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Painted by Norman Rockwell

THE FUTURE OF POWER FARMING

THE MYSTERIOUS RIDER

XVII (Continued)

RISING silently, Wade stepped up to the wall and peeped through a chink between the logs. The sunshine streamed through windows and door. Jack Bellounds sat on the ground full in its light, back to the wall. He was in his shirt sleeves. The gambling fever and the grievous soreness of a loser shone upon his pale face. Smith sat with back to Wade, opposite Bellounds. The other two men completed the square. All were close enough together to reach comfortably for the cards and gold before them.

Wade's keen eyes took this in at a single glance, and then steadied searchingly for smaller features of the scene. Bellounds had no weapon. Smith's belt and gun lay in the sunlight on the hard clay floor, out of reach except by violent effort. The other two rustlers wore their weapons.

Wade hesitated, then stooping low he softly swept aside the intervening boughs of spruce, glided out of the thicket into the open. Two noiseless bounds! Another, and he was inside the door!

"Howdy, rustlers! Don't move!" he called.

The surprise of his appearance or his voice or both stunned the four men. Bellounds dropped his cards and his jaw dropped at the same instant. These were absolutely the only visible movements.

"I'm in talkin' humor, an' the longer you listen the longer you'll have to live," said Wade. "But don't move!"

"We ain't movin'," burst out Smith. "Who're you an' what d'ye want?"

It was singular that the rustler leader had not had a look at Wade, whose movements had been swift and who now stood directly behind him.

"Who're you?" he shouted hoarsely.

"You ought to know me." The voice was Wade's, gentle, cold, with depth and ring in it.

"I've heerd your voice somewhars—I'll gamble on that."

"Sure. You ought to recognize my voice, cap," returned Wade.

The rustler gave a violent start—a start that he controlled instantly.

"Cap! You callin' me thet?"

"Sure. We're old friends—Cap Folsom!"

In the silence then, the rustler's hard breathing could be heard; his neck bulged red; only the eyes of his two comrades moved; Bellounds began to recover somewhat from his consternation. Fear had clamped him also, but not fear of personal harm or peril. His mind had not yet awakened to that.

"You've got me pat! But who're you?" said Folsom huskily.

Wade kept silent.

"Who'n hell is thet man?" yelled the rustler. It was not a query to his comrades any more than to the four winds. It was a furious questioning of a memory that stirred and haunted, and as well a passionate and fearful denial.

"His name's Wade," put in Bellounds harshly. "He's the friend of Wils Moore. He's the hunter I told you about—worked for my father last winter."

"Wade? . . . What? Wade! You never told me his name. It ain't—it ain't—"

"Yes it is, cap," interrupted Wade. "It's the old boy that spoiled your handsome mug—long ago."

"Hell-Bent Wade!" gasped Folsom in terrible accents. He shook all over. An ashen paleness crept into his face. Instinctively his right hand jerked toward his gun, then, as in his former motion, froze in the very act.

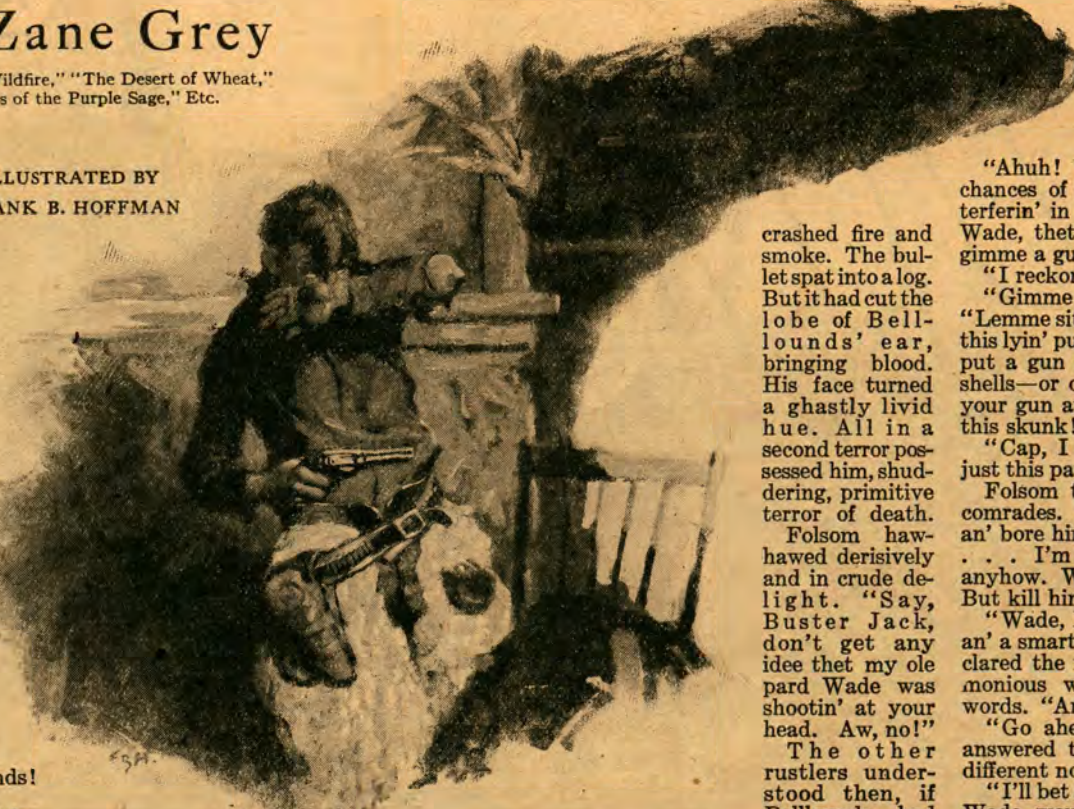
"Careful, cap!" warned Wade. "It'd be a shame not to hear me talk a little. . . . Turn round now an' greet an old pard of the Gunnison days."

Folsom turned as if a resistless heavy force was revolving his head.

By Zane Grey

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

ILLUSTRATED BY
FRANK B. HOFFMAN



"Don't Kill Me,"
Implored Bellounds, Stricken With Terror

"Wade!" he ejaculated. The tone of his voice, the light in his eyes, must have been a spiritual acceptance of a dreadful and irrefutable fact—perhaps the proximity of death. But he was no coward. Despite the hunter's order, given as he stood there, gun drawn and ready, Folsom wheeled back again savagely to throw the deck of cards in Bellound's face. He cursed horribly: "You spoiled brat of a rich rancher! Why didn't you tell me thet varmint hunter was Wade?"

"I did tell you," shouted Bellounds, flaming of face.

"You're a liar! You never said Wade—W-a-d-e—right out, so I'd hear it. An' I'd never passed by Hell-Bent Wade."

"Aw, that name made me tired," replied Bellounds contemptuously.

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" bawled the rustler. "Made you tired, hey? Think you're funny? Wal, if you knowed how many men thet name's made tired—an' tired fer keeps—you'd not think it so funny."

"Say, what're you giving me? That Sheriff Burley tried to tell me and dad a lot of rot about this Wade. Why, he's only a little bow-legged, big-nosed meddler—a man with a woman's voice—a sneaking cook and camp doctor and cow milker, and God only knows what else."

"Boy, you're correct. God only knows what else! . . . It's the 'else' you've got to learn. An' I'll gamble you'll learn it. . . . Wade, have you changed or grown old thet you let a pup like this yap such talk?"

"Well, cap, he's very amusin' just now, an' I want you all to enjoy him. Because if you don't force my hand, I'm goin' to tell you some interestin' stuff about this Buster Jack. . . . Now will you be quiet an' listen—an' answer for your pards?"

"Wade, I answer fer no man. But, so far as I've noticed, my pards ain't hankerin' to make any loud noise," Folsom replied, indicating his comrades with sarcasm.

"Buster Jack, these new pards of yours are low-down rustlers, an' one of them's worse, as I could prove," said Wade, "but compared to you they're all gentlemen."

"What do I care for you or your gabby talk?" he flashed sullenly.

"You'll care when I tell these rustlers how you double-crossed them."

Bellounds made a spring, like that of a wolf in a trap; but when halfway up he slipped. The rustler on his right kicked him and he sprawled down again, back to the wall.

"Buster, look into this!" called Wade, and he leveled the gun which quivered momentarily, like a compass needle, and then

not, that the situation was in control of a man not in any sense ordinary.

"Cap, did you know Buster Jack accused my friend, Wils Moore, of stealin' these cattle you're sellin'?" asked Wade deliberately.

"What cattle did you say?" asked the rustler, as if he had not heard aright.

"The cattle Buster Jack stole from his father an' sold to you."

"Wal, now! Bent Wade at his old tricks! I might have knowed it, once I seen you. . . . Naw, I'd no idee Bellounds blamed thet stealin' onto anyone."

"He did."

"Ahu! Wal, who's this Wils Moore?"

"He's a cowboy, as fine a youngster as ever straddled a horse. Buster Jack hates him. He licked Jack a couple of times an' won the love of a girl that Jack wants."

"Ho! Ho! Quite roomantic, I declare. . . . Say, thar's some queer notions I'm gettin' about you, Buster Jack."

"Listen. An' all of you sit tight," went on Wade swiftly. "Jack stole the cattle from his father. He's a thief at heart. But he had a double motive. He left a trail—he left tracks behind. He made a crooked horseshoe, like that Wils Moore's horse wears, an' he put that on his own horse. An' he made a contraption—a little iron ring with a dot in it an' he left the crooked shoe tracks an' he left the little ring tracks —"

"I seen them funny tracks!" ejaculated Folsom. "At the water hole an' right hyar in front of the cabin. I seen them. I knowed Jack made them somehow, but I didn't think. His white hoss has a crooked left front shoe."

"Yes, he has when Jack takes off the regular shoe an' nails on the crooked one. . . . Men, I followed those tracks. They lead up here to your cabin. Bellounds made them with a purpose. . . . An' he went to Kremmlin' to get Sheriff Burley. An' he put him wise to the rustlin' of cattle to Elgeria. An' he fetched him up to White Slides to accuse Wils Moore. An' he trailed his own tracks up here, showin' Burley the crooked horse track an' the little circle—that was supposed to be made by the end of Moore's crutch—an' he led Burley with his men right to this cabin an' to the trail where you drove the cattle over the divide. . . . An' then he had Burley dig out some cakes of mud holdin' these tracks an' they fetched them down to White Slides. Buster Jack blamed the stealin' on to Moore. An' Burley arrested Moore. The trial comes off next week at Kremmlin'."

"A man's never too old to learn!" exclaimed Folsom wonderingly. "I knowed this pup was stealin' from his own father. But I reckoned he was jest a natural-born

honest rustler with a hunch fer drink an' cards."

"Well, he's double-crossed you, cap. An' if I hadn't rounded you up your chances would have been good for swingin'."

"Ahu! Wade, I'd sure preferred them chances of swingin' to your overkind interferin' in my bizness. Allus interferin', Wade, thet's your weakness! . . . But gimme a gun!"

"I reckon not, cap."

"Gimme a gun!" roared the rustler. "Lemme sit hyar an' shoot the eyes out'en this lyin' pup of a Bellounds! . . . Wade, put a gun in my hand—a gun with two shells—or only one. You can stand with your gun at my head. . . . Let me kill this skunk!"

"Cap, I ain't trustin' you with a gun just this particular minute," said Wade.

Folsom then bawled his curses to his comrades. "Kill him! Throw your guns an' bore him—right in them bulgin' eyes! . . . I'm tellin' you—we've gotta fight anyhow. We're a-goin' to cash right hyar. But kill him first!"

"Wade, I've been a gambler all my life an' a smart one, if I do say it myself," declared the rustler leader, his voice inharmonious with the facetiousness of his words. "An' I'll make a last bet."

"Go ahead, cap. What'll you bet?" answered the cold voice, still gentle, but different now in its inflection.

"I'll bet all the gold hyar thet Hell-Bent Wade wouldn't shoot any man in the back!"

"You win!"

Slowly and stiffly the rustler rose to his feet. When he reached his height he deliberately swung his leg to kick Bellounds in the face.

"Thar! I'd like to have a reckonin' with you, Buster Jack," he said. "I ain't dealin' the cards hyar. But somethin' tells me thet shaky as I am in my boots I'd liefer be in mine than yours."

With that, and expelling a heavy breath, he wrestled round to confront the hunter.

"Wade, I've no hunch to your game, but it's slower'n I recollect you."

"Why, cap, I was in a talkin' humor," replied Wade.

"You're up to some dodge. What'd you care fer my learnin' thet pup had double-crossed me? You won't let me kill him."

"I reckon I wanted him to learn what real men thought of him."

"Ehuh! Wal, an' now I've onlightened him, what's the next deal?"

"You'll all go to Kremmlin' with me an' I'll turn you over to Sheriff Burley."

That was the gauntlet thrown down by Wade. It was not unexpected, and acceptance seemed a relief. Folsom's eyeballs became living fire with the desperate gleam of the reckless chances of life. Cutthroat he might have been, but he was brave, and he proved the significance of Wade's attitude.

"Pards, hyar's to luck!" he rang out hoarsely, and with pantherish quickness he leaped for his gun.

A tense surcharged instant—then all four men, as if released by some galvanic current of rapidity, flashed into action. Guns boomed in unison. Spurts of red, clouds of smoke, ringing reports and hoarse cries filled the cabin. Wade had fired as he leaped. There was a thudding patter of lead upon the walls. The hunter flung himself prostrate behind the bough framework that had served as bedstead. It was made of spruce boughs, thick and substantial. Wade had not calculated falsely in estimating it as a bulwark of defense. Pulling his second gun he peeped from behind the covert.

Smoke was lifting and drifting out of door and windows. The atmosphere cleared. Bellounds sagged against the wall, pallid, with protruding eyes of horror on the scene before him. The dark-skinned little man lay writhing. All at once a tremor stilled his convulsions. His body relaxed limply. As if by magic his hand loosened on the smoking gun. Folsom was on his knees, reeling and swaying, waving his gun, peering like a drunken man for some lost object. His temple appeared half shot away, a bloody and horrible sight.

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"Pards, I got him!" he said in strange half-strangled whisper. "I got him! . . . Hell-Bent Wade! My respects! I'll meet you—thar!"

His reeling motion brought his gaze in line with Bellounds. The violence of his start sent drops of blood flying from his gory temple.

"Ahuh! The cards run—my way. Bellounds, hyar's to you—lyin' eyes!"

The gun wavered and trembled and circled. Folsom strained in last terrible effort of will to aim it straight. He fired. The bullet tore hair from Bellounds' head, but missed him. Again the rustler aimed and the gun wavered and shook. He pulled trigger. The hammer clicked upon an empty chamber. With low and gurgling cry of baffled rage Folsom dropped the gun and sank face forward, slowly stretching out.

The red-bearded rustler had leaped behind the stone chimney which all but hid his body. The position made it difficult for him to shoot because his gun hand was on the inside, and he had to press his body tight to squeeze it behind the corner of ragged stone. Wade had the advantage. He was lying prone with his right hand round the corner of the framework. An overhang of the bough ends above protected his head when he peeped out. While he watched for a chance to shoot he loaded his empty gun with his left hand. The rustler strained and writhed his body, twisting his neck, and suddenly darting out his head and arm he shot. His bullet tore the overhang of boughs above Wade's face. And Wade's answering shot, just a second too late, chipped the stone corner where the rustler's face had flashed out. The bullet, glancing, hummed out of the window. It was a close shave. The rustler let out a hissing inarticulate cry. He was trapped. In his effort to press in closer he projected his left elbow beyond the corner of the chimney. Wade's quick shot shattered his arm.

There was no asking or offering of quarter here. This was the old feud of the West—of the vicious and the righteous in strife—both reared in the same stern school. The rustler gave his body such contortion that he was twisted almost clear round with his right hand over his left shoulder. He punched the muzzle of his gun into a crack between two stones and he pried to open them. The dry clay cement crumbled, the crack widened. Sighting along the barrel he aligned it with the narrow strip of Wade's shoulder that was visible above the framework. Then he shot and hit. Wade shrank flatter and closer, hiding himself to better advantage. The rustler made his great blunder then, for in that moment he might have rushed out and killed his adversary. But instead he shot again—another time—a third. And his heavy bullets tore and splintered the boughs dangerously close to the hunter's head. Then came an awkward, almost hopeless, task for the rustler in maintaining his position while reloading his gun. He did it, but his panting attested to the labor and pain it cost him.

So much, in fact, that he let his knee protrude. Wade fired, breaking that knee. The rustler sagged in his tracks; his hip stuck out to afford a target for the remorseless Wade. Still the doomed man did not cry out, though it was evident that he could not now keep his body from sagging into sight of the hunter. Then with a desperate courage worthy of a better cause, and with a spirit great in its defeat the rustler plunged out from his hiding place gun extended. His red beard, his gaunt face, fierce and baleful, his wabbling plunge that was really a fall, made a sight which was terrible. He hopped out of that fall. His gun began to blaze. But it only matched the blazes of Wade's. And the rustler pitched over the framework, falling against the wall beyond.

Then there was silence for a long moment. Wade stirred, as if to look round. Bellounds also stirred, and gulped as if to breathe. The three prostrate rustlers lay inert, their positions singularly tragic and settled. The smoke again began to lift, to float out of the door and windows. In another moment the big room seemed less hazy.

Wade rose, not without effort, and he had a gun in each hand. Those hands were bloody; there was blood on his face; and his left shoulder was red. He approached Bellounds.

Wade was terrible then—terrible with a ruthlessness that was no pretense. To Bellounds it must have represented death, a bloody death which he was not prepared to meet.

"Come out of your trance, you pup rustler!" yelled Wade.

"Don't kill me!" implored Bellounds, stricken with terror.

"Why not? Look round! My busy day, Buster! . . . An' for that Cap Folsom, it's been ten years comin'. . . . I'm going to shoot you in the belly an' watch you get sick to your stomach!"

Bellounds, with whisper and hands and face, begged for his life in an abjectness of sheer panic.

"What!" roared the hunter. "Didn't you know I come to kill you?"

"Yes—yes! I've seen that. It's awful! . . . I never harmed you. . . . Don't kill me! Let me live, Wade. I swear I'll never do it again! . . . For dad's sake—for Collie's sake—don't kill me!"

"I'm Hell-Bent Wade! . . . You wouldn't listen to them—when they wanted to tell you who I am!"

manhood in him then. He was only a factor in the lives of others, protected even from this Nemesis by the greatness of his father's love.

"Get up, an' take my scarf," said Wade, "an' bandage these bullet holes I got."

XVIII

WADE'S wounds were not in any way serious, and with Bellounds' assistance he got to the cabin of Lewis, where weakness from loss of blood made it necessary that he remain. Bellounds went home.

The next day Wade sent Lewis with pack horse down to the rustlers' cabin to bury the dead men and fetch back their effects. Lewis returned that night accompanied by Sheriff Burley and two deputies, who had been busy on their own account. They had followed horse tracks from the water hole under Gores Peak to the scene of the fight, and had arrived to find Lewis there. Burley had appropriated the considerable amount of gold, which he said could be identified by cattlemen who had bought the stolen cattle.

When opportunity afforded Burley took advantage of it to speak to Wade when the others were out of earshot.

"Thar was another man in thet cabin when the fight come off," announced the sheriff. "An' he come up hyar with you."

"Jim, you're locoed," replied Wade.

The sheriff laughed and his shrewd eyes had a kindly curious gleam.

"Wal, tell me or not, just as you like. I seen his tracks—followed them. An' Wade, old pard, I've reckoned long ago thar's a nigger in the woodpile."

"Sure. An' you know me. I'd take it friendly of you to put Moore's trial off fer

but he was reluctant to do so. Memory of Jack Bellounds dragged at him, and when he drove it away it continually returned. This feeling was almost equivalent to an augmentation of his gloomy foreboding, which ever hovered on the fringe of his consciousness. But one morning he started early, and riding very slowly, with many rests, he reached the Sage Valley cabin before sunset. Moore saw him coming, yelled his delight and concern, and almost lifted him off the horse. Wade was too tired to talk much, but he allowed himself to be fed and put to bed and worked over.

"Boot's on the other foot now, pard," said Moore with delight at the prospect of returning service. "Say, you're all shot up! And it's I who'll be nurse!"

"Wils, I'll be round to-morrow," replied the hunter. "Have you heard any news from down below?"

"Sure. I've met Lem every night."

Then he related Burley's version of Wade's fight with the rustlers in the cabin. From the sheriff's lips the story gained much. Old Bill Bellounds had received the news in a singular mood; he offered no encomiums to the victor; contrary to his usual custom of lauding every achievement of labor or endurance he now seemed almost to regret the affray. Jack Bellounds had returned from Kremmling and he was present when Burley brought news of the rustlers. What he thought none of the cowboys vouchsafed to say, but he was drunk the next day, and he lost a handful of gold to them.

Wade made scarcely any comment upon this news from the ranch; next day, however, he was up and caring for himself; and he told Moore about the fight and how he had terrorized Bellounds and extorted the promises from him.

"Never in the world will Buster Jack live up to those promises!" cried Moore with absolute conviction. "I know him, Ben. He meant them when he made them. He'd swear his soul away—then next day he'd lie or forget or betray."

"I'm not believin' that till I know," replied the hunter gloomily. "But I'm afraid of him."

"Ben, you wait and see," said Moore earnestly. "Heaven knows I'm not one to lose hope for my fellow men—hope for the higher things you've taught me. . . . But human nature is human nature. Jack can't give Collie up just the same as I can't. That's self-preservation as well as love."

The day came when Wade walked down to White Slides. There seemed to be a fever in his blood, which he tried to convince himself was a result of his wounds instead of the condition of his mind. It was Sunday, a day of sunshine and

squall, of azure blue sky and great sailing purple clouds. The sage of the hills glistened and there was a sweetness in the air.

The cowboys made much of Wade. But the old rancher, seeing him from the porch, abruptly went into the house. No one but Wade noticed this omission of courtesy. Directly Columbine appeared, waving her hand and running to meet him.

"Dad saw you. He told me to come out and excuse him. . . . Oh, Ben, I'm so happy to see you. You don't look hurt at all. What a fight you had! . . . Oh, I was sick! But let me forget that. . . . How are you? And how's Wils?"

"Collie, it's sure good to see you," said Wade, feeling the old rich thrill at her presence. "I'm comin' on tolerable well. I wasn't bad hurt, but I bled a lot. An' I reckon I'm older'n I was when packin' gunshot holes was nothin'. Every year tells. Only a man doesn't know till after. . . . I fetched a message from Wils, but I oughtn't t' tell it."

"Please do," she begged wistfully.

"Well, Wils says tell Collie I love her every day more an' more, an' that my

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Wade Was Terrible Then—Terrible With a Ruthlessness That Was No Pretense. To Bellounds it Must Have Represented Death

Every word of Wade's drove home to this boy the primal meaning of sudden death. It inspired him with an unutterable fear. That was what clamped his brow in a sweaty band and up-reared his hair and rolled his eyeballs. His magnified intelligence, almost ghastly, grasped a hope in Wade's apparent vacillation, and in the utterance of the name of Columbine. Intuition, a subtle sense, inspired him to beg in that name.

"Swear you'll give up Collie!" demanded Wade, brandishing his guns.

"Yes—yes! I'll do anything!" moaned Bellounds.

"Swear you'll tell your father you had a change of heart. You'll give Collie up! . . . Let Moore have her!"

"I swear! . . . But if you tell dad—I stole his cattle—he'll do for me!"

"We won't squeal that. I'll save you if you give up the girl. Once more, Buster Jack—try an' make me believe you'll square the deal."

Bellounds had lost his voice. But his mute fluttering lips were infinite proof of the vow he could not speak. The boyishness, the stunted moral force, replaced the

a while—till I'm able to ride to Kremmlin'. Maybe then I can tell you a story."

Burley threw up his hands in genuine apprehension. "Not much! You ain't agoin' to tell me no story! . . . But I'll wait on you, an' welcome. Reckon I owe you a good deal on this rustler round-up. Wade, thet must have been a man's-size fight, even fer you. I picked up twenty-six empty shells. An' the little half-breed had one empty shell an' five loaded ones in his gun. You must have got him quick. Hey?"

"Jim, I'm observin' you're a heap more curious than ever, an' you always was an inquisitive cuss," complained Wade. "I don't recollect what happened."

"Ahuh!" Burley grunted out the familiar exclamation. He did not say any more then, but he gazed thoughtfully down upon the pale hunter, as if that strange individual was one infinitely to respect, but never to comprehend.

Wade's wounds healed quickly; nevertheless, it was more than several days before he felt spirit enough to undertake the ride. He had to return to White Slides,

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love keeps up my courage, an' if she ever marries Jack Bellounds she can come up to visit my grave among the columbines on the hill."

Strange how Wade experienced comfort in thus torturing her! She was rosy at the beginning of his speech and white at its close. "Oh, it's true! It's true!" she whispered. "It'll kill him as it will me!"

"Cheer up, Columbine," said Wade. "It's a long time till August thirteenth. . . . An' now tell me, why did Bill run when he saw me comin'?"

"Ben, I suspect dad has the queerest notion you want to tell him some awful bloody story about the rustlers."

"Ahuh! Well, not yet. . . . An' how's Jack Bellounds actin' these days?"

"My friend, somehow I hate to tell you. You're always so hopeful, so ready to think good instead of evil. . . . But Jack has been rough with me, almost brutal. He was drunk once. Every day he drinks, sometimes a little, sometimes more. But drink changes him. And it's dragging dad down. Dad doesn't say so, yet I feel he's afraid of what will come next."

"Buster Jack didn't break off with you, Collie?" asked the hunter.

"Break off with me! . . . No indeed! Whatever possessed you to say that?"

"An' he didn't offer to give you up to Wils Moore?"

"Ben, are you crazy?" cried Columbine.

"Collie, listen. I'll tell you —" The old urge knocked at Wade's mind. "Buster Jack was in the cabin gamblin' with the rustlers when I cornered them. You remember I meant to scare Buster Jack within an inch of his life? Well, I made use of my opportunity. I worked up the rustlers. Then I told Jack I'd give away his secret. He made to jump an' run, I reckon. But he hadn't the nerve. I shot a piece out of his ear, just to begin the fun. An' then I told the rustlers how Jack had double-crossed them. Folsom, the boss rustler, roared like a mad steer. He was wild to kill Jack. He begged for a gun to shoot out Jack's eyes. An' so were the other rustlers burnin' to kill him. Bad outfit. There was a fight, which I'm bound to confess was not short an' sweet. There was a lot of shootin'. An' in a cabin gunshots almost lift the roof. Folsom was on his knees dyin', wavin' his gun, whisperin' in fiendish glee that he had done for me. When he saw Jack an' remembered, he shook so with fury that he scattered blood all over. An' he took long aim at Jack, tryin' to steady his gun. He couldn't, an' he missed, an' then fell over dead with his head on Jack's knees. That left the red-bearded rustler who had hid behind the chimney. Jack watched the rest of that fight, an' for a youngster it must have been nerve-rackin'. I broke the rustler's arm an' then his knee an' then I got him in the hip two more times before he hobbled out to his finish. He'd shot me up considerable, so that when I braced Jack I must have been a hair-raisin' sight. I made Jack believe I meant to murder him. He begged an' cried, an' he got to prayin' for his life for your sake. It was sickenin', but it was what I wanted. So then I made him swear he'd free you an' give you up to Moore."

"Promises! What are promises or oaths to Jack Bellounds?" she cried in passionate contempt. "You wasted your breath. Coward—liar that he is!"

"Ahuh!" Wade looked straight ahead of him as if he saw some expected and unpleasant thing far in the distance. Then with irresistible steps, neither swift nor slow, but ponderous, he strode to the porch and mounted the steps.

"Why, Ben, where are you going?" called Columbine in surprise as she followed him.

He did not answer. He approached the closed door of the living room.

"Ben!" cried Columbine in alarm.

But he had no reply for her; indeed, no thought of her. Without knocking he opened the door with rude and powerful hand and, striding in, closed it quickly after him.

Bill Bellounds was standing, back against the great chimney, arms folded, a stolid and grim figure, apparently fortified against an intrusion he had expected.

"Wal, what do you want?" he asked gruffly. He had sensed catastrophe in the first sight of the hunter.

"Bellounds, I reckon I want a lot," replied Wade. "An' I'm askin' you to see we're not disturbed."

"Bar the door." Wade dropped the bar in place, and then, removing his sombrero, he wiped his moist brow.

"Do you see an enemy in me?" he asked curiously.

"Speakin' out fair, Wade, there ain't any reason I can see that you're an enemy to me," replied Bellounds. "But I feel somethin'. It ain't because I'm takin' my son's side. It's more than that. A queer feelin', an' one I never had before. I got it first when you told the story of the Gunnison feud."

"Bellounds, we can't escape our fates. An' it was written long ago I was to tell you a worse an' harder story than that."

"Wal, mebbe I'll listen an' mebbe I won't. I ain't promisin' these days."

"Are you goin' to make Collie marry Jack?" demanded the hunter.

"She's willin'."

"You know that's not true. Collie's willin' to sacrifice love, honor an' life itself, to square her debt to you."

The old rancher flushed a burning red and in his eyes flared a spirit of earlier years.

"Wade, you can go too far," he warned.

"I'm appreciatin' your good-heartedness. It sort of warms me toward you. . . . But this is my business. You've no call to interfere. You've done that too much already. An' I'm reckonin' Collie would be married to Jack now if it hadn't been for you."

"Ahuh! . . . That's why I'm thankin' God I happened along to White Slides. Bellounds, your big mistake is thinkin' your son is good enough for this girl. An' you're makin' mistakes about me. I've interfered here, an' you may take my word for it, I had the right."

"Strange talk, Wade, but I'll make allowances."

"You needn't. I'll back my talk. . . . But first I'm askin' you—an' if this talk hurts, I'm sorry—why don't you give some of your love for your no-good Buster Jack to Collie?"

Bellounds clenched his huge fists and glared. Anger leaped within him. He recognized in Wade an outspoken bitter adversary to his cherished hopes for his son and his stubborn precious pride.

"Wade, I'll —"

"Bellounds, I can make you swallow that kind of talk," interrupted Wade. "It's man to man now. An' I'm a match for you, any day. Savvy? . . . Do you think I'm fool enough to come here an' brace you, unless I knew that? Talk to me as you'd talk about some other man's son."

"It ain't possible," rejoined the rancher stridently.

"Then listen to me first. . . . I tell you, straight to your face, it's a fool deal you're workin'—a selfish one—a dirty job to put on an innocent sweet girl—an' as sure as you stand there, if you do it you'll ruin four lives!"

"Four!" exclaimed Bellounds. But any word would have expressed his humiliation.

"I should have said three, leavin' Jack out. I meant Collie's an' yours an' Wils Moore's."

"Moore's is about ruined already, I've a hunch."

"You can get hunches you never dreamed of, Bellounds, old as you are. An' I'll give you one presently. . . . But we drift off. Can't you keep cool?"

"Cool! With you rantin' hell-bent for election? Haw! Haw! . . . Wade, you're locoed. You always struck me queer. . . . An' if you'll excuse me, I'm gettin' tired of this talk. We're as far apart as the poles. An' to save what good feelin's we both have, let's quit."

"You don't love Collie, then?" queried Wade imperturbably.

"Yes, I do. That's a fool idee of yours. It puts me out of patience."

"Bellounds, you're not her real father."

The rancher gave a start, and he stared as he had stared before, fixedly and perplexedly at Wade.

"No, I'm not."

"If she were your real daughter—your own flesh an' blood—an' Jack Bellounds was my son, would you let her marry him?"

"Wal, Wade, I reckon I wouldn't."

(Continued on Page 48)

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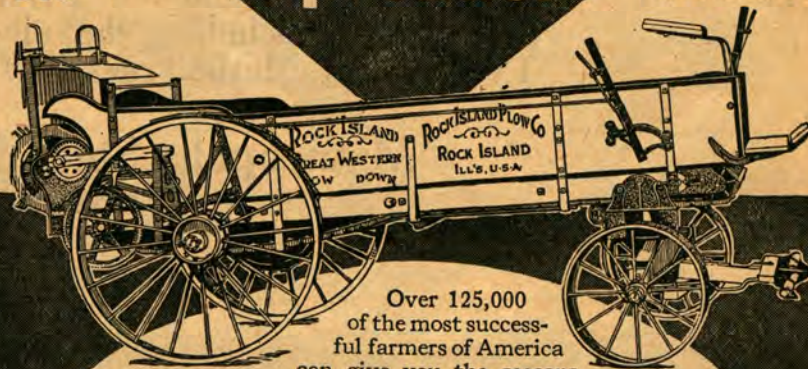
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(Continued from Page 45)

"Then how can you expect my consent to her marriage with your son?"

"What!" Bellounds lunged over to Wade, leaned down, shaken by overwhelming amazement.

"Collie is my daughter!"

A loud expulsion of breath escaped Bellounds. Lower he leaned, and looked with piercing gaze into the face and eyes that in this moment bore strange resemblance to Columbine.

"So that's the secret? . . . Hell-Bent Wade! An' you've been on my trail!"

He staggered to his big chair and fell into it. No trace of doubt showed in his face. The revelation had struck home because of its very greatness.

Wade took the chair opposite. His likeness to Columbine had faded now. It had been love, a spirit, a radiance, a glory. It was gone. And Wade's face became the emblem of tragedy.

"Listen, Bellounds. I'll tell you! . . . The ways of God are inscrutable. I've been eighteen years tryin' to atone for the wrong I did Collie's mother. I've been a prospector for the trouble of others. I've been a bearer of their burdens. An' if I can save Collie's happiness an' her soul I reckon I won't be denied the peace of meetin' her mother in the other world. . . . I recognized Collie the moment I laid eyes on her. She favors her mother in looks an' she has her mother's sensitiveness, her fire an' pride, an' she even has her voice. It's low an' sweet—alto they used to call it. . . . But I'd have recognized Collie as my own if I'd been blind an' deaf. . . .

"It's over eighteen years ago that we had the trouble. I was no boy, but I was terribly in love with Lucy. An' she loved me with a passion I never learned till too late. We came West from Missouri. She was born in Texas. I had a rovin' disposition, an' didn't stick long at any kind of work. But I was lookin' for a ranch. My wife had some money an' I had high hopes.

"We spent our first year of married life travelin' through Kansas. At Dodge I

got tied up for a while. You know in them days Dodge was about the wildest camp on the plains. My wife's brother run a place there. He wasn't much good. But she thought he was perfect. Strange, how blood relations can't see the truth about their own people! Anyway, her brother Spencer had no use for me, because I could tell how slick he was with the cards an' beat him at his own game.

"Spencer had a gambler's pard, a cowboy run out of Texas, one Cap Fol— But no matter about his name. One night they were fleecin' a stranger, an' I broke into the game, winnin' all they had. The game ended in a fight, with bloodshed, but nobody killed. That set Spencer an' his pard, Cap, agin me. The stranger was a planter from Louisiana. He'd been an officer in the Southern army. A high-strung, handsome Southerner, fond of wine an' cards an' women. Well, he got to payin' my wife a good deal of attention when I was away, which happened to be often. She never told me. I was jealous those days.

"My little girl you call Columbine was born there durin' a long absence of mine. When I got home Lucy an' the baby were gone. Also the Southerner! . . . Spencer an' his pard, Cap, an' others they had in the deal proved to me, so it seemed, that the little girl was not really mine! . . . An' so I set out on a hunt for my wife an' her lover. I found them. An' I killed him before her eyes. But she was innocent, an' so was he, as came out too late. He'd been indeed her friend. She scorned me. She told me how her brother Spencer an' his friends had established guilt of mine that had driven her from me.

"I went back to Dodge to have a little quiet smoke with these men who had ruined me. They were gone. The trail led to Colorado. Nearly a year later I rounded them all up in a big wagon-train post north of Denver. Another brother of my wife's an' her father had come West, an' by accident or Fate we all met there. We had a family quarrel. My wife would not forgive me—would not speak to me, an' her

people backed her up. I made the great mistake to take her father an' other brothers to belong to the same brand as Spencer. In this I wronged them an' her.

"What I did to them, Bellounds, is one story I'll never tell to any man who might live to repeat it. But it drove my wife near crazy. An' it made me Hell-Bent Wade! . . . She ran off from me there an' I trailed her all over Colorado. An' the end of that trail was not a hundred miles from where we stand now. The last trace I had was of the burnin' of a prairie schooner by Arapahoes as they were goin' home from a foray on the Utes. . . . The little girl might have toddled off the trail. But I reckon she was hidden or dropped by her mother or someone fleelin' for life. Your men found her there in the columbines."

Bellounds drew a long deep breath.

"What a man never expects always comes true. . . . Wade, the lass is yours. I can see it in the way you look at me. I can feel it. . . . She's been like my own. I've done my best, accordin' to my conscience. An' I've loved her, for all they say I couldn't see aught but Jack. . . . You'll take her away from me?"

"No! Never," was the melancholy reply.

"What! Why not?"

"Because she loves you. . . . I could never reveal myself to Collie. I couldn't win her love with a lie. An' I'd have to lie, to be false—false to her mother an' to Collie an' to all I hold high! I'd have to tell Collie the truth—the wrong I did her mother—the hell I visited upon her mother's people. . . . She'd fear me."

"Ahuh! . . . An' you'll never change—I reckon that!" exclaimed Bellounds.

"No. I changed once, eighteen years ago. I can't go back. . . . I can't undo all I hoped was good."

"But all this you tell an' the hell you hint at ain't changin' this hazy deal of Jack's an' Collie's. Not one jot! . . . If she remains my adopted daughter she marries my son. . . . Wade, I'm haltered like the north star in that."

"Bellounds, will you take a day to think it over?" appealed Wade.

"Ahuh! But that won't change me."

"Won't it change you to know that if you force this marriage you'll lose all?"

"All! Ain't that more queer talk?"

"I mean lose all—your son, your adopted daughter—his chance of reformin', her hope of happiness. These ought to be all in life left to you."

"Wal, they are. But I can't see your argument. You're beyond me, Wade. You're holdin' back, like you did with your hell-bent story."

Ponderously, as if the burden and the doom of the world weighed him down, the hunter got up and fronted Bellounds.

"When I'm driven to tell I'll come. . . . But once more, old man, choose between generosity an' selfishness. Between blood tie an' noble loyalty to your good deed in its beginnin'. . . . Will you give up this marriage for your son—so that Collie can have the man she loves?"

"You mean your young pard an' two-bit of a rustler—Wils Moore?"

"Wils Moore, yes. My friend, an' a man, Bellounds, such as you or I never was."

"No!" thundered the rancher, purple in the face.

With bowed head and dragging step Wade left the room.

By slow degrees of plodding steps and periods of abstracted lagging the hunter made his way back to Moore's cabin. At his entrance the cowboy leaped up with a startled cry.

"Oh, Wade! . . . Is Collie dead?" he cried.

Such was the extent of calamity he imagined from the somber face of Wade.

"No. Collie's well."

"Then, man, what on earth's happened?"

"Nothin' yet. . . . But somethin' is goin' on in my mind. . . . Moore, I'd like you to let me alone."

(TO BE CONCLUDED)

A COMMUNITY FAIR

THE Old County Fair had died. It was a serious case of impaction—not from consuming too much green alfalfa, but from taking on too many advertising features and commercialized amusements. For a few seasons before its final demise all the county-fair doctors had tried various emetics and cathartics as means of helping the Old County Fair to rid itself of its congealed mass of implement advertisements, fake shows, cheap imported horse races, and so forth. The end might be best told in the terms sometimes used by physicians concerning a hospital case: "The operation was successful, but the patient died."

The fairgrounds, which in years gone by had been sacredly reserved as the setting for the one big annual event, were now being used for various and irrelevant purposes. A Holy Roller camp meeting, a Chautauqua, and other such extremes in public expression graced or disgraced the erstwhile sacred precincts. Part of the race track had been plowed up to add to the domains of a cornfield. The roof of the grandstand had been partially blown away, converting that aristocratic seating space into bleachers.

Yet this condition did not mean at all that the great and noble cause of agriculture was on the blink in the Old County itself. It did indicate that the farmers had grown weary of an annual event which was professedly in honor of agriculture but actually a means of bringing them to the county seat to spend their good money for pink lemonade, popcorn balls and near-beer and to furnish and pay for a setting in which commercial dealers could the more readily make dupes of them.

As a matter of fact, the death of the Old County Fair evidenced agricultural progression in the Old County. This was further evidenced by the fact that the farmers had organized after the manner of the town merchants and gotten to themselves a paid secretary to look after their common interests. This county agent got on the scene in time to sit on the self-appointed coroner's jury for the Old



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It is More Than Taking the Place of the Defunct County Fair—By Walter Burr

County Fair—and afterward privately and stealthily dug up the remains for a personally conducted autopsy—with findings as aforesaid. But he also was sure that there must have been redeeming features about the Old County Fair; otherwise why should the people of the Old County, in past years, have eagerly assembled there as regularly as the autumn leaves fell?

The farmers' agent was a Maine Yankee of the "I want to know" kind, so he set out to ask questions of the old-timers. And this was the story he got:

There was a time when the Old County was just one great big community. Farm-

ers who had come from the same neighborhood "back East" had settled in the Old County, but at some distance apart. Jasper Shaw, from the south part of the county, was a neighbor to Jim Reader, who lived fifteen miles north. The annual get-together time was the occasion of the Old County Fair. Jim and Jasper hadn't seen each other for quite a spell—a year anyhow—and neither knew what the other had been doing. But now Jim had brought up to the fair some pure-bred pigs that he was raising that season—and had gotten the blue-ribbon prize. Jasper banteringly vowed that he would bring pigs the next year that would take the prize. In the

meantime Mrs. Jasper and Mrs. Jim were comparing quilts they had brought and placed on exhibition, while little Jim and little Jasper were in another part of the grounds having a heated argument over the comparative advantages of the colts that had followed each family team on the long drive to the Old County Fair.

"But later," said the old-timer, "traveling exhibitors who never raised decent pork to feed human beings, but made their money out of prize critters, got to carrying off the prizes from Jim and Jasper, who raised hogs for the sake of pork. And as for horses, professional race-horse men came with animals that never saw a real farm or an honest-to-goodness farmer; and handiwork and farm exhibits were crowded out of the way by side shows and advertising schemes. Well, it wasn't the same Old County Fair."

"I have it," shouted the county agent; "it was a go as long as it was a neighborhood fair. When more people crowded in—folks that weren't known—and more towns were built, the Old County got too big. When the neighborhood idea went out of the fair the neighbors quit coming."

"Well," asked the old-timer, "what's the answer?"

"The community fair."

The community fair has now become a regular annual feature in a large number of communities in the Old County. In each case the area from which attendance is expected and from which exhibits will be received is well established. Sometimes this area will comprise only a school district, but oftener two districts combined or, better yet, an agricultural community with a village center. Now Jasper Shaw and Jim Reader become neighbors again. They watch each other's progress in raising pigs, and when the exhibit is made in the fall they and the other neighbors have a neighborhood interest in the prize giving. Mrs. Jasper and Mrs. Jim and the other women can again chat over the handiwork exhibit, while little Jasper and little Jim are putting their colts through the paces in the colt-judging process.

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CHAFF

His Request

"BRUDDREN and sistahs," began Goat Simmons, the gambling man, during a recent experience meeting in Ebenezer Chapel. "Yo' all knows dat Ise been one o' de most contaminated scoun'els dat ever cummbered de earth. Ise flipped de kyahds and rolled de bones world widout end, mighty nigh. In de days when I could git to it I done guzzled gin enough to float a canoe. Ise chased dese yuh yallah ladies wid mouffles o' gold teef, comin' and gwine. Ise wallered in de slough o' sin and slept in de sasspole o' 'nickerky. Pray for me, bruddren and sistahs, dat I may hold out to de end!"

The Limit

"THEY'VE got one of them Fiddle Creek fellers in jail for beating his wife with a club," related a neighbor. "Serves him mighty right!" commented Gap Johnson, of Rumpus Ridge, Arkansas. "A gent that's got so he can't handle his wife with his bare fists or'tn't be allowed to whip her a-tall."

Work

"DAT Mr. Slicksmith am de meanest dog-gone white man in dis town!" grumbled old Brother Bulginback. "Yas-sah, he diametrically am! W'y, looky: Every time I does a job o' work for him, stidder scowlin' and mowlin' 'bout it and in dat way givin' me an excuse to scamp de next job I does for him, he is dess as p'lite as pie and says suppin' so nice and compermentary dat next time I busts muhsef tryin' to do a still better job. Dat schemin' white man will sho' and sartin work me into a timely grave if I don't watch him!"

Just the Same

"DO FARMERS," we asked, "actually wear billy-goat whiskers, chew straws, and say, 'Wa-al, I'll be gol-vummed!'"

"Yes," replied honest Farmer Hornbeak. "Just the same as artisans wear square paper caps and bankers indulge in side whiskers and white vests with dollar-marks on 'em."

Changing Owners

"SO YOU own your own house, Dunham?"

"No."

"Why, you told me so last month!"

"Yes—we had no cook then."

The Hussy

"ISN'T that the pretty young Widow Peachy?"

"Yes, the deceitful thing! She acts just as if she really does not want to marry again."

The Winner

"HAVE you ever—ee-hee!—loved and lost, Mr. Gloom?"

"No, Mrs. Clatter," replied the human hyena. "On the contrary, I have loved and won—sherejected me."

His Helpful Discovery

"OLD Newt Noddy's trip seems to have done him a sight of good," commented a citizen of Grudge. "For a long time he has had the railroad station here on his mind, and it

peared to weigh him down badly. He declared that it was the rustiest, ramshack-lest, tumbledownest, all-firedest depot on the whole line of road, and a shame and disgrace to our progressive little city. Everybody passively agreed with him, but nobody did anything about it. He couldn't accomplish anything by his growls, and got to moping round and looking hopeless, and finally seemed about ready to take to his bed.

"Then he went on this trip and saw over forty depots even more measly and decrepit than this one, and the discovery chirked him up so that it practically made a new man of him. It is generally good for a person to find out that other people are worse off than he is."

A Temperance Lesson

"I OBJECT," said the temperance man, "to the custom of christening ships with champagne."

"I don't," replied the other man. "I think there is a temperance lesson in it."

"How can that be?"

"Well, immediately after the first bottle of wine the ship takes to water and sticks to it ever after!"

The Usual Method

"HOW are good roads constructed in this region?" asked a guest as he left the dining room.

"Oratorically and ostensibly, as a general rule," pessimistically replied the landlord of the tavern at Crabville.

No Particular Saving

"IT WOULD be no great task for you I to dig a well near your back door," said the Presiding Elder, "and it would save you many steps going up the knoll, over the top and down to the spring in the hollow."

"I don't prezizely see how 'twould," replied a citizen of Sandy Mush, Arkansas, "being as my wife 'tends to toting the—p'tu!—water."

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