

Man of the Hunt.
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In This Issue—We're Growing Beef to Feed a Hungry World

THE MAN OF THE FOREST



By Zane Grey, Author of Wildfire

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON

VI

THE horses trotted. And the exercise soon warmed Helen until she was fairly comfortable except in her fingers. In mind, however, she grew more miserable as she more fully realized her situation. The night now became so dark that although the head of her horse was alongside the flank of Bo's she could scarcely see Bo. From time to time Helen's anxious query brought from her sister the answer that she was all right.

Dimly Helen could make out the road underneath. It was rocky and apparently little used. When Dale turned off the road into the low brush or sage of what seemed a level plain the traveling was harder, rougher, and yet no slower. The horses kept to the gait of the leaders.

Suddenly her horse stopped. He had come up alongside Bo's horse. Dale had halted ahead and apparently was listening. Roy and the pack train were out of sight in the gloom.

"What is it?" whispered Helen.

"Reckon I heard a wolf," replied Dale.

"Was that cry a wolf's?" asked Bo. "I heard. It was wild."

"We're gettin' up close to the foothills," said Dale. "Feel how much colder the air is?"

"I'm warm now," replied Bo. "I guess being near froze was what ailed me. . . . Nell, how're you?"

"I'm warm too," Helen answered.

Dale slapped his horse and started on. Helen now rode beside Bo, and for a long time they climbed steadily in silence. Helen knew when that dark hour before dawn had passed and she welcomed an almost imperceptible lightening in the east. Then the stars paled. Gradually a grayness absorbed all but the larger stars. The great blue-white morning star, wonderful as Helen had never seen it, lost its brilliance and life and seemed to retreat into the dimming blue.

Daylight came gradually, so that the gray desert became distinguishable by degrees. Rolling, bare hills, half obscured by the gray lifting mantle of night, rose in the foreground, and behind was gray space, slowly taking form and substance. In the east there was a kindling of pale rose and silver that lengthened and brightened along a horizon growing visibly rugged.

"Reckon we'd better catch up with Roy," said Dale, and he spurred his horse.

Ranger and Bo's mount needed no other urging, and they swung into a canter. Far ahead the pack animals showed, with Roy driving them. The cold wind was so keen in Helen's face that tears blurred her eyes and froze her cheeks. Riding Ranger at that pace was like riding in a rocking chair. That ride, invigorating and exciting, seemed all too short.

"Oh, Nell, I don't care what becomes of me!" exclaimed Bo breathlessly. Her face

was white and red, fresh as a rose; her eyes glanced darkly blue, her hair blew out in bright unruly strands. Helen knew she felt some of the physical stimulation that had so roused Bo and seemed so irresistible, but somber thought was not deflected thereby.

It was clear daylight when Roy led off round a knoll from which patches of scrubby trees—cedars, Dale called them—straggled up on the side of the foothills.

"They grow on the north slopes where the snow stays longest," said Dale.

They descended into a valley that looked shallow but proved to be deep and wide, and then began to climb another foothill. Upon surmounting it Helen saw the rising sun, and so glorious a view confronted her that she was unable to answer Bo's wild exclamations.

Bare, yellow, cedar-dotted slopes, apparently level, so gradual was the ascent, stretched away to a dense ragged line of forest that rose black over range after range, at last to fail near the bare summit of a magnificent mountain, sunrise-flushed against the blue sky.

"Oh, beautiful!" cried Bo. "But they ought to be called Black Mountains."

"Old Baldy there is white half the year," replied Dale.

"Look back an' see what you say," suggested Roy.

The girls turned to gaze silently. Helen imagined she looked down upon the whole wide world. How vastly different was the desert! Verily it yawned away from her, red and gold near at hand, growing softly flushed with purple far away, a barren void, borderless and immense, where dark-green patches and black lines and upheaved ridges only served to emphasize distance and space.

"See that little green spot?" said Roy, pointing. "That's Snowdrop. An' the other one—way to the right—that's Show Down."

"Where is Pine?" queried Helen eagerly.

"Farther still, up over the foothills at the edge of the woods."

"Then we're riding away from it."

"Yes. If we'd gone straight for Pine that gang could overtake us. Pine is four days' ride. An' by takin' to the mountains Milt can hide his tracks. An' when he's thrown Anson off the scent then he'll circle down to Pine."

"Mr. Dale, do you think you'll get us there safely—and soon?" asked Helen wistfully.

"I won't promise soon, but I promise safe. An' I don't like bein' called mister," he replied.

"Are we ever going to eat?" inquired Bo demurely.

At this query Roy Beeman turned with a laugh to look at Bo. Helen saw his face fully in the light and it was thin and hard, darkly bronzed, with eyes like those of a

"I Suppose Then When Your Cowboy Comes Along You Will Call Him What He Called You." Bo Blushed, Which Was a Rather Unusual Thing for Her

hawk and with square chin and lean jaws showing scant light beard.

"We shore are," he replied. "Soon as we reach the timber. Thet won't be long."

"Reckon we can rustle some an' then take a good rest," said Dale, and he urged his horse into a jog trot.

During a steady trot for a long hour Helen's roving eyes were everywhere, taking note of the things from near to far—the scant sage that soon gave place to as scanty a grass, and the dark blots that proved to be dwarf cedars, and the ravines opening out as if by magic from what had appeared level ground, to wind away, widening between gray stone walls, and farther on patches of lonely pine trees, two and three together, and then a straggling clump of yellow aspens, and up beyond the fringed border of forest, growing nearer all the while, the black sweeping benches rising to the noble dome of the dominant mountain of the range.

No birds or animals were seen in that long ride up toward the timber, which seemed strange to Helen. The air lost something of its cold, cutting edge as the sun rose higher and it gained sweeter tang of forest land.

The yellow plain had only appeared to be level. Roy led down into a shallow ravine, where a tiny stream meandered, and he followed this round to the left, coming at length to a point where cedars and dwarf pines formed a little grove. Here, as the others rode up, he sat cross-legged in his saddle and waited.

"We'll hang up a while," he said. "Reckon you're tired?"

"I'm hungry, but not tired yet," replied Bo.

Helen dismounted, to find that walking was something she had apparently lost the power to do. Bo laughed at her, but she, too, was awkward when once more upon the ground.

Then Roy got down. Helen was surprised to find him lame. He caught her quick glance.

"A hoss threw me once an' rolled on me. Only broke my collar bone, five ribs, one arm, an' my bowlegs in two places!"

Notwithstanding this evidence that he was a cripple, as he stood there tall and lithe in his ragged homespun garments he looked singularly powerful and capable.

"Reckon walkin' round would be good for you girls," advised Dale. "If you ain't stiff yet you'll be soon. An' walkin' will help. Don't go far. I'll call when breakfast's ready."

A little while later the girls were whistled in from their walk and found camp fire and meal awaiting them. Roy was sitting cross-legged, like an Indian, in front of a tarpaulin upon which was spread a homely but substantial fare. Helen's

quick eye detected a cleanliness and thoroughness she had scarcely expected to find in the camp cooking of men of the wilds. Moreover, the fare was good. She ate heartily; and as for Bo's appetite, she was inclined to be as much ashamed of that as amused at it. The young men were all eyes, assiduous in their service to the girls, but speaking seldom.

It was not lost upon Helen how Dale's gray gaze went often down across the open country. She divined apprehension from it rather than saw such expression in it.

"I declare," burst out Bo, when she could not eat any more, "this isn't believable. I'm dreaming. . . . Nell, the black horse you're reading. . . . I ever saw."

Ranger, with the other animals, was grazing along the little brook. Packs and saddles had been removed. The men ate leisurely. There was little evidence of hurried flight. Yet Helen could not cast off uneasiness. Roy might have been deep, and careless with a motive to spare the girls anxiety, but Dale seemed incapable of anything he did not absolutely mean.

"Rest or walk," he advised the girls. "We've got forty miles to ride before dark."

Helen preferred to rest, but Bo walked about the little grove, petting the horses and prying into the packs. She was curious and eager.

Dale and Roy talked in low tones all the while they leaned upon the utensils and carefully packed them away in a heavy canvas bag.

"You really expect Anson'll strike my trail this mornin'?" Dale was asking.

"I shore do," replied Roy.

"An' how do you figure that so soon?"

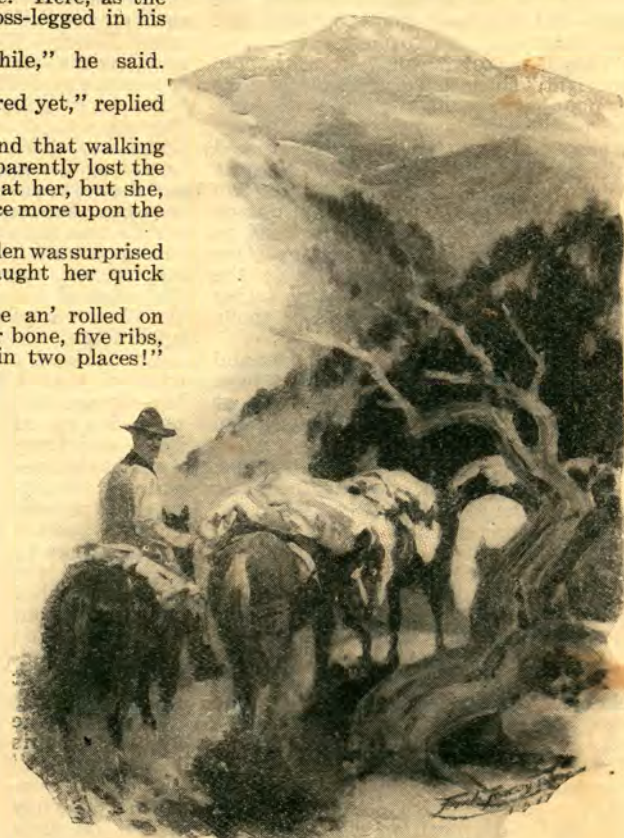
"How'd you figure it—if you was Snake Anson?" queried Roy in reply.

"Depends on that rider from Magdalena," said Dale soberly. "Although it's likely I'd seen them wheel tracks an' hoss tracks made where we turned off. But supposin' he does."

"Milt—listen. I told you Snake met us boys face to face day before yesterday in Show Down. An' he was plumb curious to know why we were there."

"But he missed seein' or hearin' about me," replied Dale.

"Mebbe he did an' mebbe he didn't. Anyway, what's the difference whether he finds out this mornin' or this evenin'?"



It Was Clear Daylight When Roy Led Off Round a Knoll From Which Patches of Scrubby Trees Straggled Up on the Side of the Foothills

"Then you ain't expectin' a fight if Anson holds up the stage?"

"Wal, he'd have to shoot first, which ain't likely. John an' Hal, since the shootin' scrape a year ago, have been sort of gun shy. Joe might get riled. But I reckon the best we can be shore of is a delay. An' it'd be sense not to count on thet."

"Then you hang up here an' keep watch for Anson's gang—say long enough so's to be sure they'd be in sight if they find our tracks this mornin'. Makin' sure one way or another you ride cross country to Big Spring, where I'll camp to-night."

Roy nodded approval of that suggestion. Then without more words both men picked up ropes and went after the horses. Helen was watching Dale, so that when Bo cried out in great excitement Helen turned to see a savage yellow little mustang standing straight up on his hind legs and pawing the air. Roy had roped him and was now dragging him in to camp.

"Nell, look at that for a wild pony!" exclaimed Bo.

Helen busied herself getting well out of the way of the infuriated mustang. Roy dragged him to a cedar near by.

"Come now, Buckskin," said Roy soothingly, and he slowly approached the quivering animal. He went closer, hand over hand on the lasso. Buckskin showed the whites of his eyes and also his white teeth. But he stood while Roy loosened the loop, and slipping it down over his head fastened it in a complicated knot round his nose.

"Thet's a hackamore," he said, indicating the knot. "He's never had a bridle an' never will have one, I reckon."

"You don't ride him?" queried Helen.

"Sometimes I do," replied Roy with a smile. "Would you girls like to try him?"

"Excuse me," answered Helen.

"Gee!" ejaculated Bo. "He looks like a devil. But I'd tackle him if you think I could."

The wild leaven of the West had found quick root in Bo Rayner.

"Wal, I'm sorry, but I reckon I'll not let you—for a spell," replied Roy dryly. "He pitches somethin' powerful bad."

"Pitches. You mean bucks?"

"I reckon."

In the next half hour Helen saw more and learned more about how horses of the open range were handled than she had ever heard of. Excepting Ranger and Roy's bay and the white pony Bo rode, the rest of the horses had actually to be roped and hauled in to camp to be saddled and packed. It was a job for fearless, strong men, and one that called for patience as well as arms of iron. So that for Helen Rayner the thing succeeding the confidence she had placed in these men was respect.

When all was in readiness for a start Dale mounted and said significantly: "Roy, I'll look for you about sundown. I hope no sooner."

"Wal, it'd be bad if I had to rustle along soon with bad news. Let's hope for the best. We've been shore lucky so far. Now you take to the pine mats in the woods an' hide your trail."

Dale turned away. Then the girls bade Roy good-by and followed. Soon Roy and his buckskin-colored mustang were lost to sight round a clump of trees.

The unhampered horses led the way; the pack animals trotted after them; and the riders were close behind. All traveled at a jog trot. And this gait made the packs bob up and down and from side to side. The sun felt warm at Helen's back and the wind lost its frosty coldness for a dry sweet fragrance. Dale drove up the shallow valley that showed timber on the levels above and a black border of timber some few miles ahead. It did not take long to reach the edge of the forest.

Helen wondered why the big pines grew so far on that plain and no farther. Probably the growth had to do with snow, but as the ground was level she could not see why the edge of the woods should come just there.

They rode into the forest. To Helen it seemed a strange critical entrance into another world which she was destined to know and to love. The pines were big, brown-barked, seamed and knotted, with

no typical conformation except a majesty and beauty. They grew far apart. Few small pines and little underbrush flourished beneath them. The floor of this forest appeared remarkable in that it consisted of patches of high silvery grass and wide brown areas of pine needles. These manifestly were what Roy had meant by pine mats.

Helen was presently struck with the silence of the forest and the strange fact that the horses seldom made any sound at all, and when they did it was a cracking of dead twig or thud of hoof on log. Likewise she became aware of a springy nature of the ground. And then she saw that the pine mats gave like rubber cushions under the hoofs of the horses and after they had passed sprang back to place again, leaving no track. Helen could not see a sign of a

following the direction, descried several gray deer standing in a glade, motionless, with long ears up.

The forest on the whole held to the level open character, but there were swales and stream beds breaking up its regular conformation. Toward noon, however, it gradually changed, a fact that Helen believed she might have observed sooner had she been more keen. The way began to ascend and the trees to grow denser.

She made another discovery. Ever since she had entered the forest she had been aware of a fullness in her head and a something affecting her nostrils. She imagined, with regret, that she had taken cold. But presently her head cleared somewhat and she realized that the thick pine odor of the forest had clogged her nostrils as if with a sweet pitch. The smell was overpowering,

almost out of sight, then loped him ahead until he had caught up.

So the hours passed, the sun got round low, sending golden shafts under the trees, and the forest gradually changed to a brighter but a thicker color. This slowly darkened. Sunset was not far away.

She heard the horses splashing in water, and soon she rode up to see tiny streams of crystal water running swiftly over beds of green moss. She crossed a number of these and followed along the last one into a more open place in the forest where the pines were huge, towering and far apart. A low gray bluff of stone rose to the right, perhaps one-third as high as the trees. From somewhere came the rushing sound of running water.

"Big Spring," announced Dale. "We camp here. You girls have done well."

Another glance proved to Helen that all those little streams poured from under this gray bluff.

"I'm dying for a drink," cried Bo with her customary hyperbole.

"I reckon you'll never forget your first drink here," remarked Dale.

Bo essayed to dismount and finally almost fell off, and when she did get to the ground her legs appeared to refuse their natural function and she fell flat. Dale helped her up.

"What's wrong with me anyhow?" she demanded in great amazement.

"Just stiff, I reckon," replied Dale as he led her a few awkward steps.

"Bo, have you any hurts?" queried Helen, who still sat her horse, loath to try dismounting.

Bo gave her an eloquent glance. "Nell, did you have one in your side, like a wicked long darning needle, punching deep when you weren't ready?"

"That one I'll never get over!" exclaimed Helen softly. Then profiting by Bo's experience she dismounted cautiously and managed to keep upright. Her legs felt like wooden things.

Presently the girls went toward the spring. "Drink slow," called out Dale.

Big Spring had its source somewhere deep under the gray weathered bluff, from which came a hollow subterranean gurgle and roar of water. Its fountain head must have been a great well rushing up through the cold stone.

Helen and Bo lay flat on a mossy bank, seeing their faces as they bent over, and they sipped a mouthful, by Dale's advice. The water was so cold that it sent a shock over Helen, made her teeth ache and a singular revivifying current steal all through her, wonderful in its cool absorption of that dry heat of flesh, irresistible in its appeal to thirst. Helen raised her head to look at this water. It was as colorless as she had found it tasteless.

"Nell, drink!" panted Bo. "Think of our old spring in the orchard—full of pollywogs!"

And then Helen drank thirstily with closed eyes, while a memory of home stirred from Bo's gift of poignant speech.

VII

THE first camp duty Dale performed was to throw a pack off one of the horses; opening it he took out tarpaulin and blankets, which he arranged on the ground under a pine tree.

"You girls rest," he said briefly.

"Can't we help?" asked Helen, though she could scarcely stand.

"You'll be welcome to do all you like after you're broke in."

"Broke in!" ejaculated Bo with a little laugh. "I'm all broke up now."

"Bo, it looks as if Mr. Dale expects us to have quite a stay with him in the woods."

"It does," replied Bo, as slowly she sat down upon the blankets, stretched out with a long sigh, and laid her head on a saddle. "Nell, didn't he say not to call him Mister?"

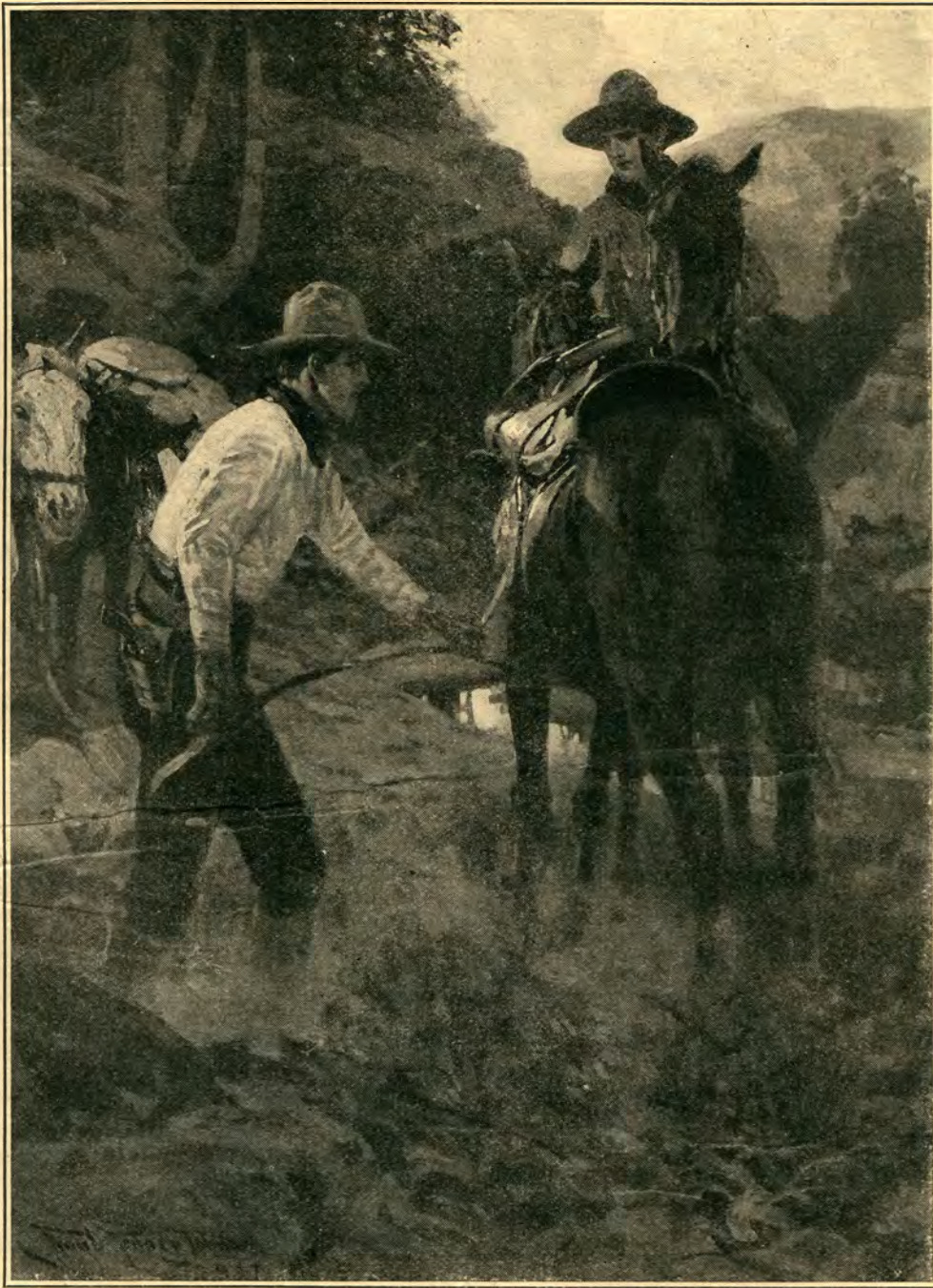
Dale was throwing the packs off the other horses. Helen lay down beside Bo and then for once in her life she experienced the sweetness of rest.

"Well, sister, what do you intend to call him?" queried Helen curiously.

"Milt, of course," replied Bo.

Helen had to laugh, despite her weariness and aches. "I suppose then when your Las Vegas cowboy comes along you will call him what he called you."

Bo blushed, which was a rather unusual thing for her. "I will if I like,"



Excepting Ranger and Roy's Bay and the White Pony, the Rest of the Horses Had Actually to be Roped and Hauled In to Camp

trail they left behind. Indeed it would take a sharp eye to follow Dale through that forest.

Bo, however, seemed too young, too wild, too intense to mind what the circumstances were. She responded to reality. Helen began to suspect that the girl would welcome any adventure. She was now helping Dale drive the horses and hold them in rather close formation. She rode well and as yet showed no symptoms of fatigue or pain. Helen began to be aware of both, but not enough yet to limit her interest.

A wonderful forest without birds did not seem real to her. And here under the stately pines there were no birds. Squirrels, however, began to be seen here and there, and in the course of an hour's travel became abundant. Once Dale, halting his horse, pointed with long arm; and Helen,

and disagreeable because of its strength. Also her throat and lungs seemed to burn.

When she began to lose interest in the forest and her surroundings it was because of aches and pains that would no longer be denied recognition. Thereafter she was not permitted to forget them and they grew worse. One especially was a pain beyond all her experience. It lay in the muscles of her side, above her hip, and it grew to be a treacherous thing. For it was not persistent. It came and went. After it did come, with a terrible flash, it could be borne by shifting or easing the body. But it gave no warning. This then was one of the riding pains that made a victim of a tenderfoot on a long ride. She found it was the trot that caused this torture. When Ranger walked she did not have to suffer it. Therefore she held him to a walk as long as she dared or until Dale and Bo were

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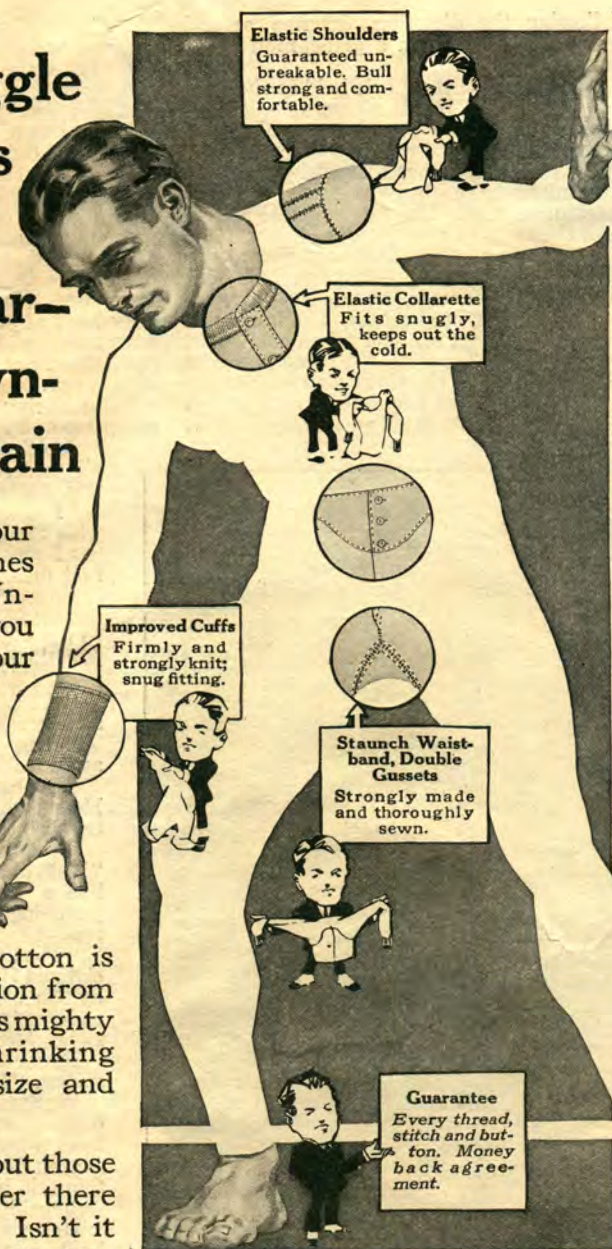
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she retorted. "Nell, ever since I could remember you've raved about the West. Now you're out West, right in it, good and deep. So wake up!"

That was Bo's blunt and characteristic way of advising the elimination of Helen's superficialities. It sank deep. Helen had no retort. Her ambition, as far as the West was concerned, had most assuredly not been for such a wild, unheard-of jaunt as this. But possibly the West was one succession of adventures, trials, tests, troubles and achievements. To make a place for others to live comfortably some day! Helen was too tired to think it out then. She found it interesting and vaguely pleasant to watch Dale.

He hobbled the horses and turned them loose. Then with ax in hand he approached a short dead tree standing among a few white-barked aspens. He appeared to advantage swinging the ax. With his coat off, displaying his wide shoulders, straight back and long powerful arms, he looked a young giant. He was lithe and supple, brawny but not bulky. The ax rang on the hard wood, reverberating through the forest. A few strokes sufficed to bring down the stub. Then he split it up.

Helen was curious to see how he kindled a fire. First he ripped splinters out of the heart of the log and laid them, with coarser pieces, on the ground. Then from a saddle-bag he took flint and steel and a piece of what Helen supposed was rag or buckskin upon which powder had been rubbed. At any rate the first strike of the steel brought sparks, a blaze, and burning splinters. Instantly the flame leaped a foot high. He put on larger pieces of wood crosswise, and the fire roared.

That done he stood erect and, facing the north, listened. Helen remembered now that she had seen him do the same thing twice before since the arrival at Big Spring. It was Roy for whom he was listening and watching. The sun had set, and across the open space the tips of the pines were losing their brightness.

The camp utensils, which the hunter emptied out of a sack, gave forth a jangle of iron and tin. Next he unrolled a large pack, the contents of which appeared to be numerous sacks of all sizes. These evidently contained food supplies. The bucket looked as if a horse had rolled over it, pack and all. Dale filled it at the spring. Upon returning to the camp fire he poured water into a washbasin and getting down on his knees proceeded to wash his hands thoroughly. The act seemed a habit, for Helen saw that while he was doing it he gazed off into the woods and listened. Then he dried his hands over the fire, and turning to the spread-out pack began preparations for the meal.

Suddenly Helen thought of the man and all that his actions implied. At Magdalena, on the stage ride, and last night, she had trusted this stranger, a hunter of the White Mountains, who appeared ready to befriend her. And she had felt an exceeding gratitude. Still she had looked at him impersonally. But it began to dawn upon her that chance had thrown her in the company of a remarkable man.

"Nell, I've spoken to you three times," protested Bo petulantly. "What're you moaning over?"

"I'm pretty tired—and far away, Bo," replied Helen. "What did you say?"

"I said I had an enormous appetite." "Really. That's not remarkable for you. I'm too tired to eat. And afraid to shut my eyes. They'd never come open. When did we sleep last, Bo?"

"Second night before we left home," declared Bo.

"Four nights! Oh, we've slept some." "I'll bet I make mine up in this woods. Do you suppose we'll sleep right here—under this tree—with no covering?"

"It looks so," replied Helen dubiously. "How perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Bo in delight. "We'll see the stars through the pines."

"Seems to be clouding over. Wouldn't it be awful if we had a storm?" "Why, I don't know," answered Bo thoughtfully. "It must storm out West."

Helen saw Dale stand erect once more and gaze into the forest. "Reckon Roy ain't comin'," he soliloquized. "An' that's good." Then he turned to the girls: "Supper's ready."

The girls responded with a spirit greater than their activity. And they ate like famished children that had been lost in the woods. Dale attended them with a pleasant light upon his still face.

"To-morrow night we'll have meat," he said.

"What kind?" asked Bo. "Wild turkey or deer. Maybe both, if you like. But it's well to take wild meat slow. An' turkey that'll melt in your mouth."

"Um-m-m!" murmured Bo greedily. "I've heard of wild turkey."

When they had finished Dale ate his meal, listening to the talk of the girls, and occasionally replying briefly to some query of Bo's.

It was twilight when he began to wash the pots and pans, and almost dark by the time his duties appeared ended. Then he replenished the camp fire and sat down on a log to gaze into the flames. The girls leaned comfortably, propped against the saddles.

"Nell, I'll keel over in a minute," said Bo. "And I oughtn't, right on such a big supper."

"I don't see how I can sleep, and I know I can't stay awake," rejoined Helen.

Dale lifted his head alertly. "Listen!" The girls gazed tense and still. Helen could not hear a sound, unless it was a low thud of hoof out in the gloom. The forest seemed sleeping. She knew from Bo's eyes, wide and shining in the camp-fire light, that she, too, had failed to catch whatever it was Dale meant.

"Bunch of coyotes comin'," he explained.

Suddenly the quietness split to a chorus of snappy, high-strung, strange barks. They sounded wild, yet they held something of a friendly or inquisitive note. Presently gray forms could be descried just at the edge of the circle of light. Soft rustlings of stealthy feet surrounded the camp, and then barks and yelps broke out all round. It was a restless and sneaking pack of animals, thought Helen; and she was glad when the chorus ended, and with a few desultory, spiteful yelps the coyotes went away.

Silence again settled down. If it had not been for the anxiety always present in Helen's mind she would have thought this silence sweet and unfamiliarly beautiful.

"Ah! Listen to that fellow," spoke up Dale. His voice was thrilling.

Again the girls strained their ears. That was not necessary, for presently, clear and cold out of the silence, pealed a mournful howl, long drawn, strange and full and wild.

"Oh! What's that?" whispered Bo.

"That's a big gray wolf—a timber wolf," replied Dale. "He's high on some rocky ridge back there. He scents us an' he doesn't like it. . . . There he goes again. Listen! . . . Ah, he's hungry."

While Helen listened to this exceedingly wild cry—so wild that it made her flesh creep and the most indescribable sensations of loneliness come over her—she kept her glance upon Dale.

"You love him?" she murmured involuntarily, quite without understanding the motive of her query.

Assuredly Dale had never had that question asked of him before, and it seemed to Helen, as he pondered, that he had never even asked it of himself.

"I reckon so," he replied presently.

"But wolves kill deer, and little fawns, and everything helpless in the forest," expostulated Bo.

The hunter nodded his head.

"Why then can you love him?" repeated Helen.

"Come to think of it, I reckon it's because of lots of reasons," returned Dale. "He kills clean. He eats no carrion. He's no coward. He fights. He dies game. . . . An' he likes to be alone."

"Kills clean. What do you mean by that?"

"A cougar, now, he mangles a deer. An' a silvertip, when killin' a cow or colt, he makes a mess of it. But a wolf kills clean, with sharp snaps."

"What are a cougar and a silvertip?"

"Cougar means mountain lion or panther, an' a silvertip is a grizzly bear."

"Oh, they're all cruel!" exclaimed Helen, shrinking.

"I reckon. Often I've shot wolves for relayin' a deer."

"What's that?"

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breakin' out of the egg, or ravens that pick the eyes out of new-born lambs an' wait till they die. An' for that matter men are crueller than beasts of prey, for men add to Nature an' have more than instincts."

Dale rose to his feet and, turning his ear to the north, listened once more.

"Are you expecting Roy still?" inquired Helen.

"No; it ain't likely he'll turn up to-night," replied Dale, and then he strode over to put a hand on the pine tree that soared above where the girls lay. His action and the way he looked up at the tree top and then at adjacent trees held more of that significance which so interested Helen.

"I reckon he's stood there some five hundred years an' will stand through to-night," muttered Dale.

This pine was the monarch of that wide-spread group.

"Listen again," said Dale.

Bo was asleep. And Helen, listening, at once caught a low distant roar. "Wind. It's goin' to storm," explained Dale. "You'll hear somethin' worth while. But don't be scared. Reckon we'll be safe. Pines blow down often. But this fellow will stand any fall wind that ever was. . . . Better slip under the blankets so I can pull the tarp up."

Helen slid down, just as she was, fully dressed except for boots, which she and Bo had removed; and she laid her head close to Bo's. Dale pulled the tarpaulin up and folded it back just below their heads.

"When it rains you'll wake, an' then just pull the tarp up over you," he said.

"Will it rain?" Helen asked. By the light of the camp fire she saw Dale's face, just as usual, still, darkly serene, expressing no thought. He was kind, but he was not thinking of these sisters as girls, alone with him in a pitch-black forest, helpless and defenseless. He did not seem to be thinking at all.

"I'll be close by an' keep the fire goin' all night," he said.

She heard him stride off into the darkness. Presently there came a dragging, bumping sound, then a crash of a log dropped upon the fire. A cloud of sparks shot up and many pattered down to hiss upon the damp ground. Smoke again curled upward along the great seamed tree trunk and flames sputtered and crackled.

Helen listened again for the roar of wind. She wanted to hear the storm wind in the pines. A few drops of cold rain fell upon her face, thrilling her with the proof that no roof stood between her and the elements. Then a breeze bore the smell of burnt wood into her face.

The roar that had seemed distant was now back in the forest, coming swiftly, increasing in volume. Like a stream in flood it bore down. Helen grew amazed, startled. How rushing, oncoming and heavy this storm wind! She likened its approach to the tread of an army. Then the roar filled the forest, yet it was back there behind her. Not a pine needle quivered in the light of the camp fire. But the air seemed to be oppressed with a terrible charge. The roar augmented till it was no longer a roar but an on-sweeping crash, like an ocean torrent engulfing the earth.

Bo awoke to cling to Helen with fright. The deafening storm blast was upon them. Helen felt the saddlepillow move under her head. The giant pine had trembled to its very roots. That mighty fury of wind was all aloft, in the tree tops; and for a long moment it bowed the forest under its tremendous power. Then the deafening crash passed to roar, and that swept on and on, lessening in volume, deepening in low detonation, at last to die in the distance.

A soft patter of rain on the tarpaulin warned Helen to remember Dale's directions, and pulling up the heavy covering she arranged it hoodlike over the saddle. Then with Bo close and warm beside her she closed her eyes and the sense of the black forest and the wind and rain faded. Last of all sensations was the smell of smoke that blew under the tarpaulin.

When she opened her eyes she remembered everything as if only a moment had elapsed. But it was daylight, though gray and cloudy. The pines were dripping mist. A fire crackled cheerily and blue smoke curled upward and a savory odor of hot coffee hung in the air. Horses were standing near by, biting and kicking at one another. Bo was sound asleep. Dale appeared busy round the camp fire. As Helen watched the hunter she saw him pause in his task, turn his ear to listen, and then look expectantly. At that juncture a shout pealed

from the forest. Helen recognized Roy's voice. Then she heard a splashing of water, and hoof beats coming closer. With that the buckskin mustang trotted into camp, carrying Roy.

"Bad mornin' for ducks, but good for us," he called.

"Howdy, Roy," greeted Dale, and his gladness was unmistakable. "I was lookin' for you."

Roy appeared to slide off the mustang without effort, and his swift hands slapped the straps as he unsaddled. Buckskin was wet with sweat and foam mixed with rain. He heaved, and steam rose from him.

"Must have rode hard," observed Dale.

"I shore did," replied Roy. Then he spied Helen, who had sat up with hands to her hair and eyes staring at him. "Mornin', miss. It's good news."

"Thank goodness!" murmured Helen, and then she shook Bo. That young lady awoke, but was loath to give up slumber. "Bo! Bo! Wake up. Mr. Roy is back."

Whereupon Bo sat up, disheveled and sleepy-eyed.

"Oh-h, but I ache!" she moaned. But her eyes took in the camp scene to the effect that she added: "Is breakfast ready?"

"Almost. Flapjacks this mornin'," replied Dale.

Bo manifested active symptoms of health in the manner with which she laced her boots. Helen got their traveling bag and with this they repaired to a flat stone beside the spring—not, however, out of earshot of the men.

"How long are you goin' to hang round camp before tellin' me?" inquired Dale.

"Jest as I figgered, Milt," replied Roy.

"Thet rider who passed you was a messenger to Anson. He an' his gang got on our trail quick. About ten o'clock I seen them comin'. Then I lit out for the woods. I stayed off in the woods close enough to see where they come in. An' shore they lost your trail. Then they spread through the woods, workin' off to the south, thinkin' of course thet you would circle round to Pine on the south side of Old Baldy. There ain't a hoss tracker in Snake Anson's gang, thet's shore. Wal, I follered them for an hour till they'd rustled some miles off our trail. Then I went back to where you struck into the woods; an' I waited there all afternoon till dark, expectin' mebbe they'd back trail. But they didn't. I rode on a ways an' camped in the woods till jest before daylight."

"So far so good," declared Dale.

"Shore. There's rough country south of Baldy an' along the two or three trails Anson an' his outfit will camp, you bet."

"It ain't to be thought of," muttered Dale at some idea that had struck him.

"What ain't?"

"Goin' round the north side of Baldy."

"It shore ain't," rejoined Roy bluntly.

"Then I've got to hide tracks certain—rustle to my camp an' stay there till you say it's safe to risk takin' the girls to Pine."

"Milt, you're talkin' the wisdom of the prophets."

"I ain't so sure we can hide tracks altogether. If Anson had any eyes for the woods he'd not have lost me so soon."

"No. But you see he's figgerin' to cross your trail."

"If I could get fifteen or twenty mile farther on an' hide tracks certain I'd feel safe from pursuit anyway," said the hunter reflectively.

"Shore an' easy," responded Roy quickly. "I jest met up with some greaser sheep herders drivin' a big flock. They've come up from the south an' are goin' to fatten up at those turkey senacas. Then they'll drive back south an' go on to Phoenix. Wal, it's muddy weather. Now you break camp quick an' make a plain trail out to that sheep trail as if you was travelin' south. But instead you ride round ahead of thet flock of sheep. They'll keep to the open parks an' the trails through them necks of woods out here. An' passin' over your tracks they'll hide 'em."

"But supposin' Anson circles an' hits this camp. He'll track me easy out to that sheep trail. What then?"

"Jest what you want. Goin' south thet sheep trail is downhill an' muddy. It's goin' to rain hard. Your tracks would get washed out even if you did go south. An' Anson would keep on thet way till he was clear off the scent. Leave it to me, Milt. You're a hunter. But I'm a hoss tracker."

"All right. We'll rustle."

Then he called the girls to hurry.

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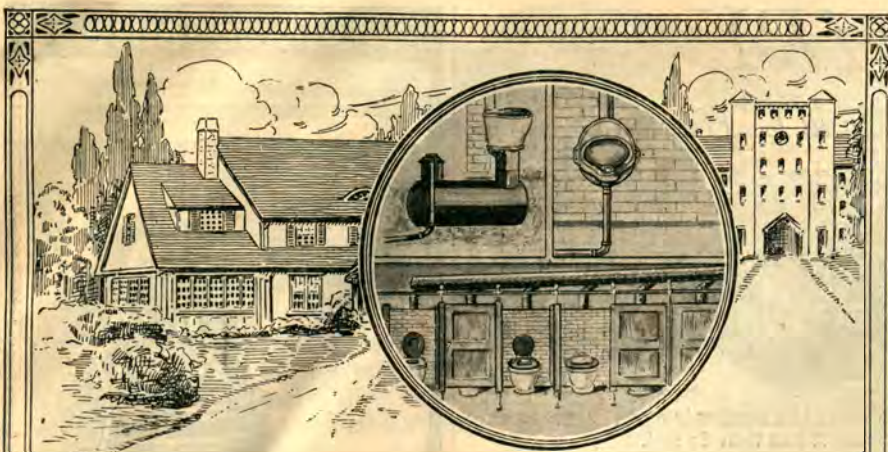
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(Concluded from Page 15)

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