses and trotted out of sight and hearing up the timbered slope.

Columbine was so stunned and so frightened and horrified that she remained hidden there for a long time before she ventured forth. Then heading homeward she skirted the trail and kept to the edge of the forest, making a wide detour over the hills, finally reaching the ranch at sunset. Jack did not appear at the evening meal. His father had one of his spells of depression and seemed not to have noticed her absence. She lay awake all night thinking and praying.

Columbine concluded her narrative there, and panting from her agitation and hurry she gazed at the bowed figure of Moore, and then at Wade.

"I had to tell you this shameful secret," she began again after a moment of silence. "I'm forced. If you do not help me, if something is not done, there'll be a horrible—end to all!"

"We'll help you, but how?" asked Moore, raising a white face.

"I don't know yet. I only feel—I only feel what may happen if I don't prevent it."

"Oh, Ben, my dear friend, we must prevent it—you must!"

"Ahuh! . . . So I was figurin'."

By Zane Grey

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

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK B. HOFFMAN

"Ben, you must go to Jack an' tell him—show him the peril—frighten him terribly. So that he will not do—do this shameful thing again."

"Lass, I reckon I could scare Jack out of his skin. But what good would that do?"

"It'll stop this—this madness. . . . Then I'll marry him—and keep him safe."

"Collie, do you think marryin' Jack will stop his bustin' out?"



"Oh, I know it will. He had conquered over the evil in him. I saw that. I felt it. He conquered over his baser nature for love of me. Then—when he heard—from my own lips—that I loved Wilson—why, then he fell. He didn't care. He drank again. He let go. He sank. And now he'll ruin us all. Oh, it looks as if he meant it that way! . . . But I can change him. I will marry him. I will love him—or I will live a lie! I will make him think I love him!"

Wilson Moore, deadly pale, faced her with flaming eyes. "Collie, why? Explain why you will shame your womanhood and ruin me—all for that coward—that thief?"

Columbine broke from Wade and ran to Wilson, as if to clasp him, but something halted her, and she stood before him.

Then it seemed to Wade that they both turned to him, unconscious of the inevitableness of his relation to this catastrophe, yet looking to him for the spirit, the guidance that had become habitual to them. It brought the warm blood back to Wade's cold heart. It was his great reward. How intensely and implacably did his soul mount to that crisis!

"Collie, I'll never fail you," he said, and his gentle voice was deep and full. "If Jack can be scared into haltin' in his mad ride to hell—then I'll do it. I'm not promisin' so much for him. But I'll swear to you that Old Bellounds' hands will never be stained with his son's blood!"

"Oh, Ben! Ben!" she cried in passionate gratitude. "I'll love you—bless you all my life!"

"Hush, lass! I'm not one to bless. . . . An' now you must do as I say. Go home an' tell them you'll marry Jack in August. Say August thirteenth."

"That'll give me time. I'm thinkin' Jack ought to be—reformed, let's call it—before you marry him. If all you say is true—why, we can turn him round. Your promise will do most. . . . So then it's settled?"

"Yes—dear—friends," faltered the girl, tremulously on the verge of a breakdown now that the ordeal was past.

Wilson Moore stood gazing out of the door, his eyes far away on the gray slopes.

"Queer how things turn out," he said dreamily. "August thirteenth! . . . That's about time the columbines blow

on the hills. . . . And I always meant columbine time."

Here he sharply interrupted himself and the dreamy musing gave way to passion. "But I mean it yet! I'll—I'll die before I give up hope of you!"

XVI

WADE, watching Columbine ride down the slope on her homeward way, did some of the hardest thinking he had yet been called upon to do. It was not necessary to acquaint Wilson Moore with the deeper and more subtle motives that had begun to actuate him. It would not utterly break the cowboy's spirit to live in suspense. Columbine was safe for the present. He had insured her against fatality. Time was all he needed. Possibility of an actual consummation of her marriage to Jack Bellounds did not lodge for an instant in Wade's consciousness. In Moore's case, however, the present moment seemed critical.

What should he tell Moore—what should he conceal from him?

"Son, come in here," he called to the cowboy.

"Pard, it looks—bad!" said Moore brokenly.

Wade looked at the tragic face and cursed under his breath.

"Buck up. It's never as bad as it looks. Anyway, we know now what to expect, an' that's well."

Moore shook his head. "Couldn't you see how like steel Collie was? . . . But I'm on to you, Wade. You think by persuading Collie to put that marriage off that we'll gain time. You're gambling with time. You swear Buster Jack will hang himself. You won't quit fighting this deal."

"Buster Jack has slung the noose over a tree an' he's about ready to slip his head into it," replied Wade.

Moore raised his head sharply, flinging himself back from his friend so as to scrutinize his face. Wade felt the piercing power of that gaze.

"Wade, what do you mean?"

"Collie told us some interestin' news about Jack, didn't she? Well, she didn't know what I know. Jack Bellounds had laid a cunning an' devilish trap to prove you guilty of rustlin' his father's cattle."

"Absurd!" ejaculated Moore with white lips.

"I'd never given him credit for brains to hatch such a plot," went on Wade. "Now listen: Not long ago Buster Jack made a remark in front of the whole outfit, includin' his father, that the homesteaders on the range were rustlin' cattle. It fell sort of flat, that remark. But no one could calculate on his infernal cunning. I quit workin' for Bellounds that night, an' I've put my time in spyin' on the boy. In my day I've done a good deal of spyin', but I've never run across one slicker than Buster Jack. To cut it short—he got himself a white speckled mustang that's a dead ringer for Spottie. He measured the tracks of your horse's left front foot—the bad hoof, you know, an' he made a shoe exactly the same as Spottie wears. Also, he made some kind of a contraption that's like the end of your crutch. These he packs with him. I saw him ride across the pasture to hide his tracks, climb up the sage for the same reason, an' then hide in that grove of aspens over there near the trail you use. Here you can bet he changed shoes on the left front foot of his horse. Then he took to the trail, an' he left tracks for a while, an' then he was careful to hide them again. He stole his father's stock an' drove it up over the grassy benches where even you or I couldn't track him next day. But up on top when it suited him he left some horse tracks, an' in the mud near a spring-hole he gets off his horse, steppin' with one foot—an' makin' little circles with dots

(Continued on Page 21)

(Continued from Page 18)

like those made by the end of your crutch. Then way over in the woods there's a cabin where he meets his accomplices. Here he leaves the same horse tracks an' crutch tracks. . . . Simple as A B C, Wils, when you see how he did it. But I'll tell you straight—if I hadn't been suspicious of Buster Jack that trick of his would have made you a rustler!"

"Damn him!" hissed the cowboy in utter consternation and fury.

"Ahuh! That's my sentiment exactly."

"I swore to Collie I'd never kill him!"

"Sure you did, son. An' you've got to keep that oath. I pin you down to it. You can't break faith with Collie. . . . An' you don't want his bad blood on your hands."

"No! No!" he replied violently. "Of course I don't. I won't. But how sweet it would be to tear out his lying tongue—to —"

"I reckon it would. Only don't talk about that," interrupted Wade bluntly. "You see now, don't you, how he's about hanged himself?"

"No, pard, I don't. We can't squeal that on him any more than we can squeal what Collie told us."

"Son, you're young in dealin' with crooked men. You don't get the drift of motives. Buster Jack is not only robbin' his father an' hatchin' a dirty trap for you, but he's double-crossin' the rustlers he's sellin' the cattle to. He's riskin' their necks. He's goin' to find your tracks, showin' you dealt with them. Sure, he won't give them away, an' he's figurin' on their gettin' out of it, maybe by leavin' the range or a shootin' fray or some way. The big thing with Jack is that he's goin' to accuse you of rustlin' an' show your tracks to his father. Well, that's a risk he's given the rustlers. It happens that I know this scar-face Smith. We've met before. Now it's easy to see from what Collie heard that Smith is not trustin' Buster Jack. So all underneath this Jack Bellounds' game there's forces workin' unbeknown to him, beyond his control an' sure to ruin him."

"I see. I see. Wade, nothing else but ruin seems possible! . . . But suppose it works out his way! . . . What then? What of Collie?"

"Son, I've not got that far along in my reckonin'," replied Wade.

"But for my sake—think. If Buster Jack gets away with his trick—if he doesn't hang himself by some blunder or fit of temper or spree—what then of Collie? . . . Do you know that it will kill her if she marries him?"

"Ahuh! I reckon it would," replied Wade, with his head bowed. Moore roused his gloomy forebodings. He did not care to show this feeling or the effect the cowboy's pleading had upon him.

"Ah! So you admit it? Well, then, what of Collie?"

"If she marries him—she'll have to die, I suppose," replied Wade.

Then Wilson Moore leaped at his friend and with ungentle hands lifted him, pushed him erect.

"Wade, you're not square with me. You don't tell me all!" he cried hoarsely.

"Now, Wils, you're set up. I've told you all I know. I swear that."

"But you couldn't stand the thought of Collie's dying for that brute. You couldn't! Oh, I know. I can feel some things that are hard to tell. So you're either out of your head or you've something up your sleeve. It's hard to explain how you affect me. One minute I'm ready to choke you for that damned strangeness—whatever it is. The next minute I feel it—I trust it myself. . . . Wade, you're not—you can't be infallible!"

"I'm only a man, Wils, an' your friend. I reckon you do find me queer. But that's no matter. Now let's look at this deal—each from his own side of the fence. An' each actin' up to his own lights! You do what your conscience dictates, always thinkin' of Collie—not of yourself! An' I'll live up to my principles. Can we do more?"

"No, indeed, Wade, we can't," replied Moore eloquently.

"Well, then, here's my hand. I've talked too much, I reckon. An' the time for talkin' is past."

In silence Moore gripped the hand held out to him, trying to read Wade's mind, apparently once more uplifted and strengthened by that which he could not divine.

Wade's observations during the following week brought forth the fact that Jack Bellounds was not letting any grass grow under his feet. He endeavored to fulfill his agreement with Smith and drove a number of cattle by moonlight. These were part of the stock that the rancher had sold to buyers at Kremmling and which had been collected and held in the big fenced pasture down the valley next to the Andrews ranch. The loss was not discovered until the cattle had been counted at Kremmling. Then they were credited to loss by straying. In driving a considerable herd of half-wild steers with an inadequate force of cowboys it was no unusual thing to lose a number.

Wade, however, was in possession of the facts not later than the day after this midnight steal in the moonlight. He was forced to acknowledge that no one would have believed it possible for Jack Bellounds to perform a feat which might well have been difficult for the best of cowboys. But Jack accomplished it and got back home before daylight. And Wade was bound to admit that circumstantial evidence against Wilson

The rancher Bellounds, who was on the porch, greeted the visitors, and then they all went into the house.

"Boys, it's what I've been lookin' for," replied Wade.

"Shore. Reckon we all have ideas. An' if my idee is correct I'm agoin' to git pretty sore pronto," declared Lem.

They were all silent for a few moments, meditating over this singular occurrence and watching the house. Presently old Bill Bellounds strode out upon the porch and walking out into the court he peered round as if looking for someone. Then he espied the little group of cowboys.

"Hey!" he yelled. "One of you boys ride up an' fetch Wils Moore down hyar!"

"All right, boss," called Lem in reply as he got up and gave a hitch to his belt.

The rancher hurried back, head down, as if burdened.

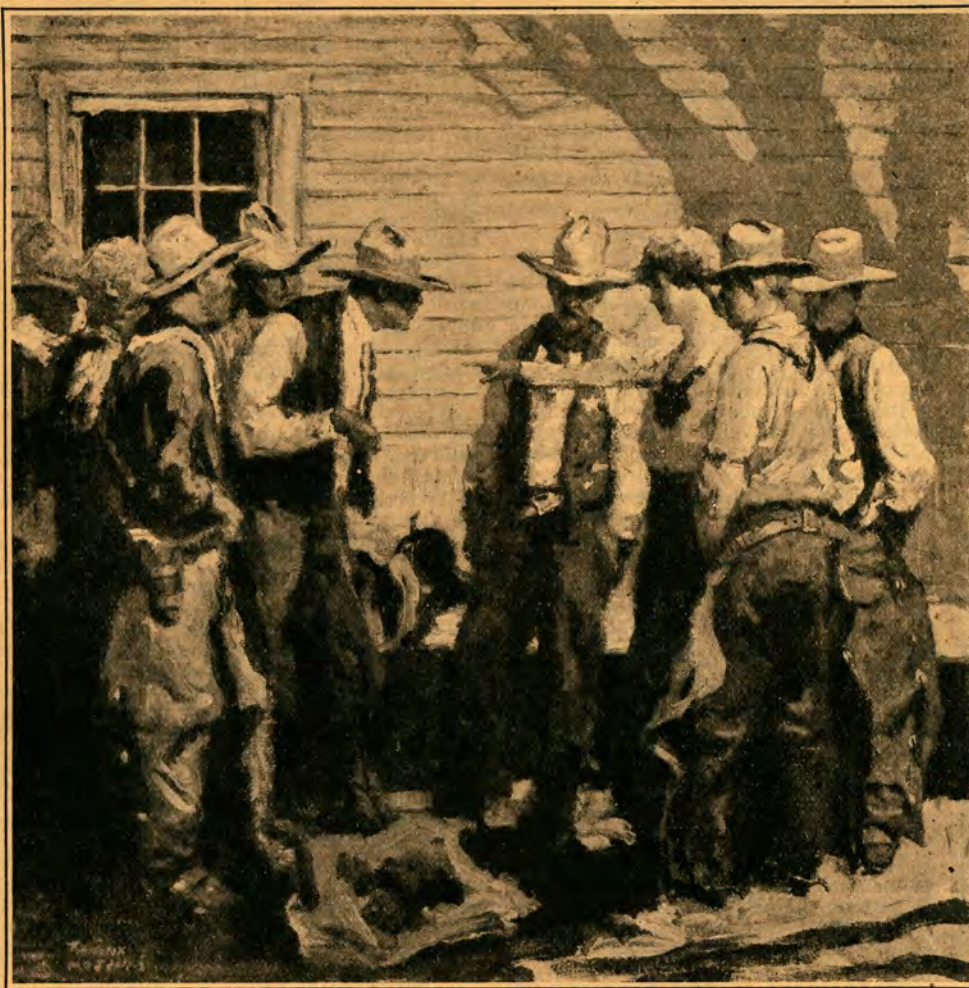
"Wade, I reckon you want to go fetch Wils?" queried Lem.

"If it's all the same to you I'd rather not," replied Wade.

"By golly! I don't blame you. Boys, Burley's after Wils."

"Wal, suppose'n he is," said Montana.

"You can gamble Wils ain't agoin' to run. I'd jest like to see him face thet outfit. Burley's a pretty square fellar. An' he's no fool."



"Jack Bellounds!" She Cried, "You Put the Sheriff on That Trail!"

Moore, which of course Jack Bellounds would soon present, would be damning and apparently irrefutable.

Waiting for further developments, Wade closely watched the ranch house, which duty interfered with his attention to the outlying trails. What he did not want to miss was being present when Jack Bellounds accused Wilson Moore of rustling cattle.

So it chanced that Wade was chatting with the cowboys one Sunday afternoon when Jack, accompanied by three strangers, all mounted on dusty tired horses, rode up to the porch and dismounted.

Lem Billings manifested unusual excitement.

"Montana, ain't thet Sheriff Burley from Kremmlin?" he queried.

"Shore looks like him. . . . Yep, thet's him. Now what's doin'?"

The cowboys exchanged curious glances and then turned to Wade.

"Bent, what do you make of thet?" asked Lem as he waved his hand toward the house. "Buster Jack ridin' up with Sheriff Burley."

"It's as plain as your nose, Montana, an' thet's shore big enough," returned Lem with a hard light in his eyes. "Buster Jack's busted out an' he's figgered Wils in some deal thet's rung in the sheriff. Wal, I'll fetch Wils." And growling to himself he slouched off after his horse.

Wade got up, deliberate and thoughtful, and started away.

"Say, Bent, you're shore goin' to see what's up?" asked Montana in surprise.

"I'll be round, Jim," replied Wade, and he strolled off to be alone. He wanted to think over this startling procedure of Jack Bellounds. Wade was astonished. He had expected that an accusation would be made against Moore by Jack, and an exploitation of such proofs as had been craftily prepared; but he had never imagined Jack would be bold enough to carry matters so far. Sheriff Burley was a man of wide experience, keen, practical, shrewd. He was also one of the countless men Wade had rubbed elbows with in the eventful past. It had been Wade's idea that Jack would be satisfied to face his father with the accusation of Moore, and thus cover his

tracks. Whatever old Bellounds might have felt over the loss of a few cattle, he would never have hounded and arrested a cowboy who had done well by him. Burley, however, was a sheriff, and a conscientious one; and he happened to be particularly set against rustlers.

Wade waited near the trail to intercept Billings and Moore on their way to the ranch house; and to his surprise they appeared sooner than it would have been reasonable to expect them. Wade stepped out of the willows and held up his hand. He did not see anything unusual in Moore's appearance.

"Wils, I reckon we'd do well to talk this over," said Wade.

"Talk what over?" queried the cowboy sharply.

"Why, old Bill's sendin' for you, an' the fact of Sheriff Burley bein' here."

"Talk nothing. Let's see what they want and then talk. Pard, you remember the agreement we made not long ago?"

"Sure. But I'm sort of worried an' maybe —"

"You needn't worry about me. Come on," interrupted Moore. "I'd like you to be there. And, Lem, fetch the boys."

"I shore will, an' if you need any backin' you'll git it."

When they reached the open Lem turned off toward the corrals, and Wade walked beside Moore's horse up to the house.

Bellounds appeared at the door, evidently having heard the sound of hoofs.

"Hello, Moore. Get down an' come in," he said gruffly.

"Bellounds, if it's all the same to you I'll take mine in the open," replied the cowboy coolly.

The rancher looked troubled. He did not have the ease and force habitual to him in big moments.

"Come out hyar, you men," he called in the door.

Voices, heavy footsteps, the clinking of spurs preceded the appearance of the three strangers, followed by Jack Bellounds. The foremost was a tall man in black, sandy-haired and freckled, with clear gray eyes and a drooping mustache that did not hide stern lips and rugged chin. He wore a silver star on his vest, packed a gun in a greasy holster worn low down on his right side, and under his left arm he carried a package.

It suited Wade then to step forward; and if he expected surprise and pleasure to break across the sheriff's stern face he certainly had not reckoned in vain.

"Wal, I'm a son-of-a-gun!" ejaculated Burley, bending low with quick movement to peer at Wade.

"Howdy, Jim. How's tricks?" said Wade, extending his hand; and the smile that came so seldom illumined his sallow face.

"Hell-Bent Wade, as I'm a born sinner!" shouted the sheriff, and his hand leaped out to grasp Wade's and grip it and wring it. His face worked. "I'm glad to see you, old-timer! Wal, you haven't changed at all! . . . Ten years! How time flies! An' it's shore you?"

"Same, Jim, an' powerful glad to meet you," replied Wade.

"Shakehands with Bridges an' Lindsay," said Burley, indicating his two comrades. "Stockmen from Grand Lake. . . . Boys, you've heerd me talk about him. Wade an' I was both in the old fight at Blair's Ranch on the Gunnison. An' I've shore reason to recollect him! . . . Wade, what're you doin' up in these diggin's?"

"Drifted over last fall, Jim, an' have been huntin' varmints for Bellounds," replied Wade. "Cleaned the range up fair to middlin'. An' since I quit Bellounds I've been hangin' round with my young pard here, Wils Moore, an' interestin' myself in lookin' up cattle tracks."

Burley's back was toward Bellounds and his son, so it was impossible for them to see the sudden little curious light that gleamed in his eyes as he looked hard at Wade and then at Moore.

"Wils Moore. How d'ye do. I reckon I remember you, though I don't ride up this way much of late years."

The cowboy returned the greeting civilly enough, but with brevity.

(Continued on Page 32)

THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER

(Continued from Page 21)

Bellounds cleared his throat and stepped forward. His manner showed he had a distasteful business at hand.

"Moore, I sent for you on a serious matter, I'm sorry to say."

"Well, here I am. What is it?" returned the cowboy with clear hazel eyes full of fire steady on the old rancher's.

"Jack, you know, is foreman of White Slides now. An' he's made a charge against you."

"Then let him face me with it," snapped Moore.

Jack Bellounds came forward, hands in his pockets, self-possessed, even a little swaggering, and his pale face and bold eyes showed the gravity of the situation and his mastery over it.

"Well, Buster Jack, what's the charge?" demanded Moore impatiently.

"I accuse you of stealing my father's cattle," declared Jack in low husky accents. After he got the speech out he swallowed hard.

Moore's face turned a dead white. His dark eyes, scornful and piercing, never moved from Jack's face.

"You call me thief! You?" at length he exclaimed.

"Yes, I do," replied Bellounds loudly.

"Before this sheriff and your father you accuse me of stealing cattle?"

"Yes."

"On what grounds do you accuse me?" demanded Moore.

"I trailed you. I've got my proofs."

Burley stepped off the porch and carefully laid down his package.

"Moore, will you get off your hoss?" he asked. And when the cowboy had dismounted and limped aside the sheriff continued: "Is this the hoss you ride most?"

"He's the only one I have."

Burley sat down upon the edge of the porch and carefully unwrapping the package he disclosed some pieces of hard-baked yellow mud. The smaller ones bore the imprint of a circle with a dot in the center, very clearly defined. The larger piece bore the imperfect but reasonably clear track of a curiously shaped horseshoe, somewhat triangular. The sheriff placed these pieces upon the ground. Then he laid hold of Moore's crutch, which was carried like a rifle in a sheath hanging from the saddle, and drawing it forth he carefully studied the round cap on the end. Next he inserted this end into both the little circles on the pieces of mud. They fitted perfectly. Burley's next move was to lift the left front foot of Moore's horse and expose the bottom to view. The iron shoe on this hoof was somewhat triangular in shape. When Burley held the larger piece of mud, with its imprint, close to the hoof, it was not possible to believe that this iron shoe had not made the triangular shaped track.

Burley let go of the hoof and laid the pieces of mud down. Slowly the other men straightened up. Someone breathed hard.

"Moore, what do them trails look like to you?" asked the sheriff.

"They look like mine," replied the cowboy.

"They are yours."

"I'm not denying that."

"I cut them pieces of mud from beside a water hole over hyar under Gore Peak. We'd trailed the cattle Bellounds lost, an' then we kept on trailin' them, clear to the road that goes over the ridge to Elgeria. . . . Now Bridges an' Lindsay hyar bought stock lately from strange cattlemen who didn't give no clear idee of their range. Jest buyin' an' sellin', they claimed. . . . I reckon the extra hoss tracks we run across at Gore Peak connects up them buyers an' sellers with whoever drove Bellounds' cattle up thar. . . . Have you anythin' more to say?"

"No. Not here," replied Moore quietly.

"Then I'll have to arrest you an' take you to Kremmlin' for trial."

"All right. I'll go."

The old rancher seemed genuinely shocked. Red tinged his cheek and a flame flared in his eyes.

"Wils, you done me dirt," he said wrathfully. "An' I always swore by you."

. . . Make a clean breast of the whole damn bizness, if you want me to treat you white. You must have been locoed or

drunk to double-cross me that way. Come on, out with it."

Whatever Moore might have replied was cut off by the sudden appearance of Columbine.

"Dad, I heard you," she cried as she swept upon them, fearful and wide-eyed. "What has Wilson Moore done? Why is Sheriff Burley here?"

"Miss, I'm arrestin' him."

"Oh! . . . For what?"

"Rustlin' your father's cattle."

For a moment, while he displayed the evidence, Columbine was speechless. Then she burst out: "Who put you on that track?"

"Jack, hyar. He found it fust, an' rode to Kremmlin' fer me."

"Jack! Jack Bellounds!" she cried, bursting into wild and furious laughter.

"Wal, I shore will, Wade," replied Burley heartily.

"I object to that," interposed Jack Bellounds stridently. "He confessed. He's got to go to jail."

"Wal, my hot-tempered young fellar, thar ain't any jail nearer'n Denver. Did you know that?" returned Burley with his dry grim humor. "Moore's under arrest. An' he'll be as well off hyar with Wade as with me in Kremmlin' an' a sight happier."

XVII

GORE PEAK was the highest point of the black range that extended for miles westward from Buffalo Park. It was a rounded dome, covered with timber, and visible as a landmark from the surrounding country. All along the eastern slope of that range an unbroken forest of spruce and pine

heavily studded with shells, contained two guns, both now worn in plain sight.

He headed for the concealed cabin on the edge of the high valley under the black brow of Gore Peak. It was early morning of a July day, with summer fresh and new to the forest.

When Wade came to the Elgeria trail he was not disappointed to find it smooth, untrodden by any recent travel. Half a mile farther on through the forest, however, he encountered tracks of three horses, made early the day before. Still farther on he found cattle and horse tracks now growing old and dim. These tracks, pointed toward Elgeria, were like words of a printed page to Wade.

About noon he climbed a rocky eminence that jutted out from a slow-descending ridge, and from this vantage point he saw down the wavering black and green bosom of the mountain slope. A narrow valley, almost hidden, gleamed yellow in the sunlight. At the edge of this valley a faint column of blue smoke curled upward.

"Ahuh!" muttered the hunter as he looked. Kane, the bloodhound that accompanied Wade, whined and pushed a cool nose into his hand.

Then Wade resumed his noiseless and stealthy course through the woods. He began a descent, leading off somewhat to the right of the point where the smoke had risen. The presence of the rustlers in the cabin was of importance, yet not so paramount as another possibility. He expected Jack Bellounds to be with them or meet them there, and that was the thing he wanted to ascertain. When he got down below the little valley he swung round to the left to cross the trail that came up from the valley, some miles still farther down. He found it, and was not surprised to see fresh horse tracks, made that morning. He recognized those tracks. Jack Bellounds was with the rustlers—come, no doubt, to receive his pay.

Wade expected the rustlers to have someone of their number doing duty as an outlook. So he kept uphill, above the cabin, and made his careful way through the thicket coverts, which at that place were dense and matted clumps of jack pine and spruce. At last he could see the cabin and the narrow grassy valley just beyond. To his relief the horses were unsaddled and grazing. No man was in sight. But there might be a dog. The hunter in his slower advance used keen vigilance, and at length he decided that if there had been a dog he would have been tied outside to give an alarm.

Wade had now reached his objective point. He was some eighty paces from the cabin, in line with an open aisle down which he could see into the cleared space before the door. On his left were thick small spruces with low spreading branches, and they extended all the way to the cabin on that side, and, in fact, screened two walls of it. Wade knew exactly what he was going to do. No longer did he hesitate. Laying down his rifle he tied the hound to a little spruce, patting him and whispering for him to stay there and be still.

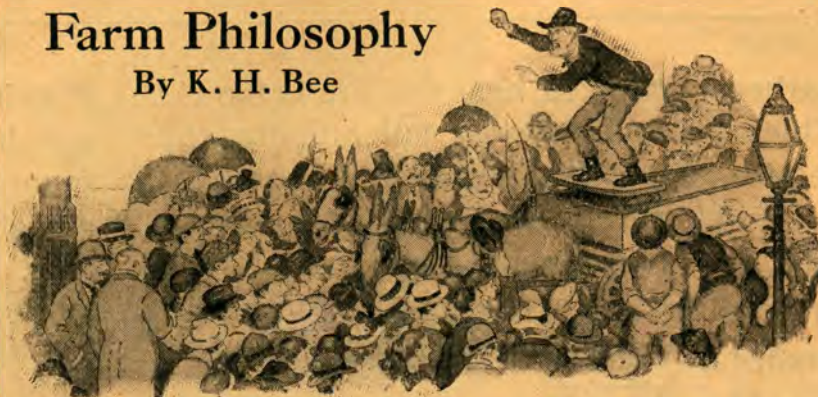
Then Wade's action in looking to his belt guns was that of a man who expected to have recourse to them speedily, and by whom the necessity was neither regretted nor feared. Stooping low he entered the thicket of spruces. The soft spruce-matted ground, devoid of brush or twig, did not give forth the slightest sound of step, nor did the brushing of the branches against his body. In some cases he had to bend the boughs. Thus, swiftly and silently, with the gliding steps of an Indian, he approached the cabin till the brown-barked logs loomed before him, shutting off the clearer light.

He smelt a mingling of wood and tobacco smoke; he heard low deep voices of men; the shuffling and patting of cards; the musical clink of gold. Resting on his knees a moment the hunter deliberated. All was exactly as he had expected. Luck favored him. These gamblers would be absorbed in their game. The door of the cabin was just round the corner and he could glide noiselessly to it or gain it in a few leaps. Either method would serve. But which he must try depended upon the position of the men inside and that of their weapons.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Farm Philosophy

By K. H. Bee



SAID Uncle Zebediah Gray:
*"I went to town last Saturday.
 A crowd of farmers that I knew
 Stood on a corner listenin' to
 A speech, and cheerin'. The speaker he
 Aroused my curiosity—
 The way he waved his long black hair
 And yelled and raved and pawed the air."*

*"Sez he: 'O tillers of the soil!
 You duntrod men who sweat and toil
 And let these folks that live in town
 Eat up your profits, do you brown.
 Rise up! Demand your rights from
 those
 That's nothin' but your natural foes—
 The merchants, bankers, educators;
 The doctors, lawyers, legislators.'"*

*"He told us town folks tries to get
 Our land away. And how they set
 And laugh and call us 'hick' and
 'jay.'
 He had a hull lot more to say."*

*My friends hurraed and said that he
 Was put on earth to set us free.
 But I preferred to think about
 These new idee's he pointed out."*

*"Agoin' home it come to me
 How, in the fall of ninety-three,
 When hail and drought had took the
 crop,
 And all my hogs began to drop
 Off dead, Lem Judson's bank had took
 My wuthless note; and how Wes' Cook
 Had sold me merchandise on tick,
 And hadn't called me 'jay' nor 'hick.'"*

*"Sez I: 'Now, Zeb, you've farmed for nigh
 On forty year. You've got laid by
 A blamed sight more than some town
 folks."*

*Why worry 'bout some foolish jokes?
 If some does figure you're their prey,
 Remember they ain't all that way.
 And don't you listen to the kicks
 Of none of them dern Bolsheeviks.'"*

"You put the sheriff on that trail! You accuse Wilson Moore of stealing dad's cattle!"

"Yes, and I proved it," replied Jack hoarsely.

"You! You proved it? So that's your revenge? . . . But you're to reckon with me, Jack Bellounds! You villain! You devil! You —" Suddenly she shrank back with strong shudder. Then her hands shot out to Moore.

"Wilson Moore, what have you to say—to this sheriff—to Jack Bellounds—to me?"

Moore bent upon her a gaze that must have pierced her soul, so like it was to a lightning flash of love and meaning and eloquence.

"Collie, they've got the proof. I'll take my medicine. . . . Your dad is good. He'll be easy on me!"

"You lie!" she whispered. "And I will tell why you lie!"

"Collie," said Wade, with that voice he knew had strange power over her, with a clasp of her outflung hand, "no more! This is a man's game. It's not for a woman to judge. Not here! It's Wils' game—an' it's mine. I'm his friend. Whatever his trouble or guilt I take it on my shoulders. An' it will be as if it were not!"

Then turning to the sheriff he asked:

"Jim, if I answer fer Wils Moore bein' in Kremmlin' the day you say, will you leave him with me?"

spread down to the edge of the valley. This valley narrowed toward its source, which was Buffalo Park. A few well-beaten trails crossed that country, one following Red Brook down to Kremmlin, another crossing from the Park to White Slides, and another going over the divide down to Elgeria. The only well-known trail leading to Gore Peak was a branch off from the valley, and it went round to the south and more accessible side of the mountain.

All that immense slope of timbered ridges, benches, ravines and swales west of Buffalo Park was exceedingly wild and rough country. Here the buffalo took to cover from hunters and were safe until they ventured forth again. Elk and deer and bear made this forest their home.

Bent Wade, hunter now for bigger game than wild beasts of the range, left his horse at Lewis' cabin and penetrated the dense forest alone, like a deer stalker or an Indian in his movements. Lewis had acted as scout for Wade, and had ridden furiously down to Sage Valley with news of the rustlers. Wade had accompanied him back to Buffalo Park that night, riding in the dark. There were urgent reasons for speed. Jack Bellounds had ridden to Kremmlin, and the hunter did not believe he would return by the road he had taken.

Wade carried his rifle and a buckskin pouch containing meat and bread. His belt,

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CHAFF

Perseverance

"THE prominent citizens who are to be found lingering and loitering in the lobby of the post office day after day are within their rights," said the landlord of the tavern at Grudge in reply to the criticisms of a captious guest. "The post office is public property—it belongs to the people; and, no matter what you think about it, they are people."

"They assemble at a fairly early hour in the forenoon and lallygag there most of the day—of course, the individuals change more or less, but they all look a good deal alike. And while none of 'em is actually expecting an important letter, any of 'em might get one; or, at least, a circular or a sample copy of one of them there blood-and-thunder story papers from August, Maine."

His Humiliation

"ALMOST every time I go downtown I am humiliated by the sight of a young soldier who lately came back from France," declared old Rufus Rasp. "He is Jimmy Sands, who was shot and gassed, and will always be lame and perhaps tubercular. At home, after I have growled about my rheumatism and snarled at everybody on the place and cursed the weather and the Government, the infernal neighbors and the profiteer hogs, and predicted disaster for everything in general, and shoved the old dog out of the way when he tried to be sympathetic, I go raging out, slamming the door behind me, and feeling mightily misused. Then I grouch down the street, snapping people's heads off when they politely greet me, until I come in front of the little home of the Widow Sands. The lad is pretty sure to be sitting out on the porch in his neatly brushed uniform, with his little overseas cap perched perkily on the side of his head, his decoration on his breast, and his cane beside him, grinning at the friends as they pass."

"How are you to-day, Jimmy?" I feel impelled to ask.

"Fine and dandy!" he wheezes. "Isn't this a beautiful day?"

"I have to be polite enough to own up that it is, and then, after a few more words, I go on and make my rounds, and proceed home, ashamed of myself because of the picture I carry with me of that brave boy, with a leg that will never be of much use to him, and gas in his lungs, wheezing out his thankfulness at being alive in this bright world and home again in good old U. S. A. I've either got to reform or go downtown some other way, for I am not the kind of a man who can stand being humiliated day after day."

One Redeeming Feature

"I RATHER admire the Hon. John R. Trickery," admitted old Festus Pester. "He is a scoundrel and liar, a dead-beat, and as crooked as a barrel of snakes, but when he gets into trouble on those accounts he never whimpers that there is a conspiracy against him."



The Pup: "Well! You'd Squeal, Too, if Your Tail Was Twisted Like That"

Self-Preservation

FOR three nights the proud father had walked the floor with the baby. On the fourth night he came home and unwrapped a bottle of soothing sirup.

"Oh, Kenneth," exclaimed

his wife, "what did you buy that for? It's so dangerous to give a child anything like that!"

"Don't worry!" was the tired husband's reply. "I shall take every drop in that bottle myself!"

Not Emancipated

MRS. A. F. HOWIE, the famous lecturer on dairying, tells this one:

After finishing her lecture in a farming section of Alabama she suddenly ran into an old negro sitting at the rear of the tent, who plainly showed that he had been a slave.

"Well, how do you do, uncle?" said Mrs. Howie. "And you were a slave?"

"Yes," replied the old man.

"Well," inquired Mrs. Howie, "you got your freedom?"

"No, ma'am," replied the negro, "I dun got married."

Why He Named Her

FIRST DARKY: Well I dun went and bought me a cow and I calls her United States.

SECOND DARKY: Well, what a name! And what for you-all call her United States?

FIRST DARKY: 'Caze that cow is dun goin' dry.

Lost Lands of Laughter

JUICY calls of Bob White trillin'
'Cross the stubble fields to me,
Whistle round my old heart, thrillin'
Back the days of Used-To-Be.
Tophet hot and gittin' hotter,
Yet I wander out through dreams
Sweet as was the sound of water
In old Benton County's streams.

Scootin' truantwise through clover
I hear comrade calls, and deep
Sounds of wood doves cooing, over
Where the woodland lies asleep.
Memories come and clutch my fingers,
And they lead me down the ways
Where the ghost of boyhood lingers,
Truant yet through yesterdays.

Deep, wet ways I follow after,
Down through snarl of reed and vine,
Lead me to forgotten laughter
And the land of lost sunshine.
Course, it's just in dreams I'm farin',
But old faiths come back to me
From the realms of Never Caring,
And lost loves of Used-To-Be.

So I turn the team and wander
Truantwise to furrow end,
Turnin' grief and stubble under
In a way that you'd commend.
While it's hot and gittin' hotter,
I go wanderin' through dreams,
Sweet as was the sound of water
In old Benton County's streams.

—Jay B. Iden.

Table of Contents for August 9, 1919

	PAGE		PAGE
Cover Design—Photograph by G. Gardner Richards		A Town That Understands the Farmer—By Charles Josiah Galpin	15
Congress and the Packers—By J. Clyde Marquis	3	Feeding and Managing the Brood Sow—By W. B. Perrin	16
The Illinois Agricultural Association—By E. Davenport	5	The Mysterious Rider—By Zane Grey	18
Putting the Bottom on Top—By Freeman Tilden	6	Handy Farm Mechanics	22
Two Ways of Selecting Sires—By John E. Pickett	8	The Apostles of Top Silage—By George Frederic Stratton	24
Acres of "Grass"—By Charles E. Bassett	9	Hunting Wild Bees—By C. O. Ormsbee	29
The Open-Front Poultry House—By Harry R. Lewis	10	Healthy Sheep—By Mark J. Smith	29
A Farm Bureau on Tour—By Robert E. Jones	11	The Home Garden	45
The Prodigal Gets Part of the Calf—By William H. Hamby	12	Western Poultry Women—By Helen Dow Whitaker	48
The Editors' Page	14	Chaff	52