

His Royal Nibs

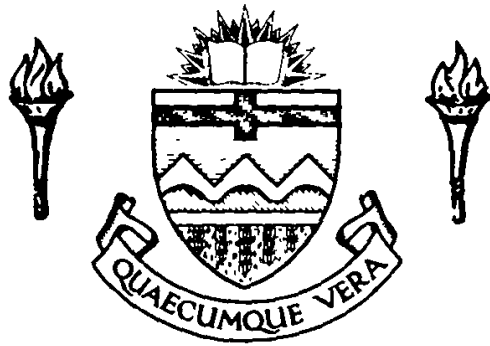
by ~

WINIFRED
REEVE



the
author of "CATTLE"

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By

WINIFRED EATON REEVE

AUTHOR OF "CATTLE," ETC.



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To
CARL LAEMMLE
FOR WHOM THE AUTHOR HAS
THE SINCEREST ADMIRATION

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His Royal Nibs

HIS ROYAL NIBS

CHAPTER I

ALONG the Banff National Highway, automobiles sped by in a cloud of dust, heat, noise and odour. They stopped not to offer a lift to the wayfarer along the road, for they were intent upon making the evergrowing grade to Banff on "high."

This year tramps were common on the road, war veterans, for the most part, "legging it" from Calgary to lumber or road camp, or making for the ranches in the foothills, after that elusive job of which the Government agent in England had so eloquently expatiated, but which proved in most cases to be but a fantastic fable. With somewhat of that pluck which had meant so much to the world, when the "vets" were something more than mere job hunting tramps, these men from across the sea

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trudged in the heat, the dust and the dry alkali-laden air. Sometimes they were taken on at camp or ranch. More often they were shunted farther afield. One wondered where they would finally go, these "boys" from the old land, who had crossed to the Dominion of Canada with such high hopes in their breasts.

The O Bar O lies midway between Calgary and Banff, in the foothills of the ranching country. Its white and green buildings grace the top of a hill that commands a view of the country from all sides.

From the Banff road the fine old ranch presents an imposing sight, after miles of road through a country where the few habitations are mainly those melancholy shacks of the first homesteaders of Alberta.

When "Bully Bill," foreman of the O Bar O, drove his herd of resentful steers from the green feed in the north pasture, where they had broken through the four lines of barbed wire, he was shouting and swearing in a blood-curdling and typically O Bar O fashion, whirling and cracking his nine feet long bull

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whip over the heads of the animals, as they swept before him down to the main gate.

Bully Bill had "herding" down to a science, and "them doegies," as he called them, went in a long line before him like an army in review. Had events followed their natural course, the cattle should have filed out of the opened gate into the roadway, and across the road to the south field, where, duly, they would distribute themselves among the hummocks and coulies that afforded the most likely places for grazing. On this blistering day, however, Bully Bill's formula failed. Something on the wide road had diverted the course of the driven steers. Having gotten them as far as the road, Bully Bill paused in his vociferous speech and heady action to take a "chaw" of his favorite plug; but his teeth had barely sunk into the weed when something caused him to shift it to his cheek, as with bulging eyes, he sat up erectly upon his horse, and then moved forward into swift action.

A certain pausing and grouping, a bunching together and lowering of heads, the ominous

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movement of a huge roan steer ahead of the herd, apprised the experienced cowpuncher of the fact that a stampede was imminent.

As he raced through the gate, Bully Bill perceived the cause of the revolution of his herd. Directly in the path of the animals was a strange figure. Not the weary footsore tramp common to the trail. Not the nervy camper, applying at O Bar O for the usual donation of milk and eggs. Neither neighbour, nor Indian from Morley. Here was a clean tweed-clad Englishman, with a grip in his hand. How he had maintained his miraculous neatness after forty-four miles of tramping all of the way from Calgary cannot be explained.

Eye to eye he faced that roan steer, whose head sank loweringly, as he backed and swayed toward that moving mass behind him, all poised and paused for the charge.

Time was when the Englishman had been in another kind of a charge, but that is a different story, and France is very far away from Alberta, Canada.

As the dumbfounded cowpuncher raced

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wildly in his direction, the man afoot did a strange thing. Raising on high his grip in his hand, he flung it directly into the face of the roan steer. In the scattering and scampering and bellowing that ensued, it was hard to distinguish anything but dust and a vast, moving blur, as the startled herd, following the lead of the roan steer, swept headlong down the road, to where in the canyon below, the Ghost and the Bow Rivers had their junction.

From the direction of the corrals swept reinforcements, in the shape of "Hootmon," a Scot so nicknamed by the outfit, because of his favourite explosive utterance, and Sandy, son of the O Bar O, red-haired, freckled-faced and indelibly marked by the sun above, who rode his Indian bronc with the grace and agility of a circus rider.

Into the roaring mêlée charged the yelling riders. Not with the "hobo-dude," lying on the inner side of the barbed-wire fence, through which he had scrambled with alacrity before the roan steer had recovered from the onslaught of the grip, were the "hands" of the

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ranch concerned. Theirs the job to round up and steady that panic-stricken herd; to bring order out of chaos; to soothe, to beat, to drive into a regulation bunch, and safely land the cattle in the intended south field.

Half an hour later, when the last of the tired herd had passed through the south gate, when the bellowings had died down and already the leaders were taking comfort in the succulent green grass on the edges of a long slough, Bully Bill bethought him of the cause of all this extra work and delay. He released that plug of tobacco from his left cheek, spat viciously, and with vengeance in his eye, rode over to where the intruder still reclined upon the turf. Said turf was hard and dry, and tormenting flies and grasshoppers and flying ants leaped about his face and neck; but he lay stretched out full-length upon his back, staring up at the bright blue sky above him. As Bully Bill rode over, he slowly and easily raised himself to a sitting posture.

"Hi! you there!" bawled the foreman, in the overbearing voice that had earned for him his

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nickname. "What the hell are you squattin' out here for? What d'ya mean by stirrin' up all this hell of a racket? What the hell d'ya want at O Bar O?"

The stranger smiled up at him, with the sun glinting in his eyes. His expression was guileless, and the engaging ring of friendliness and reassurance in his voice caused the irate cowhand to lapse into a stunned silence, as he gaped at this curious specimen of the human family on the ground before him.

"Ch-cheerio!" said the visitor. "No harm done. I'm f-first rate, thank you. Not even scratched. How are you?"

Hootmon applied his spurs to his horse's flanks, and cantered up the hill in the direction of the corrals, there to recount to an interested audience old Bully Bill's discomfiture and amazement.

Things move slowly in a ranching country, and not every day does the Lord deposit a whole vaudeville act at the door of a ranch house.

Sandy, seeking to curry favour with the con-

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founded foreman, winked at him broadly, and then deliberately pricked the rump of the unfortunate Silver Heels with a pin. Kicking around in a circle, the bronco backed and bucked in the direction of the man upon the grass, now sitting up and tenderly examining an evidently bruised shin.

At this juncture, the long-suffering Silver Heels developed an unexpected will of his own. Shaking himself violently from side to side, he reared up on his hind legs, and by a dash forward of his peppery young head, he jerked the reins from the hands of the surprised lad, who shot into the air and nearly fell into the lap of the Englishman.

That individual gripped the boy's arm tightly and swung him neatly to his side.

"You leggo my arm!"

Sandy squirmed from the surprisingly iron grip of the visitor.

The tramp, as they believed him to be, was now sitting up erectly, with that sublime, smooth air of cheerful condescension which Canadians so loathe in an Englishman.

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"Cheerio, old man!" said he, and slapped the unwillingly impressed youngster upon the back. "Not hurt much—what?"

"Hurt—nothing! Whacha take me for?"

Sandy, a product of O Bar O, let forth a typical string of hot cusses, while the Englishman grinned down upon him.

"What the hell you doin' sittin' on our grass?" finished Sandy shrilly. "What cha want at our ranch?"

"Oh, I say! Is this a rawnch then?"

He turned a questioning eager gaze upon the foreman, who now sat with right leg resting across the pommel of the saddle, studying their visitor in puzzled silence. After a moment, having spat and transferred his plug from the left to the right cheek, Bully Bill replied through the corner of his mouth.

"You betchour life this ain't no rawnch. Ain't no *rawnches* this side o' the river. They *ranch* on this side."

The other looked unenlightened, and Bully Bill condescended further explanation, with a flicker of a wink at the delighted Sandy.

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"Yer see, it's like this. On the south side of the river, there's a sight of them English "dooks" and earls and lords and princes. They play at rawnching, doncherknow. On the north side, we're the real cheese. We're out to raise beef. We *ranch!*"

Having delivered this explanation of things in the cattle country, Bully Bill, well pleased with himself, dropped his foot back into his stirrup and saluted the Englishman condescendingly:

"Here's lookin' at you!" he said, and gently pressed his heel into his horse's side.

"I say——!"

The tramp had sprang to his feet with surprising agility, and his nervy hand was at the mouth of Bully Bill's mount.

"I say, old man, will you hold on a bit? I w-wonder now, do you, by any chance, need help on your ranch? Because if you do, I'd like to apply for the position. If this is a cattle ranch, I'll say that I know a bit about horses. R-r-r-ridden s-some in my time, and I t-took care of a c-car-load of cattle c-coming

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up from the east. W-w-worked my way out here, in fact, and as to w-wages, nominal ones will be quite satisfactory as a s-starter."

Bully Bill, his mouth gaped open, was surveying the applicant from head to foot, his trained eye travelling from the top of the sleekly-brushed blond hair, the smoothly-shaven cheek, down the still surprisingly dapper form to the thin shoes that were so painfully inadequate for the trail. Sandy was doubled up in a knot, howling with fiendish glee. Bully Bill spat.

"I d-don't m-mind roughing it at all," continued the applicant, wistfully. "D-don't judge me by my clothes. Fact is, old man, they happen to be all I've g-got, you see. B-but I'm quite c-competent to——"

Bully Bill said dreamily, looking out into space, and as if thinking aloud.

"We ain't as tough as we're cracked up to be. Of course, they's one or two stunts you got to learn on a cattle ranch—rawnch—beggin' your pardon——"

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"That's quite all right, old man. Don't mention it. Is there a chance then for me?"

There was not a trace of a smile on Bully Bill's face as he solemnly looked down into the anxious blue eyes of the applicant.

"They's the makin's of a damn fine cowboy in you," he said.

"I say!"

A smile broke all over the somewhat pinched face of the strange tramp. That smile was so engaging, so sunny, so boyish that the cowpuncher returned it with a characteristic grin of his own.

"D-you really mean to say that I'm engaged?"

"You betchu."

"Thanks awfully, old man," cried the other cordially, and extended his white hand, which gripped the horny one of the cowpuncher, at rest on his leather-clad knee.

Bully Bill rode off at a slow lope, and as he rode, he steadily chewed. Once or twice he grunted, and once he slapped his leg and made a sound that was oddly like a hoarse guffaw.

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In the wake of the loitering horse, carrying his now sadly-battered grip in his hand, the Englishman plugged along, and as he came he whistled a cheery strain of music.

CHAPTER II

SANDY made three somersaults of glee on the turf, and at his last turn-over, his head came into contact with something hard. He rubbed said head, and at the same time observed that which had pained him. It was a large, old-fashioned gold locket, studded with rubies and diamonds.

"Holy Salmon!" ejaculated the highly-elated boy. In an instant he had seized the bridle of his horse, and was on him. He went up the hill on a run, and began calling outside the house, while still on horse.

"Hilda! I say, Hilda! Come on out! Looka here what *I* found!"

A girl, skin bronzed by sun and wind, with chocolate-coloured eyes and hair and a certain free grace of motion and poise, came on to the wide verandah. Sandy had ridden his horse clear to the railing, and now he excitedly held up the trinket in his hand, and

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then tossed it to Hilda, who caught it neatly in her own. Turning it over, the girl examined to find with admiration and curiosity, and, with feminine intuition, she found the spring and opened the locket. Within, the lovely, pictured face of a woman in low-cut evening dress, looked back from the frame. On the opposite side, a lock of dead-gold hair curled behind the glass.

Sandy had leaped off his horse, and now was excitedly grasping after the treasure.

"Wher'd you find it, Sandy?"

"Down in the lower pasture. Betchu its his girl! Say, Hilda, he's a scream. You'd oughter've been there. He came along the road all dolled up in city clothes, and—look! Oh, my God-frey! Look ut him, Hilda!"

In an ecstasy of derision and delight, Sandy pointed.

Hand shading his eyes, the stranger was gazing across the wide-spreading panorama of gigantic hills, etched against a sky of sheerest blue, upon which the everlasting sun glowed.

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"By Georgel!" exclaimed the new "hand" of the O Bar O, "what a tophole view! Never saw anything to beat it. Give you my word, it b-b-beats S-switzerland. When I was tramping along the road, I th-thought that was a good one on us at home, 'bout this being the Land of Promise, you know, b-but now, by Georgel I'm hanged if I don't think you're right. A chap cannot look across at a view like that and not feel jolly well up-lifted!"

There was a ring of men closing in about the new arrival, for it was the noon hour, and Hootmon had hurried them along from bunkhouse and corral. At the stranger's stream of eloquence to Bully Bill anent the beauties of nature in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, "Pink-eyed Jake" swooned away in the arms of Hootmon. A gale of unbridled laughter burst from a dozen throats. The men held their sides and leaned forward the better to scan this new specimen of the human family. Hands on hips, they "took his

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number" and pronounced him internally a freak of nature.

To the door of the cook-car, rolled the immense form of Tom Chum Lee, the Chinese cook who dominated the grub-car of O Bar O. With a vast smile of benignant humour directed upon his "boys," Lee summoned all hands to chow, by means of a great cow bell, that he waved generously back and forth.

With immense satisfaction and relish, the newcomer was taking in all of the colour and atmosphere of the ranch. The fact that he himself was an object of derisive mirth to the outfit, troubled him not at all.

A skirt—pink—flirted around the side of the house, and outlined against the blue of the sky, the slim form of a young girl shone on the steps of the ranch house. The Englishman had a glimpse of wide, dark eyes, and a generous red mouth, through which gleamed the whitest of teeth. But it was her voice, with its shrill edge of impudent young mirth that sent the colour to the pinched cheeks of the new

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hand of O Bar O. There was in it, despite its mockery, a haughty accent of contempt.

“Who’s his royal nibs, Bully Bill?”

Through the corner of his mouth, the foreman enlightened her:

“Vodeyveel show. Things gittin’ kind o’ dull at O Bar. Thought I’d pull in something to cheer the fellows up a bit, and they’s nothing tickles them more than turnin’ a green tenderfoot Englishman on to them. This one here is a circus. When I asked him what the hello—excuse me, Miss Hilda!—what the hello he was doin’ round here, he ses: ‘Cheeriol’ Say, if ever there was ‘Kid me’ writ all over a human bein’, it’s splashed over that there one.”

“Um!”

Hilda came down the steps and approached the newcomer. Head slightly on one side, she examined him with evident curiosity and amusement. “Paper-collar dudes,” as the ranch folk called the city people, came quite often to O Bar O, but this particular specimen seemed somehow especially green and guile-

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less. A wicked dimple flashed out in the right cheek of the girl, though her critical eyes were still cold as she looked the man over from head to foot.

“Hi-yi! You! Where do you hail from?”

As he looked up at the beautiful, saucy young creature before him, the Englishman was seized with one of his worst spells of stuttering. The impediment in his speech was slight, on ordinary occasions, but when unduly moved, and at psychological moments, when the tongue’s office was the most desired of adjuncts, it generally failed him. Now:

“Bb-b-b-b-b-b-b-b——”

The girl, hands on hips, swayed back and forth with laughter.

“Haven’t you a tongue even? What are you doing in this wild country, you poor lost lamb from the fold?”

He had recovered his wits, and the use of his tongue. His heels came together with a curiously smart and military click, and his blue eyes looked squarely into the impudent

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brown ones of the girl, laughing in his face. With complete gravity, he replied:

"J-just came across to the p-promised land, to try and make a home for myself and—" he paused, smiling sunnily—"and another, you know."

"Now wasn't that the great idea!" geyed the girl, with mock seriousness. "And who's the other one, by the way? Another like you? Do tell us."

"Her name's—Nanna, we call her."

"Nanna! Nanna! What a sweet name!"

She was still mocking, but suddenly swung the locket on its chain toward him.

"Do you know, I believe we've found your long-lost Nanna. I was just admiring her fair, sweet face inside. Catch her!"

She tossed it across to him. It dropped on the stones between them. He stooped to pick it up, and anxiously examined it, before turning to look back at the girl with a slightly stern glance.

"Righto!" he said. "Thanks for returning her to me."

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For some unaccountable reason, the girl's mood changed. She tossed her head, as the colour flooded her face. Something wild and free in that tossing suggested the motion of a young thoroughbred colt. Affecting great disdain, and as if looking down at him from a height, she inquired:

"Oh, by the way, what's your name?"

He absently fished in his vest pocket, and this action provoked a fresh gale of laughter from the highly edified hands, in which the girl heartily joined. At the laughter, he looked up, slightly whistled, and said in his friendly way:

"Cheerio!"

"Cheerio!" repeated the girl. "Some name. Boys, allow me—Cheerio, Duke of the O Bar O. Escort his grace to the dining-car, and mind you treat him gentle. And say, boys—" she called after them, "doll him up in O Bar O duds. Let's see what he looks like in reglar clothes."

Shoved along by the men, "his grace" was pushed and hustled into the cook-car. Here

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the odour of the hot food, and the rich soup being slapped into each bowl along the line of plates, almost caused the hungry Englishman to faint. Nevertheless, he kept what he would have termed "stiff upper lip," and as the Chinaman passed down between the long bench tables, and filled the bowl before the newcomer, Cheerio, as he was henceforward to be known, controlled the famished longing to fall to upon that thick, delicious soup, and, smiling instead, turned to the man on either side of him, with a cigarette case in his hand:

"Have one, old man, do. P-pretty g-good stuff! Got them in France, you know. Believe I'll have one myself before starting in, you know. Topping—what?"

CHAPTER III

P. D. MCPHERSON, or "P. D." as he was better known throughout the ranching country, owner of the O Bar O, was noted for his eccentricities, his scientific experiments with stock and grain, and for the variety and quality of his vocabulary of "cusses."

An ex-professor of an Agricultural College, he had come to Alberta in the early days, before the trails were blazed. While the railroads were beginning to survey the new country, he had established himself in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

Beginning with a few head of cattle imported from the East, P. D. had built up his herd until it was famous throughout the cattle world. His experiments in crossing pure-bred grades of cattle in an attempt to produce an animal that would give both the beef of the Hereford and the butterfat and cream of the

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Holstein, had been followed with unabated interest.

He had been equally successful with his horses and other stock. Turning from cattle and stock, P. D. next expended his genius upon the grain. It was a proud and triumphant day for O Bar O when, at the annual Calgary Fair, the old rancher showed a single stalk of wheat, on which were one hundred and fifty kernels.

His alfalfa and rye fields, in a normally dry and hilly part of the country, were the wonder and amazement of farmers and ranchers.

The Government, the Railways, the Flour mills and the Agricultural Colleges, sought him out, and made tempting offers to induce him to yield up to them his secrets.

P. D. stroked his chin, pinched his lower lip, drew his fuzzy eyebrows together, and shook his fine, shaggy old head. He was not yet satisfied that his experiments had reached perfection.

He'd "think it over." He'd "see about it some day, maybe," and he "wasn't so damned cussed sure that it would benefit the world to

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produce cheap wheat at the present time. This way out, gentlemen! This way out!"

He was a rude old man, was P. D. McPherson.

In a way, he was obliged to be so, for otherwise he would have been enormously imposed on. O Bar O was in the heart of the game and fishing country, and was, therefore, the mecca of all aspiring hunters and fishermen, to say nothing of the numerous campers and motor hoboes, who drove in every day upon the land and left their trail of disorder and dirt behind, and quite often small or large forest fires, that were kept under control only by the vigilance of O Bar O.

The ranch was noted for its hospitality, and no tramp or stranger or rider along the trail had ever been turned from its door. The line, however, had to be drawn somewhere, and it was drawn in so far as the idle tourists, pausing en route to Banff or Lake Louise to "beat" a meal or a pleasant day at the ranch, were concerned, or the numerous motor hoboes, who, denied at the ranch house their numerous

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requests for milk and eggs and gasolene and the privilege of spending the night there, slipped in under the bridge by the river, and set up their camps on the banks of the Ghost River.

About the time when his wheat had brought him considerable, but undesired, fame, P. D., holding his lower lip between thumb and forefinger, was looking about for new experimental worlds to conquer. By chance, his motherless son and daughter, then of the impressionable ages of four and ten respectively, shot under his especial notice, through the medium of a ride down the bannister and resultant noise.

P. D. studied his offspring appraisingly and thoughtfully, and as he looked into the grimy, glooming young faces, he conceived another one of his remarkable "inspirations."

It was soon after this, that P. D. founded that "School of Nature," to which were bidden all of the children of the neighbouring ranch country, and into which his own progeny were unceremoniously dumped.

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However, when the curriculum of this Institution of Learning became more fully understood, despite the fame of its founder and president, there were none among the parents of the various children who felt justified in sending them to the O Bar O School of Nature.

Even the most ignorant among them believed that school existed only mainly for the purpose of teaching the young minds how to shoot with reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic.

P. D. proposed only the slightest excursion into these elementary subjects. Nature, so he declared, addressing the assembled farmers at a special meeting, was the greatest of all teachers, a book into which one might look, without turning a single leaf, and learn all that was necessary for the knowledge of mankind.

He was convinced, so eloquently proclaimed P. D., that school such as the world knew it, was antiquated in its methods and wholly unnecessary and wrong. To teach the young the secrets and mysteries of nature—that alone

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was needed to produce a race of supermen and women.

One timid little woman arose, and asked what "supermen" meant, and the huge, rough father of the family of ten replied that it meant "men who liked their supper."

The meeting broke up in a riot—so far as P. D. was concerned, and his neighbours departed with his wrathful imprecations ringing in their ears.

Not to be daunted by the lack of support afforded him by his neighbours, P. D. set at once to put his theories into practice upon his helpless children.

It came to pass that the children of P. D. missed the advantages of the ordinary modern schools. Had P. D., in fact, carried out his original curriculum, which he prepared with scientific detail, it is quite possible that the results might have turned out as satisfactorily as his experiments with cattle, pigs, sheep and horses. P. D. reckoned not, however, with the vagaries and impetuosities of youth and human nature. Unlike dumb stock, he had fiery

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spirits, active imaginations, and saucy tongues to deal with. He was not possessed with even the normal amount of patience desirable in a good teacher. His classes, therefore, were more often than not punctuated by explosive sounds, miraculous expletives, indignant outcries, and the ejection or hurried exit from the room of a smarting, angry-eyed youngster, suffering from the two-fold lash of parental tongue and hand.

Then when some of his original ideas were just beginning to take substantial root in their young minds and systems, P. D. fell a victim to a new and devastating passion, which was destined to hold him in thrall for the rest of his days.

Chess was his new mistress, alternately his joy and his bane. Even his children were forgotten in the shuffle of events, and, turned upon their own resources, they grew up like wild young things, loose on a great, free range.

If, however, the young McPhersons had missed school, they had learned much of which the average child of to-day is more or less igno-

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rant. They knew all of the theories concerned in the formation of this earth of ours, and the living things upon it. They were intimately acquainted with every visible and many invisible stars and planets in the firmament. They had a plausible and a comprehensible explanation for such phenomena as the milky way, the comets, the northern lights, the asteroids and other denizens of the miraculous Alberta sky above them. They knew what the west, the east, the north and the south winds portended. They could calculate to a nicety the distance of a thunderstorm. No mean weather prophets were the children of P. D. McPherson; nor were their diagnosis dependent upon guess-work, or an aching tooth, or rheumatic knee, or even upon intuition or superstition, as in the case of the Indian.

Woodlore they knew, and the names and habits of the wild things that abounded in the woods of O Bar O. Insects, ants, butterflies, bees, were known by their scientific names. A rainbow, a sunrise, sunset, the morning mist, fog, the night sun of Alberta, the Japanese cur-

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rent that brought the Chinook winds over the Rocky Mountains, that changed the weather from thirty below zero to a tropical warmth in Alberta, the melting clouds in the skies, the night rainbows—all these were not merely beautiful phenomena, but the result of natural causes, of which the McPherson children were able to give an intelligent explanation.

They could ride the range and wield the lariat with the best of the cowpunchers. Hilda could brand, vaccinate, dehorn, and wean cattle. She was one of the best brand readers in the country, and she rode a horse as if she were part of the animal itself. She could leap with the agility of a circus rider upon the slippery back of a running outlaw, and, without bridle or saddle, maintain her place upon a jumping, bucking, kicking, wildly rearing "bronc."

Untamed and wild as the mavericks that, eluding the lariat of the cowpuncher, roamed the range unbranded and unbroken, Hilda and Sandy McPherson came up out of their childhood years, and paused like timid, curious

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young creatures of the wild upon the perilous edge of maturity.

Hilda was not without a comprehension of certain things in life that had been denied her. If her heart was untamed, it was not the less hungry and ardent. Though she realized that she had missed something precious and desirable in life, she was possessed with a spartan and sensitive pride. About her ignorance, she had erected a wall of it.

It was all very well to ride thus freely over the splendid open spaces and to wend her fearless way through the beckoning woods of the Rocky Mountain foothills. It was fine to be part of a game which every day showed the results of labour well done, and to know that such labour was contributing to the upkeep and value of the world. Yet there were times when a very wistful expression of wonder and longing would come into the girl's dark eyes, and the craving for something other than she had known would make her heart burn within her.

To appease this heart hunger, Hilda sought

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a medium through the reading matter obtainable at O Bar O; but the reading matter consisted of the Encyclopædia Britannica, Darwin's "Origin of the Species," several scientific works, and two voluminous works on the subject of chess.

For a time, the Encyclopædia afforded sufficient material to satisfy at least her curiosity; but presently a new source was tapped. From the bunkhouse came dime novels and the banned newspapers, which P. D. had more than once denounced as "filthy truck fit for the intelligence of morons only." Besides these were the *Police Gazette*, two or three penny dreadfuls, *Hearsts'*, and several lurid novels of the blood-and-thunder type. This precious reading matter, borrowed or "swiped" by Sandy and Hilda, while the men were on the range, was secretly devoured in hayloft and other secure places of retreat, and made a profound impression upon their eager young minds.

CHAPTER IV

AT this time, P. D. McPherson held the title of Champion Chess Player of Western Canada. He was, however, by no means proud or satisfied with this honourable title to chess fame.

Western Canada! One could count on the fingers of one hand the number of real players in the whole of the west. P. D. had played with them all. He considered it child's play to have beaten them. P. D. had issued a challenge not merely to the eastern holders of the title, but across the line, where went his bid to contest the world's title with the Yankee holders of the same.

P. D. dreamed and brooded over the day when he would win in an international tournament that would include the chess players of all the nations of the world. Meanwhile, it behooved him to keep in practice, so that his

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skill and craft should abate by not a jot or a tittle.

He had taught his young son and daughter this noble game. Though good players, they had inherited neither their parent's craft nor passion for it. Indeed, they had reason to fear and dislike chess as a veritable enemy. Many a ranch or barn dance, many a gymkhanna, rodeo, stampede and Indian race; many a trip to Calgary or Banff had been wiped off Hilda's pleasure slate, as punishment for a careless move or inattention when the ancient game was in progress. Many a night the bitter-hearted Sandy had departed early, supperless, to bed, because of a boyish trick of wriggling while his father debated in long-drawn-out study and thought the desirability of such and such a move.

Hilda and Sandy loved their father; yet his departure upon a scouting expedition on the trail of a prospective chess player filled them always with a sense of unholy elation and ecstatic freedom.

P. D.'s good or bad humour upon his return

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to the ranch depended entirely upon the success or failure of his quest. If success crowned his pursuit, and his cravings were satisfied, P. D. returned, beaming with good will upon the world in general and the inhabitants of O Bar O in particular. On the other hand, should such excursions have proven fruitless, the old monomaniac came back to his ranch in uncertain and irascible humour. All hands upon the place then found it expedient and wise to give him a wide berth, while his unfortunate son and daughter were reduced to desperate extremities to escape his especial notice and wrath.

It should not be inferred from the foregoing that P. D. necessarily neglected his ranching interests. Chess was a periodic malady with him. The ranch was a permanent institution. O Bar O was the show-place of the foothills and a matter of pride to the country. The smoothest of beef, grass-fed steers, topped the market each year, when they went forth from the ranch not merely to the local stockyards, but to Kansas City, Montreal, St. Louis, and

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Chicago, in the latter place to compete with success with the corn-feds of the U. S. A.

At the fairs, over the country, O Bar O stock carried a majority of the ribbons, and "Torchy," a slim, black streak of lightning and fire, brought undying fame to its owner by going over the bar of the annual horse-show of Calgary, with Hilda upon his back, the highest peak ever attained by a horse in Canada.

A berth at O Bar O was coveted by all the riders and cowpunchers of the country. The fame of the fine old ranch had crossed the line, in fact, and had brought to the ranch some of the best of the bronco busters and riders. The outfit could not, in fact, be beaten. The food was of the best; the bunkhouses modern and clean; the work done in season and in a rational number of hours per day; the wages were fair; first-class stock to care for; a square foreman, and a bully boss. What more could a man wish upon a cattle ranch? Pride permeated to every man-Jack upon the place. Each sought to stand well in the eyes of P. D.,

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and his praise was a coveted thing, while his anger was something to escape, and unlikely to be forgotten.

P. D.'s praise took the form of a resounding, smashing clap upon the shoulder, a prized assignment, and a bonus at the end of the month. His anger took the form of an ungodly and most extraordinary string of blistering and original curses, words being cut in half to slip curses midway between as the torrent poured from the wrathful P. D.

It may be mentioned in passing that P. D.'s son and his daughter had inherited and were developing a quaint vocabulary of typical O Bar O "cusses," much to their father's amazement and indignation. Indeed, the first time P. D.'s attention was directed toward this talent of his daughter—her voice was raised in shrill damning speech toward a squawking hen who desired to sit upon a nest of eggs destined for the house—the old fellow stopped midway in his strut across the barnyard, overcome with dismay and anger. Every "hand" within sight and sound was bawled to the pres-

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ence of the irate parent, and upon them he poured the vials of his wrath.

"Where in hot hell did my daughter learn such language? You blocketty, blinketty, gosh darned, sons of cooks and dish-washers have got to cut out all this damned, cursed, hellish language when my daughter's around. D'you hear me?"

And to the foreman!

"Orders to your men, sir, no more damned cursing upon the place! I'll have you and your men know that this is O Bar O and not a G— D— swearing camp for a blasted lot of bohunks."

This, then, was the outfit to which the seemingly guileless Englishman had become attached.

P. D., his bushy eyebrows twitching over bright old eyes, confirmed the judgment of the foreman, that "a bite of entertainment won't come amiss at O Bar O" in the shape of the English tenderfoot.

"Put him through the ropes, damn it. Get all the fun you want out of him. Work the

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blasted hide off him. Make him sweat like hell to earn his salt. Go as far as you like, but—" and here P. D.'s bushy eyebrows drew together in an ominous frown, "give the man a damned square deal. This is O Bar O, and we'll have no G— D— reflections upon the place."

So the Englishman was "put through the ropes." Despite his greenness and seeming innocence, it is possible that he was wider awake than any of the men who were working their wits to make his days and nights exciting and uproarious. He played up to his part with seeming ingenuousness and high good humour. If the hands of O Bar O regarded him as a clown, a mountebank, a greenhorn, he played greener and funnier than they had bargained for.

He was given steers to milk. He was assigned the job of "housemaid, nurse, chambermaid, and waitress" to the house barn stock. He fed the pigs, and he did the chores of cook-car and bunkhouse. All the small and mean jobs of the ranch were assigned to the new-

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comer. He was constantly despatched upon foolish and piffling errands. For an indefinite period, he was relegated to the woodpile of the cook-house. This was a job that the average cowman scorned. The cowpuncher and ranch rider consider any work not concerned with horse or cattle a reflection upon their qualities as riders. Cheerio, however, acquired a genuine fondness for that woodpile. He would chop away with undiminished cheer and vigour, whistling as he worked, and at the end of the day, he would sit on a log and contentedly smoke his pipe, as he surveyed the fruit of his labours with palpable pride and even vanity.

"Boastin' of how many logs he'd split. Proud as a whole hen. Hell! you can't feaze a chap like that. He'd grin if you put'm to breakin' stones."

Thus Bully Bill to Holy Smoke, assistant foreman at the O Bar O. "Ho" as he was known for short, scowled at that reference to breaking stones, for Ho knew what that meant

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in another country across the line. Out of the side of his mouth he shot:

“Why don’t cha set ’im choppin’ real logs if he’s stuck on the job. Stick ’im in the timber and see if he’ll whistle over his job then.”

So “into the timber” went Cheerio, with strict orders to cut down ten fifty-foot tall trees per day. He looked squarely into the face of the assistant foreman, and said: “Righto,” and took the small hand axe handed him by the solemn-faced Hootmon, whose tongue was in his cheek, and who doubled over in silent mirth as soon as Cheerio’s back was turned. But neither Mootmon, nor Ho, nor Bully Bill, nor, for that matter, old P. D. or his son and daughter, laughed when at the end of the day Cheerio returned with twelve trees to his credit for the day’s work. It was, in fact, a matter of considerable wonder and speculation as to the method employed by the Englishman to achieve those twelve immense trees through the medium of that small hand axe. Cheerio went on whistling, kept his own counsel, and was starting off the next morning

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upon a similar errand when Bully Bill harkened to another suggestion of his assistant, and beckoned him to the corrals.

There was a wary-eyed, ominously still, maverick tied to a post, and him Cheerio was ordered to mount. He said:

"Hello, old man—waiting for me, what?" smiled at the boy holding his head, and swung up into the saddle.

"Now," said Bully Bill. "You lookut here. You ride that bronc to hell and back again, and break 'er cowboy if you have to break your own head and hide and heart in doing it."

Then someone untied the halter rope, and the race was on. He was tossed over and over again clear over the head of the wild maverick, and over and over again he remounted, to be thrown again by the wildly kicking bronco. Bruised and sore, with a cut lip and black eye, he pursued, caught, and again and again mounted, again and again was thrown, to mount once again, and to stick finally like glue to the horse's back, while the hooting, yelling ring of men surrounding the

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corrals—Hilda and Sandy upon the railings—yelled themselves hoarse with derisive comments and directions, and then went wild with amazed delight, when, still upon the back of a subdued and shivering young outlaw, Cheerio swept around the corrals. He arose in his stirrups now, himself cheering lustily, and waving that newly-acquired O Bar O hat like a boy. Even Hilda begrudged him not the well-earned cheers, though she stifled back her own with her hand upon her mouth, when she found that he had observed her, and with eyes kindling with pride, rode by.

He was thumped upon the back, hailed as “a hellufafellow,” and enjoyed the pronounced favour and patronage of Bully Bill himself, who brought forth his grimy plug of chewing tobacco, and offered a “chaw” of it to the Englishman. Cheerio bit into it with relish, nor showed any sign of the nauseating effects of a weed he preferred in his pipe rather than his mouth.

As a matter of fact, like most Englishmen of his class, Cheerio was an excellent rider,

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though his riding had not been of the sort peculiar to cowboydom. However, it did not take him long to learn "the hang of the thing." He dropped his posting for the easy, cowboy lope, and he discovered that, while one clung with his knees when on an English saddle, such an action had painful and exhausting results with a stock saddle. There really was something to Bully Bill's simple formula:

"Hell! There ain't nothin' to this here ridin'. All you got to do is throw your leg over his back and—stick!"

His English training, however, stood him in good stead. More than the foreman at O Bar O noted and appreciated the fact that the newcomer was as intimate with horses as if they were human brethren.

From this time on, his progress at the ranch was swift, considering the daily handicaps the men still continued to slip in his way. His courage and grit won him at least the grudging respect of the men, though, try as he might, to "pal" with the O Bar O "hands," his overtures were met with suspicion.

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There is about certain Englishmen, an atmosphere of superiority that gives offence to men of the newer lands. The "hands" of the O Bar O realized instinctively that this man belonged to another class and caste than their own. No one in the outfit was in a mood to be what he would have considered "patronized." It was all very well to have a whale of a good time "guying," "stringing," and making the tenderfoot hop. That was part of the game, but when it came down to "pal-ing" with a "guy," who patronized the Ghost River for a daily bath, wielded a matutinal razor, and had regard for the cleanliness of his underwear as well as his overwear, that was a different proposition. Undaunted by continual rebuffs, however, Cheerio pertinaciously and doggedly continued to cultivate his "mates" of the bunkhouse, and at the end of the second month he felt that he could call at least four of the men his friends.

Pink-eyed Jake vehemently and belligerently proclaimed him a "damfinefellow." This was after Cheerio had knocked him out

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in a bout, in private, after enduring public bulldogging and browbeating. Hootmon made no bones about expressing his conviction that Cheerio was a "mon"! Neither he nor Cheerio revealed the fact that the better part of Cheerio's first month's wages was in the coat pocket of the Scotchman. The latter had a sick wife and a new baby in Calgary. Jim Hull was unlikely to forget certain painful nights, when all hands in the bunkhouse snored in blissful indifference to his groans, while Cheerio had arisen in his "pink pie-jammies" and rubbed "painkiller" on the rheumatic left limb.

The foreman by this time had discovered that despite his stammering tongue and singular ways, this lean and slight young Englishman could "stand the gaff" of twenty-four hours at a stretch in the saddle, nor "batted an eyelash" after a forty mile trip and back to Broken Nose Lake, after a "bunch" of yearling steers, without a moment off his horse, or a speck of grub till late at night.

His love of nature, his enthusiasm over sun-

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sets and sunrises, the poetry he insisted upon inditing to the moon and the star-spotted skies, to the jagged outline of those misty mountains, towering against the sun-favoured sky, the pen pictures he drew of the men and the silhouette shadows of ranch buildings and bush; the wild flowers he carried into the bunkhouse and cherished with water and sun; these and other "soft" actions, which had at first brought upon him the amused contempt of the men, slowly won at last their rough respect and approval.

Came long evenings, when under the mellow beams of the Alberta night sun, the wide-spreading hills and meadows seemed touched by a golden spell, and a brooding silence reigned on all sides, then the low murmur of Cheerio, half humming, half reciting the songs he had written of home and friends across the sea, tightened something in the throats of the toughest of the men and brought recollections of their own far-off homes, so that with suspended pipes they strained forward the better to catch each half-whispered word of the Englishman.

CHAPTER V

ONE there was at O Bar O who could not be reconciled to Cheerio. Hilda intuitively recognized the fact that this stranger on the ranch belonged to that "upper world" of which she knew vaguely through the medium of newspapers and tawdry literature emanating from the bunkhouse. Even the Encyclopædia had furnished the girl with information concerning kings and princes, lords and dukes, and earls that abounded in diverse places in the old world. "Bloody parasites," her father had named them, "living for generations off the blood and sweat and toil of the poor, blind underdogs who had not the intelligence or the 'sand' to unseat them from power."

Her fiery young nature was up in arms at the thought of "that Englishman's patronage." No doubt, thought the proud, hot-headed and ignorant girl, "he looks down on us as poor Rubes. Well, we'll show him a thing or two,"

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and she urged the men on to torment and make uneasy the life of Cheerio.

Thorny and suspicious, with her free head toss, so characteristic of her young, wild nature, her eyes intensely dark, fixed above his head, or surveying him as from an amused and contemptuous height, Hilda left no opportunity neglected to show her scorn and contempt for the newcomer. She could not herself have diagnosed the reason for her hostility.

Sandy, on the other hand, had slowly but completely capitulated to the man whose first appearance had so amused him. In Alberta, daylight lingers, in the summer time, till as late as ten o'clock at night. When the day's work was done, Sandy and his new friend, would depart from the ranch on a hunt that was new to the cattle country. They hunted, in fact, for fossils, whitened, hardened bones of the original denizens of the land that had existed before the Rocky Mountains had sprung into being by some gigantic convulsion of nature.

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Zoology was a subject that exercised an uncanny fascination over the mind of the red-haired boy. P. D. had scarcely begun the instruction of this alluring subject when chess diverted him, much to the disappointment and aggravation of his son. Cheerio, however, proved a mine of information in this particular field. He had actually once been a member of an archæological expedition to Thibet, from whose bowels the bones of the oldest man in the world had been dug. Sandy could have sat by the hour listening to the tales of that expedition and its remarkable contribution to science. It was an even more enthralling experience for the youngster, therefore, to personally explore the wild canyons above the Ghost River, and, with bated excitement, himself assist in picking out on the gigantic rocks what Cheerio definitely proved were bones of a dinosaur. These immense reptiles of prehistoric days were quite common to the Red Deer district, but the new "hand" of the O Bar O had proven that they were to be found also along the Ghost River canyons.

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Many a time, sitting on the bank of the river, waiting for the wary trout to bite, the slowly-drawling, seldom-stammering Cheerio, pictured to the bulging-eyed, open-mouthed youngster, the giant reptiles and mountainous mammals of prehistoric days. He even drew life-like pictures upon scraps of paper, which Sandy carefully cherished and consigned to his treasure drawer. Sandy, at such times, came as near to touching complete satisfaction with life as was possible.

His defection, in favour of Cheerio, however, was a bitter pill for his sister to swallow. Argue and squabble, wrangle and fight as the young McPherson's had done all of their lives, for they were of a healthy, pugnacious disposition, they nevertheless had always been first-rate chums, and in a way, a defensive and offensive alliance to which no outsider had been permitted more than a look-in. Now "that Englishman" had come between them, according to Hilda. Sandy evidently preferred his society to that of his own and only sister. Thus, bitter Hilda.

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Sandy upbraided, reproached and sneered at, grouchily allowed that she could come along too if she wanted to and "didn't interfere or talk too much." Girls, he brutally averred, were a doggone, darned old nuisance, and always in the way when something real was being done. They were well enough as ornaments, said Sandy, but the female of the species was not meant for practical purposes and they ought to know and keep their place, and if they wouldn't do it, why they'd be made to.

This was adding insult to injury. It proved beyond question that someone had been "setting her brother against her," and Hilda knew who that someone was. Sandy knew absolutely nothing about the "female of the species"—that, by the way, was a brand new expression to the young McPhersons—and Hilda proposed to "teach him a thing or two" about her much maligned sex. Also she would "spite that Englishman" who had influenced her brother against her, by imposing her unwanted society upon the explorers.

Each evening, therefore, Hilda was on

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hand, and she arose before dawn of a Sunday morning—a time when all hands on the ranch were accustomed to sleep in late—to ride out with them under the grey-gold skies, with the air fresh and sparkling, and such a stillness on all sides that one felt loth to break it by even a murmur.

She rode somewhat behind the “bone enthusiasts,” disdaining to ride abreast with them, or to join in the unintelligible conversation that presently would begin. No brush was too thick to hold back this girl of the ranching country; no trail too intricate or tortuous. Foot wide ledges, over precipices three and four hundred feet above the river daunted her not. Hilda held her careless seat on the back of her surefooted and fleet young Indian pony, and if the path crumbled away in places too perilous for even a foothill horse to pass, Hilda dismounted and led him, breaking a trail herself through dense timber land.

True, bones, whether of prehistoric man or mammal, had no actual interest for the living

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girl. Sandy's passion for such things indeed puzzled and troubled her, inasmuch as she was unable to share it with him. It was strangely sweet and pleasant, none the less, to ride out in the quiet dawn or in the evening when the skies were bronzed and reddened by the still lingering sun. With every day, they found new trails, new byways, new depressions in the wild woods of O Bar O.

On these excursions Sandy monopolized the conversation and, in a measure, Hilda was ignored. Cheerio's concern in her behalf when first they had penetrated into difficult woods and his offer to lead her horse had met with haughty and bitter rebuff. Hilda, indeed, rudely suggested that she was better able to care for herself than he was. Also she said:

"Don't bother about me. Ride on with Sandy. I like to ride alone, and I don't care for conversation when I ride."

Sandy more than made up for his sister's conversational deficiency. He was a human interrogation point, and his hunger for

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knowledge in matters anent man and beast of ancient days was unquenchable.

Hilda, riding a few paces behind, would listen to the endless questions popped by the eager boy, and secretly marvel at the always comprehensible replies of his companion. Sometimes she was tempted to join in the discussions; but her opinions were never solicited by her brother or Cheerio. As the two rode on, apparently oblivious of her very existence, Hilda was torn with mixed emotions. She had scornfully advised Cheerio not to bother her; nevertheless, she was indignant at thus being ignored. "I might just as well be an old pack pony," she thought wrathfully. "I don't know why I come along anyway. However, I'm not going to turn back for that Englishman. Not if I know it."

Cheerio, on the other hand, was not insensible to that small, uplifted chin and the disdainful glance of the dark eyes that seemed to harden when they glanced in his direction. He was not versed in the ways of a woman, or it may be that Hilda's treatment of him

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would not have wounded him so sorely. Cheerio was not stupid; but he was singularly dense in certain matters. He pondered much over the matter of how he could possibly have offended the girl, and the thought that she very evidently disliked him was hard to bear. That cut deep.

Many a night, pipe in mouth, upon the steps of the bunkhouse, Cheerio would debate the matter within himself. Why did Hilda dislike him? What was there about him that should arouse her especial scorn and contempt? Why should her eyes harden and her whole personality seem to stiffen at his approach? Almost it seemed as if the girl armoured herself against him. He could find no answer to his questions, and his troubled meditations would end with the dumping of his pipe, as he shook his head again in the puzzle of womanhood, and ruefully turned in for the night. Sometimes he would lie awake for hours, and wholly against his will the vision of her small, dark face, with its scarlet

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lips and deep brown eyes accompanied him into the world of sleep.

About this time, he began to draw sketches of Hilda. He made them at odd moments; at the noon hour, when he scratched them on the backs of envelopes, slips of paper, a bit of cardboard torn from a box. Presently parcels were brought by an Indian on horseback from the Morley Trading Store, and after that Cheerio began to paint the face of the girl whom he believed hated him. It is true that his model sat not for him. Yet she was drawn from life, for his memory drew her back as faithfully as though they were standing face to face. This was all secret work, done in secret places, and packed away in the locked portfolio, which was in that battered grip. Drawing and painting in this way was not at all satisfactory to the artist, who felt that he was not doing Hilda justice. His need of a place, where he might work, undisturbed, was keenly felt by him. Cheerio, as before mentioned, was the one "hand" at the ranch who daily visited the Ghost River for bathing

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purposes. He would arise an hour before the other men and was off on horse to the river, returning fresh and clean for breakfast and the long day's work. His explorations with Sandy and these daily expeditions to the river had made him very well acquainted with the Ghost River canyon. One day, scanning thoughtfully the rockbound river, he perceived what appeared to be a declivity in the side of a giant rock that jutted out several feet above the river. Out of curiosity, Cheerio climbed up the cliff, and discovered a small cave, part of which was so cleft that the light poured through. His first thought was of Sandy, and the fun the boy would have exploring through what was evidently a considerable tunnel. His next thought was that on account of the nature of the earth, this might prove a dangerous and hazardous undertaking for an adventurous youngster. Suddenly an inspiration flashed over Cheerio. Here was the ideal studio. Not in the tunnel, on whose ledge he could very well keep his work, but in that round natural chamber near

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the opening, when the north light was husbanded. It did not take him long to bring his drawing and painting paraphernalia to his "studio," and after a few days he fashioned a rude sort of easel for himself. Here on a Sunday Cheerio worked, and during that day of rest the ranch saw him not. He would carry his lunch with him, and depart for the day, much to the bewilderment of Hilda and the disappointment of Sandy, unwilling to abandon the Sunday morning exploration trips. The cave was so situated that his privacy was complete, and anyone coming along the top of the canyon or even down the river itself could not have seen the man in the cave a few feet above, quietly smoking and drawing those impressionistic pictures of the ranch, the Indians, the cowboys, P.D., the overall-clad Sandy and Hilda. Hilda on horse, flying like the wind at the head of the cowboys; Hilda, loping slowly along the trail, with her head dropped in a day dream, that brought somehow a singularly wistful and touching expression of longing to the

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lovely young face; Hilda with hand on hip, head tossed up, defiant, impudent, fascinating; Hilda's head, with its crown of chocolate-coloured hair and the darker eyes, the curiously dusky red that seemed burned by the sun into her cheeks, and the lips that were so vividly alive and scarlet.

Of all his subjects, she alone he drew from memory. He had found no difficulty in inducing his other subjects to "pose" for him. Even P. D. with old pipe twisted in the corner of his mouth had made no demur when Cheerio, pad and pencil in hand, seated on the steps of the ranch-house rapidly sketched his employer. The Indians were a never-failing source of inspiration to the artist. The chubby babies, the child mothers, the tawny braves, the ragged, old, shuffling women; Indian colours—magentas, yellows, orange, scarlet, cerise. They furnished subjects for the artist that made his paintings seem fairly to blaze with light, and later were to win for him well-deserved fame and monetary reward. Cheerio would take these miniature

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sketches to his studio, and there enlarge them. Hilda, however, whom above all things in the world, he desired to paint, somehow eluded him. No matter how lifelike or well-drawn his pictures of this girl, they never wholly satisfied him. Indeed it was not one of his drawings, but a little kodak picture of her, acquired from Sandy, that found its way into the ancient locket, where previously had been the picture of the woman with the long sleepy eyes and dead-gold hair.

CHAPTER VI

PURELY by accident, the wall of reserve that Hilda had reared between herself and Cheerio was, for the nonce at least, removed. Sandy had desired to go over a certain cliff, incredibly steep and slippery and four hundred feet above the river. Now Sandy could climb up and down places with the agility and sureness of a mountain goat, but even a mountain goat would have hesitated to go over the side of that cliff.

Hilda came out of her absent trance with a start, as she realized the intention of the daring and reckless youngster. Over an out-jutting rock Sandy was poised.

"Sandy McPherson! You cut out that darned nonsense. You can't go down there. It's too doggone steep."

"Guess I can if I want to," retorted the boy, looking over the perilous edge and scrutinizing the grade for any possible root

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or tree stump upon which he might grasp in an emergency. "Say," his head jerked sideways toward Cheerio, who had dismounted himself to investigate the situation. "Will you look after Silver Heels till I get back? 'Tain't safe for *him* to go over, but I'll be Jake."

"Sandy! You come back! Dad said the earth wasn't safe under those rocks there, and any minute one of 'em might roll over. That rock's moving now! Sandy! Oh, stop him! D-d-don't let—him! *Please!*"

She had appealed to Cheerio. It was the first request she had ever made of him. Instantly he grasped the arm of her brother.

"Come on, old man. There's a prospect over yonder that looks a jolly sight better than down there."

"Aw, girls give me a pain," declared the disgusted Sandy. "What do they want to come spyin' along for anyway, and throwin' fits about nothin'. What do they know about dinosauruses or anything else, I'd like to know?"

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"On you go, old man!"

He had hoisted the grumbling boy upon his horse. Sandy raced angrily ahead. Cheerio looked at Hilda with the expectant boyish smile of one hoping for reward. He had "taken her part." Thanks were his due. Thanks indeed he did not get. Hilda's glance met his own only for a moment and then she said, while the deep colour flooded all of her face and neck:

"Now you can see for yourself what your fool expeditions might lead to. Sandy's the only brother I have in the world, and first thing you know he'll be going over one of those cliffs and then—then—you'll be entirely to blame."

Discomfited, Cheerio lost the use of his tongue. After a moment he inquired, somewhat dejectedly:

"Sh-shall we c-c-c-call them off then?"

Hilda was unprepared for this. Though she would not have admitted it to herself for anything in the world, those evening rides were becoming the most important events in

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her life. Indeed, she found herself looking forward to and thinking of them all day. Faced now with the possibility of their being ended, she said hurriedly and with a slight catching of her breath that made Cheerio look at her with an odd fixity of expression:

"No, no—of course not. I wouldn't want to disappoint my brother, b-but I can't trust that boy alone. I've always taken care of Sandy. That's why I come along. Sandy's just a little boy, you know."

How that "little boy" would have snarled with wrath at his sister's designation! Even Cheerio's eyes twinkled, and Hilda, to cover up her own embarrassment, hastily pressed her heel into her horse's flank, and for the first time she suffered him to ride along beside her.

It was intensely still and a dim golden haze lay like a dream over all the sky and the land, merging them into one. Into this glow rode the girl of the ranching country and the man from the old land across the sea. The air was balmy and full of the essence of summer.

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There was the sweet odour of recently-cut hay and green feed and a suave wind whispered and fragrantly fanned the perfumed air about them. They came out of the woods directly into the hay lands and passed through fields of thick oats already turning golden. A strange new emotion, a feeling that pained by its very sweetness was slowly growing into being in the untutored heart of the girl of the foothills. Glancing sideways at the man's fine, clean-cut profile, his gaze bent straight ahead, Hilda caught her breath with a sudden fear of she knew not what. Why was it, she asked herself passionately, that she was unable to speak to this man as to other men? Why could she scarcely meet his clear, straight glance, which seemed always to question her own so wistfully? What was the matter with her and with him that his mere presence near her moved her so strangely? Why was she riding alone with him now in this strange, electrical silence? As the troubled questions came tumbling over one another through the girl's mind, Cheerio suddenly turned in his

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saddle and directly sought her gaze. A wonderful, a winning smile, which made Hilda think of the sunshine about them, broke over the man's face. She was conscious of the terrifying fact that that smile awoke in her breast tumultuous alarms and clamours. She feared it more than a hostile glance. Feared the very friendly and winning quality of it.

Impetuously the girl dug her little spurred heels into her horse's flanks and rode swiftly ahead.

It was nearly ten o'clock, yet the skies were incredibly bright and in the west above the wide range of mountains, shone the splendour of a late sunset, red, gold, purple, magenta and blue. All of the country seemed tinted by the reflected glow of the night sun. Hilda, riding breathlessly along, had the sense of one in a race, running to escape that which was pursuing her. On and on, neck and neck with the galloping horse beside her, and feeling its rider's gaze still bent solely upon her.

Presently there was a slackening of the running speed; gradually the galloping turned to

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the shorter trot. Daisy and Jim Crow, panting from the long race, slowed down to a lope. Some of the fever had run out of Hilda's blood and she had recovered her composure.

Silence for a long interval, while they rode steadily on into the immense sun glow. Then:

"R-ripping, isn't it?" said the man, softly.

"Meaning what?" demanded the girl, angry with herself that her voice was tremulous.

Almost they seemed to be riding into the sky itself. Sky and earth had the curious phenomenon of being one.

"Everything," he replied, with an eloquent motion of his hand. "It's a r-ripping—land! I'm jolly glad I came."

"I don't suppose," said Hilda, "that you have skies like this in England."

"Hardly."

"It's foggy and dark there, I've heard," said Hilda.

He glanced at her, as if slightly surprised.

"Why no, that hardly describes it, you know."

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He was thoughtful a moment, and then said, with a smile, as if glad to reassure her:

"It's a dashed fine place, all the same. C-carn't beat it, you know."

That brought the girl's chin up. For some reason, she could not have analyzed, it hurt and offended her to hear him praising the land from which he had come.

"Hm! I wonder why Englishmen who think so darned much of their own old land bother to come to wild outlandish places like Canada."

If she had expected him to deny that Canada was wild and outlandish she was to be disappointed, for he replied eagerly:

"Oh, by Jove! th-that's wh-why we like it, you know. It's—it's exhilarating—the difference—the change from things over there. One gets in a rut in the old land and travel is our only antidote."

Hilda had never travelled. She had never been outside the Province of Alberta. Calgary and Banff were the only cities Hilda had ever been in. She was conscious now of a

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sense of extreme bitterness and pain. Like some young wounded creature who strikes out blindly when hurt, Hilda said:

"Look here, Mr.——er——Whatever your name is, if you Englishmen just come out to Canada out of curiosity and to——"

"But, my dear child, Canada is part of us! We're all one family. I'm at home here."

"No, you're not. You're a fish out of water."

"I s-say——"

"And look here, I don't let anyone call me 'dear child.' I won't be patronized by you or anyone like you. I'm not a child anyway. I'm eighteen and that's being of age, if you want to know."

He could not restrain the smile that came despite himself at this childish statement. Hilda's face darkened, and her eyelids were smarting with the angry tears that, much to her indignation, seemed to be trying to force their way through. She said roughly, in an effort to hide the impending storm:

"Anyway you can't tell me that there is any-

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thing whatsoever in England to compare with—that—for instance.”

Her quirt made an eloquent motion toward the west, along the complete horizon of which the long line of jagged peaks were silhouetted against the gilded skies.

“Righto!” said the man, softly and then after a pause he added almost gently, and as if he were recalling something to memory: “But I doubt if there’s anything rarer than our English country lanes—lawns—fine old places—the streams—but you must see it all some day.”

When he spoke, when he looked like that, with the faraway absent expression in his eyes. Hilda had a passionate sense of rebellion and resentment. For some reason she could not have explained she begrudged him his thought of England. It tormented her to think that the man beside her was homesick. Her quirt flicked above Daisy’s neck. A short swift gallop and back again to the lope of the cow ponies. The ride had whipped the colour into her cheeks and brought back

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the fire to her eyes. She was ready now with the burning questions that for days she had ached to have answered.

"If England's such a remarkable place, why do you come to Canada to make a home for this—what was her name, did you say?"

"Her name? Oh, I see—you mean—Nanna."

He said the name softly, almost tenderly, and Hilda's breath came and went with the sudden surge of unreasonable fury that swept over her. He answered her lightly, deliberately begging the question.

"Why not? This is the p-p-promised land!"

"Are you making fun of Canada?" she demanded imperiously.

"No—never. I s-said that quite seriously."

She shot her next question roughly. She was determined to know the exact relationship of this Nanna to the man beside her. Undoubtedly she was the woman of the locket, whose fair, lovely face Hilda was see-

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ing in imagination too often these days for her peace of mind.

"Is she your sister?"

"Oh, no. No relation whatever. At least, no blood relation."

"I see. I sup-pose you think her very—pretty?"

"Lovely," said Cheerio. Something had leaped into his eyes—something bright and eager. He leaned toward Hilda with the impulse to confide in her, but the look on the girl's face repelled him, so that he drew back confounded and puzzled. Hilda set her little white teeth tightly together, put up her nose, and, with a toss of her head, said:

"For goodness sakes, let's get home. Hi, Daisy! get a wiggle on you, you old poke."

She was off on the last lap of the journey.

In her room, she faced herself in the wide mirror and revealed a remarkable circumstance so far as she was concerned. Tears, bitter and scorching, were running down her face. Clinching her hands, she said to the tear-stained vision in the mirror:

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"It's just because I hate him so! Oh, how I hate him. I never knew anyone in all the days of my life that I hated so much before and I'd give anything on earth if only I could just *hurt* him!"

Hurt him she did, for the following evening when he brought her horse, saddled and ready for her, to the front of the ranch house, Hilda, in the swinging couch on the verandah apparently deeply absorbed in a dictionary, looked up coolly, and inquired what the hell he was doing with her horse.

"Wh-why I th-th-thought you would be coming with us as usual," said the surprised Cheerio.

"No thank you, and I'm quite able to saddle my own horse when I want to go," said Hilda, and returned to a deep perusal of the dictionary. But the crestfallen and puzzled Cheerio did not see her, as on tiptoe, she stole around the side of the house, to catch a last glimpse of him as he rode out with Sandy beside him. Her cheeks were hot and her eyes humid with undropped tears as over the still

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evening air her brother's shrill young voice floated:

"Hilda not coming! Gee! we're in *luck!*
Now we can go over the cliff!"

Hilda didn't care just then whether that brother of hers went over the cliff or not. She felt forsaken, bitter, ill-used and extremely unhappy and forlorn. But she had had her last ride in the magical evenings on a dinosaur quest.

CHAPTER VII

“SAY, Hilda, guess what I found to-day? I didn’t reckonize it at first until he said it was his. Viper rooted it up right under his window outside the bunkhouse. Well, I found that picture of his girl that he keeps in that locket. It must’ve slipped out, and Viper nearly chewed it up. So I yipped to him to come on out and I give it up to him and I says: ‘Whose her nibs anyway,’ and he says: ‘Someone I used to know,’ and I says: ‘Don’t you know her still?’ and he says: ‘Oh, yes, oh, yes,’ and he was lookin’ just as if he wasn’t hearin’ a word I was saying and he says as if he was talking to himself; ‘She was to have been my wife, you know.’ Just like that. Then he got up and he looked kind of queer, and he went on inside and come on out again with that locket in his hand and he sits down beside me on the steps and smokes without saying a word. So then I said, just to kid

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him: 'Say, I'll give you two of my buffalow skulls for that bit of dinky tin,' meaning the locket, and he dumps his pipe and gives me the laugh and he says: 'Nothing doing, old man. The sweetest girl in the world is enshined'—that's what he said—'right inside that "dinky bit of tin"!'

CHAPTER VIII

SITTING in the sunlight on the wide steps of the ranch house, chin cupped in her hands, her glance far off across the mountain tops, her thoughts wandering over the seas that stretched between the Dominion of Canada and the Mother-land, Hilda McPherson came out of her deep reverie to find the object of her thoughts standing before her. He had a book in his hand and with the sunny, engaging almost boyish smile that was characteristic of him he was tendering it to the girl on the steps.

For some days Cheerio's discourse on mastodons, dinosaurs and the various species of the prehistoric days had been extremely vague and unsatisfactory to his disciple. Matters reached a climax upon this especial Sunday, when he had wandered from the matter of a fossil skeleton recently discovered on the Red Deer River, said to be one hundred and sixty

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feet long and at least seventy feet tall, with a sudden question that brought a snort of disgust from the intensely-interested Sandy.

"What's *she* got to do with the Mezzozoic age?" he exploded.

(Note: Cheerio had digressed from the absorbing matter of the age of the Red Deer dinosaurs, to ask suddenly whether Hilda was likely to be riding with a certain bachelor rancher whose bronco was tied to the front of the ranch house when the reluctant Cheerio and Sandy had ridden away that morning.)

"I s-s-suppose," stuttered Cheerio, "that your s-s-sister w-w-will probably be riding with her caller at the r-r-ranch."

Sandy's reply was neither enlightening nor respectful. He glimpsed his friend with the shrewd unflattering scrutiny of a wise one, and presently:

"Say, you don't mean to tell me that *you're* gettin' stuck on her too!"

That was a disturbing question, and moreover a revealing one. It plainly disclosed to the upset Cheerio that there were others

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“stuck on” Hilda. In fact, Sandy left no room for doubt as to that.

“Holy Hens!” went on Hilda’s brother. “Half the guys in this country’s got a case on *her!* I don’t know what they see in her. Should think *you’d* have more common sense than to pile along in too.”

“Hilda’s eyes,” said the Englishman softly, “are as b-brown as loamy soil. They’re like the dark earth, warm and rich and full of promise.”

“Oh, my God—frey!” groaned Sandy and rolled clear down the grassy slope on which they had been sitting to the more intelligent and sane company of Viper, a yellow and unlovely cur who was, however, the private and personal property of Sandy. Viper was at that moment “snooping” above a gopher hole. One intelligent eye and ear cocked up warily, signalled with canine telepathy to his master and pal the warning:

“Careful! She’s under there! Don’t let on you and me are above her. I’ll get her for you. You’ll have another tail for your col-

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lection. Don't forget there's a gymkhanna over at the Minnehaha ranch next month and the prize for the most gopher tails is five plunks."

To this unspoken but perfectly comprehensible message, Sandy replied:

"Betchu we get his tail, Viper! Betchu I take the prize this year! I got seventy-five now. Make it seventy-six, Viper, and I'll give you eight bones for dinner to-night."

Cheerio, meanwhile, ruminating painfully upon Sandy's revelation, and also upon that bronco tied to front of the ranch house, and its good-looking owner who was inside, unable to endure the picture his mind conjured of Hilda riding off with her caller into their own (his and Hilda's) especial sun glow, jumped in a hurry upon Jim Crow's back, and with the best of intentions sped back to O Bar O.

It was Sunday afternoon, and such of the ranch hands as were not off on some courting or hunting or fishing or riding expedition, were stretched out on the various cots that

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lined the long bunkhouse taking their weekly siesta. Cheerio himself was accustomed to spend his Sundays in his cave studio, but in these latter days—since in fact Hilda had ceased to ride with them in the evenings—even the painting had lost its charm for him. He spent his Sundays in the near vicinity of the ranch house, his hopeful eyes pinned upon that wide verandah on to which the girl now so seldom came.

Occasionally, as on this Sunday, Sandy would induce him into short excursions from the ranch, but Cheerio was restless and unsettled now, and far from being the satisfactory companion and oracle upon whom Sandy had depended.

Now as Cheerio paused at the bunkhouse, he turned over in his mind such small treasures as he possessed. He had a most ardent desire to endow Hilda with one or all of his possessions. He was obsessed with a longing to lay his hands upon certain treasures of a great house that should have been his own. His possessions at the ranch were modest

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enough. His wages had been spent mainly for paint and books. He surveyed the crude, but adequate, book-case he had built himself, and scanned the volumes laid upon the shelves. After all, one could offer no finer gift than a book. He chose carefully, with a thought rather for what might appeal especially to a girl of Hilda's type than his own preferences.

As he came around the side of the house, he perceived that the bronco was gone. A momentary heartshake over the thought that Hilda might have gone with it, and then a great thumping of that sensitive organ as he saw the girl upon the steps. She was sitting in the sunlight, staring out before her in a day dream. Something in the mute droop of the expressive young mouth and the slight shadow cast by the lashes against her cheek gave Hilda a look of singular sadness and depression and sent her caller impetuously hurrying toward her. He had come, in fact, directly in front of her, before the eyes were lifted and Hilda looked back at him. Slowly the colour swept like the dawn over her young face, as he ex-

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tended the book, stammering and blushing in his boyish way.

"M-m-m-miss Hilda, I r-r-recommend this f-for b-b-both pleasure and information. It's p-p-part of one's education to read Dumas."

Education! The word was inflammatory. It was an affront to her pride. He was rubbing in the fact of her appalling ignorance. That was her own affair—her own misfortune. Hilda sprang to her feet, up in arms, on the defensive and the offensive. While the astonished Cheerio still extended the book—a silent peace offering—Hilda's dark head tossed up, in that characteristic motion, while her foot stamped the ground.

"I don't care for that kind of rot, thank you. My dad's right. It's better to be real people in the world rather than fake folk in a book."

Again the head toss and the blaze of angry wide eyes; then, swift as a fawn, Hilda sped across the verandah and the ranch house door banged hard.

Thus might have ended the Dumas incident, but on the following day, when the men were

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all out on the range, she who had spurned "The Three Musketeers" slipped out of the ranch house, over to the grove of trees to the east and running behind the shelter of these, so that Chum Lee should not see her as she passed, made her way swiftly to the bunkhouse.

Bunkhouses in a ranching country are not savoury or attractive places as a general rule. This of the O Bar O was "not too bad" as the expression goes in Alberta. It had the virtue at all events of being clean, thanks to the assiduous care of Chum Lee. Moreover, shiftless and dirty fellows found a short job at O Bar O. Hats and caps, hide shirts, buckskin breeks, chaps and coats were all, therefore, neatly hung along the wall on the row of deer horns, while under these were piled on the long shelf the puttees, boots and other gear of the riders.

The bunkhouse was lavishly decorated, the entire walls being covered with pictures cut from magazines or newspapers or from other sources and pasted or tacked upon the wall. Ladies in skin tights of rounded and ample

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curves, in poses calculated to attract the attention of the opposite sex, ravishing beauties, all more or less with that stage smile in which all of the dental equipment of their owners, alluringly displayed, beamed down above the beds of the riders of O Bar O. Hilda had seen these often before and they had no especial interest for her. Her glance travelled instead to the long table on which was piled the treasured possessions of the men, correspondence boxes, tobacco, pipes, jack-knives, quirts, gloves, letters and photographs of friends and relatives. Nothing on that table would likely belong to him. Nothing suggested Cheerio. Her eye went slowly down the row of beds till it came to rest upon that one pulled out from the wall till the head was thrust directly under the widely opened window, by the side of which stood the crude book-case and stand. She paused only a moment and then swiftly crossed to the Englishman's bed.

Three of the shelves were filled tightly with books and the bottom one held a writing folio and sketch tablet. This Hilda seized upon,

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but stopped before opening it, while the colour receded from her cheeks. Within that folio, perhaps, would be found some clue, some letter from the woman he loved. Yes, Hilda faced the fact that Cheerio loved the woman whose pictured face was in the locket, and for whom he had come to Canada to make a home. As she held the folio in her hand, she felt a passionate impulse of shame that fought her natural curiosity, and caused her to put the thing back upon the shelf. No! She had not come to the bunkhouse to spy into a man's correspondence. It was only that she suffered from an unconquerable hunger merely again to see the other woman's face; to study it, to compare it with her own—Oh! to destroy it! But no, no—she would not stoop so low as to look at something which he did not wish her to see.

The book was a different matter. He had offered it to her. It was therefore really her own. Thus argued Hilda within herself. A quick search along the shelves and she had picked out the volume she sought. It was

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marked number one in the row of books by Alexandre Dumas. Thrusting it under her cape, Hilda hurried to the door, and once again like a scared child who has been stealing apples, she slipped behind the sheltering bushes, came from behind them into the open and sped across the yard to the house.

All of that morning, Hilda McPherson was dead to the world. Lying on the great fragrant heap in the hay loft, she lost herself in the meshes of one of the most entrancing romances that has ever been penned by the hand of man. She emerged from her retreat at the dinner hour, brought back to earth by the arrival of the "hands" in the barn below. It was haying time and the men came in from the fields for their noon meal. Certain of the horses were changed and relieved and brought to the stables for especial feeding. Hiding her precious book under a pile of hay in a corner of the loft, Hilda descended, and still under the spell of the book she had been reading all morning, made her way to the house.

It so happened, that in her absorption, she

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had paid little attention to Sandy's dog, who leaped up at her as she passed, capered around her, sought to lick her hands and otherwise ingratiate himself. Absently Hilda ordered him down.

"That will do, Viper! Now cut it out! Get away! Get away! Shoooo-o-o! Bad dog! Down!"

Duly admonished, spirits but slightly dampened, Viper repaired to the barn, where for a spell, with his tongue hanging out and panting from recent long runs across the land after his master on horse, he endeavoured to attract the attention of such hands as were still in the barn by an occasional yelp and a moan of protest when at last the doors were shut upon him.

For a little while Viper rested in one of the stalls; then being young and of an active disposition he arose and stretched himself and looked about him for diversion. In the natural course of events, having tired of chasing the various hens from the stalls and vainly snapping at persistent fleas, he sniffed along

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the trail over which his young mistress (he regarded her as such) had passed. In due time, therefore, Viper arrived in the loft. Also in the natural course of events, he nosed around and dug under the hay, disclosing the hidden book. He carried this treasure below in his mouth, and was having quite a jolly time with it, growling and barking and shaking it and alternatively letting it go and then pouncing upon it, when he was interrupted by a well-known and much-beloved and sometimes feared whistle. Joyously, proudly, triumphantly Viper brought his find to his master, and with the pride of a new mother, laid it at Sandy's feet. Wagging his tail furiously and emitting short, sharp yelps which spoke as eloquently as mere words the dog's demand for well-earned praise, he was rewarded from various pockets of Sandy's overalls. The prizes consisted of bones and other edibles "swiped" from the kitchen through which Sandy had passed like a streak en route to join his dog in the barn.

Sandy now squinted appraisingly over the

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printed lines of that now ragged volume. Presently his attention was drawn to one living line that flashed from the page with the swift play of the sword of D'Artagnan. Sandy's mouth gaped, and his gaze grew intent. Presently, still reading, he retired from the barn, and, followed by Viper, climbed aboard a huge hay wagon that stood beneath the open window of the big loft.

All of that afternoon Hilda McPherson searched in vain for "The Three Musketeers." The mystery of its disappearance from the loft tormented her, for she had reached a portion of the tale that had to be finished. What had become of Porthos when—Hilda felt that she had to know the sequel of that especial episode "or bust" with unsatisfied curiosity. The story had seized upon her imagination.

The blazing sunlight of the July afternoon was softening and the mellow tone that would presently settle into the misty gleam of the reluctantly-ending day was beginning to tint the land, when Hilda looked forth from the hay

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loft window and perceived something directly below her that was brick red in colour. It stuck out from a loaded hay wagon. His dog curled beside him, half buried in the deep hay, book propped before him, Sandy, as his sister had done, had dropped out of this world of ours and was soaring into realms of another time.

Hilda's eyes widened with amazement and righteous indignation. A moment of pause only, poised on the window sill of the loft. Then down she dropped squarely into the lap of the great hay wagon. There was the smothered sound of murmuring and scrambling under the hay; the delighted bark of the entertained dog, uncertain whether this was a contest or a game, and then two heads, plentifully besprinkled with straw and hay arose to the surface and two wrathful, angry faces glared across at each other.

"That's mine!"

"It ain't!"

"It is, I say. I had it first."

"Don't care if you did. Viper found it."

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"That cur stole it. I hid it in the loft. You give it up to me, do you hear me?"

"Yeesh, don't you see me givin' it up. My dog found it for me, and finding's keepings, see?"

"Sandy, you give me that book, or you'll be sorry. It's mine."

"Prove it then."

A tussle, a tug, a tremendous pull; back and forth, a fierce wrestle; a scramble and sprawl over the hay; a whoop of triumph from Hilda as on the edge of the wagon, with Sandy temporarily restrained by the hay under which she had buried him, she paused a second ere she dropped to the ground almost into the arms of the highly-edified Cheerio.

Sandy at last freed from his prison of hay was upon her tracks, and with a blood-curdling yell of vengeance he leaped to the ground beside her.

"You gimme that book!"

At the sight of Cheerio. Hilda's clasp of the book had relaxed and it was therefore a cinch for the attacking Sandy to seize and re-

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gain possession of the disputed treasure. From the boy to the girl the quizzical glance of the Englishman turned.

"I s-say, old man, b-believe that's m-my book, d'you know."

"Then she mus've swiped it, 'cause Viper found it in the hay loft and that's where she always hides to read, so Dad won't ketch her."

Hilda had turned first white and then rosily red. She felt that her face was scorching and smarting tears bit at her eyelids waiting to drop. One indeed did roll down the round sun-burnt cheek and splashed visibly upon her hand right before the now thoroughly concerned Cheerio. His face stiffened sternly as he looked at Sandy, and reaching over he recovered his book. Quietly he extended it to Hilda. Sandy thereupon pressed his claim in loud and emphatic language.

"That ain't fair. She's just turnin' on her old water-works so's to make you give her the book. It ain't fair. I'm just up to that part where Porthos and——"

Hilda made no motion to take the book.

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Two more tears rolled to join their first companion. Hilda could no more have stayed the course of those flowing tears than she could have dammed up the ocean with her little hand. She was forced to stand there, openly crying, before the man she had so often assured herself that she hated. Far from "gloating over" her humiliation as she imagined he was doing, Cheerio, as he looked at the weeping girl, was himself consumed with the most tender of emotions. He longed to take her into his arms and to comfort and reassure her.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Cheerio, gently. "I'll read the story to you both. What do you say? An hour or two every evening while the light lasts. Wh-when we're through with this one, w-we'll tackle others. There's three sequels to this, and we'll read them all. Then we'll go at the 'Count of Monte Christo.' Th-that's a remarkable yarn!"

"Three sequels! My aunt's old hat!" yelled the delighted Sandy, tossing his ragged head gear into the air. "Gee whillikins!"

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But Cheerio was looking at Hilda, intently, appealingly. Her face had lighted, and a strange shyness seemed to come over it, reluctantly, sweetly. The long lashes quivered. She looked into the beaming face bent eagerly toward her own, and for the first time since they had met, right through her tears that still persisted strangely enough in dropping, she smiled at Cheerio.

CHAPTER IX

“AND they saw by the red flashes of the lightning against the violet fog at six paces behind the governor, a man clothed in black and masked by a visor of polished steel, soldered to a helmet of the same nature, which altogether enveloped him. . . .

“‘Come, monsieur,’ said Saint Mars sharply to the prisoner—‘Monsieur, come on.’

“Say, ‘Monseigneur,’” cried Athos from his corner, with a voice so terrible that the governor trembled from head to foot. Athos insisted upon respect being paid to fallen majesty. The prisoner turned around.

" 'Who spoke?' said Saint Mars.

" 'It was I,' said D'Artagnan.

“Call me neither “monsieur” nor “monseigneur,”’ said the prisoner— ‘Call me “Accursed.”’

"He passed on, and the iron door creaked after him."

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"Ten o'clock!"

"Oh-h!"

"It's not—not quite ten. Your watch's slow."

"Ten minutes after," declared Cheerio, hiding a smile as he glanced at his watch in the slightly waning light.

A murmur of protest from Hilda, and a growl from Sandy, ready to argue the point. It seemed as if they always reached the most thrilling part of the narrative when "ten o'clock" the limit hour set for the end of the reading would come and Cheerio would, with seeming reluctance, close the enthralling book.

The readings had been substituted for the daily riding trips. The adventures of "The Three Musketeers" were proving of even more enthralling interest to Sandy than the fossilized bones of the early inhabitants of the North American continent. No dime novel of the most lurid sort had had the power to fascinate or appeal to the imagination of the young McPhersons as this masterpiece of the elder Dumas. They were literally transplanted in

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thought into the France of the Grande Monarchie.

Hilda indeed so lost herself each night in the chronicle that she forgot her grudge against the reader, and sat on one side of him almost as closely, peering over his arm at the page, as Sandy on the other side. Of course, the steps were not wide and barely accommodated the three and Hilda's place was next to the wall. Cheerio sat between the two.

After the readings there would follow an excited discussion of the story that was almost as interesting as the tale itself. It was astonishing how much this Englishman knew about France in the time of Louis the XIV. Sandy would pepper him with questions, and sometimes sought to entrap him into returning to the tale.

"What was Aramis doing at that time? I betchu he had a finger in it all the time. Was he a regular priest?"

"If I'd a been D'Artagnan you bet I'd 've stood up for the Man in the Iron Mask. I betchu he'd 've made a better king than Louis."

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Couldn't you read just as far as where they take the mask off? Did they ever take it off? Say, if you set your watch by Chum Lee's clock, he's eight minutes and——"

"The clock's all right, old man. To-morrow'll be here soon. It's getting pretty dark now anyway."

"Oh, that don't mean it's late, and I c'd get a lantern if you like. Days are shorter now in Alberta. Before long we won't have any night light at all, 'cept the star and moon kind."

Hilda was as concerned in the fortunes of the Musketeers as her brother, but she was obliged to curb her curiosity. With the ending of the reading, her diffidence and restraint would gradually creep back upon her. She was not going to let this man know how throbbingly interested she was. She did not wish him to know how limited had been her reading up to this time. That was a family skeleton that was none of his business, and she could have given Sandy a hard shaking when he disclosed to Cheerio the type of literature that he and Hilda had been "raised on."

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Cheerio, with intense seriousness, assured them that their father was "dead right." That sort of reading, as P. D. had declared, was "truck."

"Well, it's all there is anyway," defended Sandy.

"Not by a jugful, old man. There's no limit to the amount of books in this good old world of ours—fine stuff, like this, Sandy. Some day you'll look upon them as friends—living friends."

"Geel! I wisht I knew where I could get 'em then."

"Why you can get all the books you want in the public library and in the b-book stores."

"That's easy enough to say," burst from Hilda, "but Dad never gives us time when we go to Calgary to get anywhere near a library, and he'd have a fit if we were to buy books. He says that he'll choose all that we need to read, and he doesn't believe in stories or fiction and books like that. He says it's all made-up stuff and what we want to read—to study, he says—is Truth."

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"Hmph!" from Sandy. "Yes, Mister Darwin and Mister Huxley and a lot of for'n stuff. He's got a heap of French and German books, but a lot of good they do us, since we can't read 'em. He's got five volumes of chess alone, and books and books 'bout cattle and pigs and horses. Just s'f any boy wanted to read that sort of bunk. It's a doggone shame. If it wasn't for the bunkhouse Hilda and I never would 've had no eeducation at all."

Cheerio laughed. He could not help himself, though he quickly repressed it, as he felt the girl beside him stiffening.

"Well, old man, the stuff from the bunkhouse will do you more harm than good. I wouldn't touch it with a stick. Tell you what we'll do. When we're through with the Musketeers, we'll have a regular course of reading."

"You said there were three sequels to the Musketeers."

"So there are, and we'll read them too; but we want to vary our reading. Now we'll

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tackle a bit of Scott and then there's some poetry I want you to read and——"

"Poetry! Slush-mush! Gee, we don't want any poetry."

"Oh, yes, you do. Wait till you hear the kind of poetry I'm going to read to you. Wait till we get into the 'Idylls of the King.' "

"Idols! You mean gods like the savages worship?"

"No—but never mind. You'll see when we get to them."

Hilda said, with some pride:

"First time we go to Calgary, I'm going to buy some books for myself."

"Where you going to get the money from?" demanded Sandy.

"I suppose Lady Bug won't take the first prize at the Fall Horse Show—Oh, no, of course not."

"Ye-eh, and he'll make you put the prize money in the bank."

"He won't."

"How won't he?"

"Because," said Hilda, with dignity, "I

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happen to be eighteen years old. That's of age. He can't. Of course, you——"

Sandy groaned. Hilda had on more than one occasion rubbed in to him the sore matter of his infernal youth and her own advantage of being of age—the extraordinary powers that descended upon her in consequence of those eighteen years.

"I betchu," said Sandy, "that Dad'll whirl us through the town, in and out for the Fair, and we won't get anywhere near a book-store or the libry, and we won't get a hopping chance to do any shopping. And if we do, he'll go along to choose for us. Besides he'll make you give him a list of the things you buy, and you won't dare to put books on that list. He calls it systematic, scientific, mathematical training of the mind. Oh, my God—frey!"

"I don't care," said Hilda bitterly. "I intend to buy what I choose with my own money. I'm going to get that book 'The Sheik.' I saw it in the movies, with Valentino, and it was just lovely. Dad was playing chess at the Palliser and left me in the car, and I got out

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and went to the movies, and I just loved it, and I'm going every time I get a chance. You just watch me."

Something in the eager, hungry way in which the girl spoke touched Cheerio and caused him suddenly to put his hand over the small one resting on her lap. His touch had an electrical effect upon the girl. She started to rise, catching her breath in almost a sob. She stood hesitating, trembling, her hand still held in that warm, comforting grasp. At that moment Cheerio would have given much to be alone with the girl. A few moments only of this thrilling possession of the little hand. Then it was wrenched passionately free. Hilda was regaining possession of her senses. The dusk had fallen deeply about them and he could not see her face, but he felt the quick, throbbing breath. A moment only she stayed, and then there was only the blur of her fleeing shadow in the night. Yet despite her going Cheerio felt strangely warmed and most intensely happy. He was acquiring a better knowledge and understanding of Hilda. Her

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odd moods, her chilling almost hostile attitude and speech no longer distressed him. Perhaps this might have been due to an amazing and most delicious explanation that her red-haired brother had vouchsafed:

"I guess my sister's stuck on you," had volunteered Sandy carelessly, whittling away at a stick, and utterly unconscious of the effect of his words on the alert Cheerio. "'Cause she swipes you to your face and throws a fit if anyone says a word about you behind your back."

Little did that freckled-faced boy realize the amazing effects of his words. No further information in fact might have come from him at this juncture had not Cheerio flagrantly bribed him with "two bits."

"Go on Sandy——"

"Go on with what?"

"About what you were saying about your sister."

"Wa-al——" Sandy scratched his chin after the manner of his father, as he tried to recall some specific instance to prove his sister's in-

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terest in the briber. "I said myself that you were a poor stiff and she says: 'You judge everyone by yourself, don't you?' And then I heard her give Hello to Bully Bill, 'cause he said that Holy Smoke was the best rider at O Bar O and Hilda says: 'Why, Cheerio can ride all around him and back again. He's just a big piece of cheese.' And I heard Ho himself makin' fun of you 'bout takin' baths every day and 'bout your boiled Sunday shirts, and Hilda says to him: ' 'Twouldn't be a bad idea if you took a leaf or two out of his book yourself; only you'll need to stay in the river when you do get there, though it'll be hard on the river.' And another time I heard her say to Bully Bill when he was referrin' to you as a vodeveel act, that time they put you to breakin' Spitfire, she says: 'Wonder what you'd look like yourself on his back? Wonder if you'd stay on. Spitfire's pretty slippery, you know, and you're no featherweight,' and Bully Bill says: 'Hell, I ain't no tenderfoot,' and she says: ' 'Course not. You're a hard-boiled pig's foot,' and before he could sass her

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back—if he dared and he don't dare, neither, she was off into the house and had banged the door on him. You know Hilda. Gee!

Yes, he was beginning to know Hilda!

CHAPTER X

HOLY SMOKE was strong as an ox and had the reputation of phenomenal deeds done "across the line," where to use his own boasts "they did things brown." It is true, he had come hastily out of that particular part of the American union, with a posse at his heels. He had secured a berth at O Bar O in a busy season, when help was scarce and work heavy. His big physique stood him in good stead when it came to a matter of endurance, though he was too heavy for swift riding, needed for breaking horses or cutting out cattle. However, there was no man in the country could beat him at lariat throwing and he was generally esteemed a first-rate hand. His last name was actually "Smoke," and his first initial "H" it did not take the men long to dub him "Holy Smoke" though he was more shortly called "Ho."

Other nicknames were secretly applied to

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him. Secretly because Ho had achieved such a reputation as a fighter that few of the men cared to risk his displeasure by calling him to his face "Windy Ho" or "Blab." His was the aggressive, loud-voiced overbearing type of personality that by sheer noise often will win out in an argument and makes an impression on those who are not expert students of character. Few at O Bar O questioned the prowess of which Ho everlastingly boasted, for he looked the part he played. His favourite boast was that he "could lick any son-of-a-gun in Alberta, just as I licked every son-of-a-gun in Montana" with one hand tied behind. No one accepted his challenge, pugnaciously tossed forth, and little Buddy Wallace, one of P. D.'s diminutive jockies, hurriedly retreated when the big fellow merely stretched out a clinched fist toward him.

Even Bully Bill, himself somewhat of a blusterer, discovered in Ho a personality more domineering than his own. It was uncomfortable to have the big bully around, but the foreman had never quite screwed up the courage to

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“fire the man” as more than once P. D. had suggested. Easy-going and good-natured Bully Bill had suffered Ho to remain all of that summer, enduring meanwhile the fellow’s arrogance and boasts and even threats of violence to each and every hand upon the place. He had wormed his way to the position of temporary assistant foreman, as Bully Bill had discovered that the men took orders from him as meekly as from P. D. himself. This was up to the time that Cheerio drifted into O Bar O. Soon after that memorable day, another even more important in the annals of O Bar O dawned that not only elevated the Englishman permanently from the woodpile and chores to the proud position of first rider. but lost Ho his prestige in the cattle country.

The row started in the cook-car. The first prod in his side had been ignored by Cheerio, who had continued to eat his meal in silence, just as if a vicious punch from the thick elbow of the man on his right had not touched him. Holy Smoke winked broadly down the length of the table. At the second prod, Cheerio

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looked the man squarely in the eye and said politely:

“I wouldn’t keep that up if I were you.”

This brought a roar of laughter followed by the third prod. There was a pause. He had raised in the interval his bowl of hot soup in his hands and was greedily and noisily swallowing, when a surprising dig in his own left rib not only produced a painful effect but sent the hot soup spluttering all over him. Up rose the huge cowhand, while in the tense silence that ensued all hands held their breath in thrilled suspense. As Ho cleared his vision—temporarily dimmed by the hot soup, Cheerio, who had also risen in his seat, said quietly:

“I d-don’t want to hurt you, you know, b-but the fact is it’s got to be done. S-suppose we go outside. T-too bad to m-make a m-m-mess of Chum Lee’s car.”

Holy Smoke snorted, hitched his trousers up by the belt, and then in ominous silence he accompanied the Englishman, followed by every man in the cook-car, including Chum Lee.

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A ring was made in short order and into the ring went the snorting, loudly-laughing Ho and the lean, quiet young Englishman.

"I hate this sort of a thing," said Cheerio, "and if you feel equal to an apology, old man, we'll let it go at that."

Holy Smoke retorted with a low string of oaths and a filthy name that brought Cheerio's fist squarely up to his jaw.

To describe that fight would require more craft and knowledge than the author possesses. Suffice it to say that weight and size, the strength of the powerful hands and limbs availed the cowhand nothing when pitted against the scientific skill of one of the cleanest boxers in the British army, who, moreover, had studied in the east that little-known but remarkable art of wrestling known as jiujitsu. The big man found himself whirling about in a circle, dashing blindly this way and that, and through the very force of his own weight and strength overcoming himself, and in the end to find himself literally going over the head of the man who had ducked like light-

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ning under him. There on the ground sprawled the huge, beaten bully, who had tyrannized over the men of O Bar O. His the fate to come to out of his daze only to hear the frantic yells and cheers of the encircling men and to see his antagonist borne back into the cook-car upon the shoulders of the men.

Holy Smoke was a poor loser. His defeat, while it quenched in a measure his outward show of bluster, left him nursing a grudge against Cheerio, which he promised himself would some day be wiped out in a less conspicuous manner and place. Not only had his beating caused him to lose caste in the eyes of the men of the ranching country, but the story went the rounds of the ranches, and the big cowhand suffered the snubs and heartless taunts of several members of the other sex. Now Ho was what is termed "a good looker," and his conquests over the fair sex generally had long been the subject of gossip and joke or serious condemnation. He was, however, ambitious and aspired to make an impression upon Hilda McPherson. For her this big

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handsome animal had no attraction, and his killing glances, his oily compliments and the flashy clothes that might have impressed a simpler-minded maid than she, aroused only her amused scorn. Herself strong and independent by nature, beneath her thorny exterior Hilda McPherson had the tender heart of the mother-thing, and the brute type of man appealed less to her than one of a slighter and more æsthetic type.

Furthermore, Hilda loved little Jessie Three-Young-Mans, a squaw of fifteen sad years, whose white-faced blue-veined papoose was kept alive only by the heroic efforts of Hilda and the Agency doctor. The Morley Indian Reserve adjoined the O Bar O ranch, and P. D. employed a great many of the tribe for brush-cutting, fencing and riding at round-ups. No matter how unimportant a job given to a "brave," he moved upon the place the following day with all of his relatives far and near, and until the job was done, O Bar O would take on the aspect of an Indian encampment. At such times Hilda, who knew

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personally most of the Indians of the Stoney tribe, would ride over to the camp daily to call upon the squaws, her saddle bags full of the sweet food the Indians so loved. She was idolized by the Indian women. When riding gauntlets and breeks were to be made for the daughter of P. D. only the softest of hides were used and upon them the squaws lavished their choicest of bead work. They were for "Miss Hildy, the Indian's friend." Of all the squaws, Hilda loved best Jessie Three-Young-Mans; but Jessie had recently fallen into deep trouble. Like her tiny papoose, the Indian girl's face had that faraway longing look of one destined to leave this life ere long. She who had strayed from her own people clung the closer to them now when she was so soon to leave them forever. Hilda alone of the white people, the Indian girl crept forth from her tent to greet. What she refused to tell even her parents, Jessie revealed to Hilda McPherson and accordingly Hilda loathed Holy Smoke.

However, Ho was assistant foreman at O.

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Bar O and very often in full charge of the ranch, for there were times when Bully Bill went to the camps to oversee certain operations and in his absence Ho had charge of the ranch and its stock. Also in P. D.'s absence, Hilda was accustomed to take her father's place so far as the men were concerned, and if there were any questions that needed referring to the house they were brought to her. Thus she was forced to come into contact with the foreman as well as his assistant.

Ho had what Hilda considered a "disgusting habit" of injecting personal remarks into his conversation when he came to the house on matters connected with the cattle, and no amount of snubbing or even sharp reproof or insult feazed him. He was impervious to hurt and continued his smirking efforts to ingratiate himself with P. D.'s daughter. He always spruced himself up for those calls at the ranch-house, slicked his hair smooth with oil and axle grease, put on his white fur chaps, carried his huge Mexican sombrero with its Indian head band, and with gay handkerchief

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at his neck, Ho set out to make a "hit" with his employer's daughter.

At the time when Cheerio was reading from Dumas, P. D. was away in Edmonton, and for a few days Bully Bill had gone down to Calgary, accompanying his men with a load of steers for the local market. Ho, therefore, in the absence of both of the bosses, was in charge of the ranch, and one evening he presented himself at the house, ostensibly to inquire regarding the disposition of certain yearlings that had been shipped by Bully Bill from the Calgary stockyards. Were they to be turned on the range with the other stuff? Should he keep them in separate fields? How about re-branding the new stuff? Should he go ahead or wait till the round-up of the O Bar O yearlings and brand all at one time?

"Dad's in Edmonton," replied Hilda. "You had better wait till he gets back, though I don't know just when that will be. He's playing chess."

"Couldn't you get him by phone or wire, Miss Hilda? Rather important to know what

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to do with this new stuff, seein' as how they're pure-bred. Maybe the boss'll want them specially cared for."

"I could phone, of course, for I know where to get him, but it makes him mad as a hornet to talk on the telephone, especially long distance, and as for a wire, like as not, if Dad's playing chess, he'd just chuck it into his pocket and never bother to read it."

"Wa-al, I just thought I'd come along over and talk it out with you, Miss Hilda. Your orders goes, you know, every time."

He helped himself to a seat, which the girl had not proffered him, and stretched out his long legs as if for a prolonged visit. Hilda remained standing, looking down at him coolly, then she quietly moved toward the door, and opened it.

"That'll be all, then," she said, and held the screen door open.

The cowhand, with a black look at the back of the small, proud head, arose and taking the hint he passed out. Hilda snapped the screen

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door and hooked it. From outside, in a last effort to detain her, Ho said:

"One minute, Miss Hilda. Did you say them doegies were to go into the south pasture with our own stuff, then?"

Hilda had not mentioned the south pasture. However she said now:

"I suppose that will be all right, won't it?"

"Well, if they was mine I'd keep 'em in the corrals for a bit, and give 'em the once-over in case they's any blackleg among 'em. They's one or two looks kind o' suspicious."

"All right, then. Keep them in the corrals."

After all, the man knew his business, and she looked at him curiously through the screen door.

"Everything else on the place all right? Nothing loose? I thought I saw some stuff in the bull pasture when I rode up from the Minnehaha ranch to-day."

"Them doegies is all right, Miss Hilda. There ain't nothin' out 'cept what's meant to be out. You leave it to me. Nothin's goin'

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to git out of hick with the boss away, you can take it from me."

"I didn't mean to question that," she said quickly.

Her father's sense of squareness in treatment of his men was shared by her, and she added with a slightly more friendly tone:

"You know an awful lot about cattle, don't you, Ho?"

To give Ho "an inch" was to yield the proverbial mile. Instantly he was grinning back at her, his chest swelling with conceit and self-esteem, as he pressed against the screen door, his bold eyes seeking hers.

"I know 'bout everything they is to know 'bout cattle—the two-legged as well as the four."

"Is that so?"

"You see, Miss Hilda, they ain't much difference between 'em, whichever way you look at 'em. Some folks are scrub stock and go up blind before the branding iron; others is like yourself, Miss Hilda, with high spirits and you got to get 'em broke in the Squeezegate

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before you can use 'em. Pretty hard to slip a lariat over that kind, but they's a saying among cowhands that 'every outlaw has his day,' and I'm thinking"—his bold eyes leered into her own with significance, "the rope'll git you too."

"You think so, do you? Well, who do you think is smart enough to get the rope over *my* head, I'd like to know?"

He leered and chuckled. The conversation was to his liking.

"Can't say, but the woods is full of them as is achin' for the chance. Some day when you're loose on the range maybe you'll slip under."

Hilda's scorn had turned to anger. Holy Smoke's body was against the screen door, bulging the wirework in. His cunning gaze never left her face. He had lowered his voice meaningly.

"How about that English fly, Miss? He's getting fair handy with the lariat, they do say."

Hilda had flushed scarlet and drawn back

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with blazing eyes, but the words of the cow-hand on the outer side of the door stopped her in her premeditated flight and sent a cold shiver all over her.

"Ye needn't to worry 'bout him, Miss Hilda. He ain't likely to swing his lariat in your direction. It's hooked already over another one."

Hilda's dry lips, against her will, moved in burning query:

"Who do you mean?"

She scarcely knew her own voice. Something wild and primitive was surging through her being. She wanted to cry out, to hurl something into the face of the grinning man at the door, yet fascinated, tormented, she stayed for an answer:

"Her that's under his pillow. Her that he takes along of him wherever he goes and has locked up in one of them gold gimcracks as if her face was radio. It'd make you laugh to see him take it to bed with him, and tuck it just as if it was heaven under his pillow and——"

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Hilda stared blankly at the man on the other side of the door. She uttered not a word. Her hand shot out, as if she were dealing a blow to him, and the inside door banged hard.

CHAPTER XI

THERE were eighteen hundred head of calves to be vaccinated, branded, dehorned and weaned. Over the widespreading hills and meadows the cattle poured in a long unbroken stream, bellowing and calling as they moved. The round-up included the mothers, eighteen hundred head of white-faced Herefords. These, sensing danger to their young, came unwillingly, moaning and stopping stolidly to bawl their unceasing protests or to call peremptorily to their straying offspring. Sometimes a mother would make a break for freedom and a rider would have his hands full driving her out of the dense brush where the fugitive might find a temporary asylum.

At the corrals they were driving long posts four feet deep into the earth. Close by the posts a soft coal fire spat and blazed. "Doc" Murray, veterinary surgeon, on an upturned wooden box, sleeves rolled to elbow and pipe

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in the corner of his mouth, squatted, directing the preparations. Everything was done ship-shape at O Bar O.

For some time, oblivious to the taunts and jeers cast at him, Cheerio, returned from the round-up, had been standing by his horse's head gazing up the hill in a brown study of rapture. The sight of that army sweeping in from all directions over the hills and from the woods, to meet in the lower pastures and automatically form in to that symmetrical file, fascinated him beyond words. Even the riders, loosely seated on their horses, their bright handkerchiefs blowing free in the breeze, whirling lariat and long cattle whips, flanking and following the herd, seemed pleasing to the eye of the Englishman.

Though the day of the chap-clad, large-hatted type of cowboy is said to have passed in the Western States, in Alberta he is still a thriving, living reality. In this "last of the big lands," where the cattle still range over hundreds of thousands of acres, their guardians appear to have somewhat of that ro-

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mantic element about them which has made the cowboy famous in story and in song. He wears the fur and leather chaps, the buckskin shirts and coats, the Indian beaded gauntlets and the wide felt hats not wholly because they are good to look at, but because of their sterling qualities for utilitarian purposes. The chaps are indispensable for the trail, the fur ones for warmth and general protection and the leather ones for the brush. The great hats, which the Indians also use in Alberta, serve the double purposes of protection from a too-ardent sun and as great drinking vessels during a long ride. The hide shirts are both wind and sun proof and the beadwork sewn on with gut thread serve as excellent places for the scratching of matches. Cheerio himself had by now a full cowboy outfit, chaps, hide shirt, wide hat, flowing tie, but he never tired of looking appreciatively at the other fellows in similar garb. Now, with eyes slightly screwed to get the right angle upon them, he planned a canvas that was some day to hang in a place of great honour.

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The morning's work had been exhilarating. To him had been assigned some of the most difficult riding tasks of the round-up. He had been dispatched into the bush on the east side of the Ghost River to gather in forty-seven strays that had taken refuge in the bog lands and had drawn with them their young into this insecure and dubious protection from the riders.

Cheerio had ridden through woods so dense that his horse could barely squeeze between the bushes and the trees. He had been obliged to draw his feet out of the stirrups and ride cross-legged in his saddle. Sometimes he was forced to dismount and lead his horse over trails so narrow that the animal had balked and hesitated to pass until led. Rattling a tin bell made of an empty tomato can with a couple of rocks in it, Cheerio wended his way through the deep woods. This loudly-clanking contraption served to rouse and frighten the hidden cattle out into the open, but several of them retreated and plunged farther into the

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bush that bordered hidden pools of succulent mud and quicksand.

The branches of the thick trees had snapped against his face as he rode and his chin and cheeks were scratched where the wide hat had failed to afford sufficient protection. The sleeves of his rough riding shirt were literally torn to shreds and even the bright magenta chaps that were his especial pride and care came out of that brush ragged, soiled and full of dead leaves, brush and mud.

He had been delayed at a slough whose surface of dark green growth gave no intimation of the muddy quicksands beneath. Stuck hard in the mud of this pool a terrified heifer was slowly sinking, while her bawling calf was restrained from following its mother only through the quick action of Cheerio, who drove the distracted little creature a considerable distance into the woods ere he returned to its mother.

It is one thing to throw the lariat in an open space and to land it upon the horns or the back feet of a fleeing animal. It is another

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thing to swing a lariat in a thickly-wooded bush where the noose is more likely than not to land securely in the branch or the crotch of a tree, resisting all tugs and jerks to leave its secure hold. Cheerio, inexpert with the lariat, gave up all thought of rescuing the animal in that way. Instead, his quick wits worked to devise a more ingenious method of pulling the heifer from the slough, where she would have perished without help.

Along the edges of the woods were fallen willow trees and bushes that the Indians had cleaved for future fence posts. Cheerio hauled a quantity of these over to the slough, and shoving and piling them in criss-cross sections, he made a sort of ford to within about fifteen feet of the mired cow. His horse was tied by its halter rope to a tree. With one end of the lariat firmly attached to the pommel of his saddle which had been cinched on to the animal very tightly and the other end about his own waist, Cheerio crossed this ford toward the animal. He now let out the lariat and coiled its end for the toss. It landed easily

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upon the horns of the animal. Holding to the rope, now drawn taut, Cheerio made his way back over the ford. Unfastening his horse, he mounted. Now began the hard part of the work. His horse rode out a few feet and the sudden pull upon the horns of the cow brought her to her feet. She stumbled and swayed but the rope held her up. A pause for rest for horse and heifer, and then another and harder and longer pull and tug. The cow, half-strangled in the mud, nevertheless was drawn along by the stout lariat rope. She slid along the slippery floor of the slough and not till her feet touched sod was she able to give even a feeble aid to the now heavily-panting mare.

Once on solid ground, Cheerio burst into a cheer such as an excited boy might have given, and he called soothingly to the desperately-frightened heifer.

"You're doing fine, old girl! There you go! Ripping!" And to the mare:

"Good for you, Sally-Ann! You're a top-notch, old girl!"

There was an interval to give the exhausted

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animals an opportunity for a rest and then they were on the bush trail again, the heifer going slowly ahead, thoroughly tamed and dejected, yet raising her head with monotonous regularity to call and moan her long loud cry for her young.

As Cheerio came out into the open range certain words recurred to his mind and he repeated them aloud with elation and pride:

"They's the makings of a damn fine cowboy in you," had said the foreman of O Bar O.

He was whooping and hurraing internally for himself and he felt as proud of his achievement as if he had won a hard pitched battle. In fact, if one reckoned success in the terms of dollars and of cents, then Cheerio had saved for O Bar O the considerable sum of \$1500, which was the value of the pure-bred heifer rescued from the slough. Moreover, Cheerio had brought from the bush the full quota of missing cows and their offspring. When at last he joined up with that steadily-growing line pouring down from all parts of the woods and the ranges, to join in the lower

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meadows, he was whistling and jubilantly keeping time to his music with the clanking "bell," and when he came within sight of his "mates" he waved his hat above his head, and rode gleefully down among them, shouting and boasting of his day's work. He counted his cows with triumph before the doubting "Thomases" who had predicted that the tenderfoot would come out of that dense wood with half a heifer's horn and a calf's foot.

They rode westward under a sky bright blue, while facing them, wrapped about in a haze of soft mauve, the snow-crowned peaks of the Rocky Mountains towered before them like a dream. The glow of a late summer day was tinting all of the horizon and rested in slumberous splendour upon the widespreading bosom of pastures and meadows and fair undulating sloping hills. Almost in silence, as if unconsciously subdued by the beauty of the day, came the O Bar O outfit, riding ahead, behind, and flanking the two sides of that marvellous army of cattle.

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Small wonder that the Englishman's heart beat high and that his blood seemed to race in his veins with an electrical fervour that comes from sheer joy and satisfaction with life. If anyone had asked him whether he regretted the life he had deliberately sacrificed for this wild "adventure" in Western Canada, he would have shouted with all the vehemence and it may be some of the typical profanity of O Bar O:

"Not by a blistering pipeful! This is the life! It's r-ripping! It's—Jake!"

But now they were at the corrals. Finished the exhilarating riding of the range, done the pretty work of cutting out the cattle and drawing the herd into that line while one by one they were passed through the gates that opened into especial pastures assigned for the mothers, while the calves that were to be operated upon were "cut out" and driven into the corrals.

Slowly Cheerio tore his gaze from the fascinating spectacle of that moving stream of cattle and turned towards the corral. He saw, first of all, a giant structure, a platform on

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which was a gallowslike contrivance. Already a bawling calf had been driven up the incline and its head had been gripped by the closing gates around its neck. The Squeezegate! The dehorning shears were being sharpened over the grindstone and the whirring of the wheel, the grating of the steel hissed into the moaning cries of the trapped calves in the corrals.

CHAPTER XII

HOLY SMOKE rode in ahead with orders from Bully Bill for all hands finished riding to fall to and help at the branding and the de-horning. To each man was assigned some especial post or task, and Ho was in his element as he shouted his orders to the men, "showing off" in great form. His left eye had flattened in a broad wink to the veterinary surgeon, as he paused by Cheerio, turned now from the Squeezegate and trying to recapture the enthusiasm that had animated him before he had noted that platform.

"Hey you there! Bull ses yer to give a hand to the Doc, and there ain't no time neither for mannicarring your nails before fallin' to. This ain't no weddin' march, take it from me. We ain't had no round-up for fun. We're here to brand and dehorn, d' you get me?"

"Righto!"

Cheerio drew up sprightly before Dr. Mur-

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ray and saluted that grimy, nicotine-stained "vet." The latter glimpsed him over in one unflattering and comprehensive sweep of a pair of keen black eyes. Then, through the corner of his mouth, he hailed young Sandy, right on the job at the fire.

"Hey, kid, give a poke, will yer? Keep that fire agoing."

This was a job upon which Sandy doted. From his baby years, fire had been both his joy and his bane, for despite many threats and whippings, the burning down of a costly barn brought a drastic punishment that was to stick hotly in the memory of even a boy who loved fire as dearly as did Sandy. It caused him forevermore to regard matches with respect and an element of fear. P. D. had deliberately burned the tips of his son's fingers. Though Sandy feared the fire, he still loved it. With both care and craft, therefore, he poked the fire, and pounded the huge pieces of coal till they spluttered and burst into flames. The heat grew intense.

The cattle were now pouring into the cor-

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als and the riders by the gates were cutting out such of the mothers as had gotten through, besides certain weaklings of the herd that were to be spared the branding. These, temporarily driven to adjoining corrals, set up the most deafening outcries and calls for their young, while in the calf corrals these sturdy young creatures voiced their indignant and anguished protests.

Darting in and out of the clamouring herd, the experienced "hands" bunched and separated them according to the bellowing orders of Holy Smoke.

The scorching crunch of the closing Squeezegate and the first long bawl of agony swept the pink from the cheeks of the Englishman. He was seized with a sudden, overwhelming impulse to flee from this Place of Horrors, but as he turned instinctively toward the gate, he saw Hilda standing upon it. She had climbed to the third rung and, hands holding lightly to the top rail, she watched the operations with professional curiosity. For a moment, Cheerio suffered a pang of revolting

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repugnance. That one so young and so lovely should be thus callous to suffering seemed to him an inexcusable blemish.

It may be that Hilda sensed something of his judgment of her, for there was a pronounced lifting of that dangerous young chin and the free toss of the head so characteristic of her wild nature, while her dark eyes shone defiantly. Almost unconsciously, he found himself excusing her. She had been born to this life. Since her baby years she had been freely among cattle and horses and men. Daughter of a cattleman, Hilda knew that the most painful of the operations, namely, the de-horning, was, in a measure, a merciful thing for the cattle, who might otherwise gore each other to death. The vaccination was but a pin prick, an assurance against the deadly black-leg. As for the branding, it was not nearly as painful as was generally supposed, and first aid was immediately administered to relieve the pang of the burning. It was the only means the cattlemen had for the identification of their property. She resented, therefore,

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the horror and reproach which she sensed in the stern gaze of the Englishman. Her cool, level glance swept his white, accusing face.

"Pretty sight, isn't it?" she taunted. "If there's one thing I love," she went on, defiantly, "it is to see a brand slapped on true!"

With a nonchalant wisp of a smile, her tossing head indicated the stake, to which a three-month-old calf was bound, its head upturned as the red-hot branding iron smote with a firm, quick shot upon its left side.

The odour of burnt hide nauseated Cheerio. He felt the blood deserting his face and lips. His knees and hands had a curiously numb sensation. He was dizzy and almost blind. He found himself holding to the gate rail, the critical, judging glance of the girl fixed in question upon his face.

Like one hypnotized, he forced his gaze toward the branded calf and he saw something then that brought his trembling hand out in a gesture of almost entreaty and pain. A long, red spurt of blood was trickling down the animal's side. The old terror of blood swept over

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him in a surge—a terror that had bitten into his soul upon the field of battle. It was something constitutional, pathological, utterly beyond his control.

Cheerio no longer saw the girl beside him, nor felt the stab of her scornful smile. He had the impulse to cry out to her, to explain that which had been incomprehensible to his comrades in France.

Hilda's voice seemed to come from very far away and the tumult that made up the bawling voices of Holy Smoke and the raging hands of the O Bar O was utterly unintelligible to him; nor could he comprehend that the shouts were directed at him. In a way, the shouting brought him stark back to another scene, when, in wrath, men seemed to rush over him and all in a black moment the world had spun around him in a nightmare that was all made up of blood—filthy, terrifying, human blood.

Ho's bawling message was transmitted from bawling mouth to bawling mouth.

“Take the rope at the south stake, and take

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it damn quick. Are yer goin' to let the bloody calf wait all the damn day for his brandin'?"

Above the tumult cut the girl's quiet, incisive words:

"Get on your job! You're wanted at the south stake."

"My job? Oh, by Jove, what was it I was to do?"

His hand went vaguely across his eyes. He staggered a few paces across the corral.

"Hold the rope!" squealed Sandy, jumping up and down by the stake. "I gotter keep the fire goin', and the other fellers has their hands full at the Squeezegate."

"Hold the bally rope! Oh, yes. Wh-wh-where is the bally thing?"

"Here! Catch him! That's Jake! There you go, round and round. Keep agoin'. Hold taut there! Don't let go whatever you do. That calf's awful strong. If you don't look out she'll get away!"

Sandy's young wrists had been barely strong enough to hold the rope that bound the wretched calf to the stake. Pink Eye, wield-

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ing with skill a long lariat that never failed to land upon the horns of the desired calf and bring it to the stake, urged all hands along with profane and impure language. Automatically and with perfect precision, Hootmon was clapping the brand upon one calf after another and passing them along to the "Vet," who in turn thrust the syringe into the thigh, the prick of the vaccination being dulled in comparison with the fiercer pang of the branding iron. Now the rope had passed from Sandy to Cheerio and there was a pause.

"Get a wiggle on you! Hold tight! Round this way! For the love of Saint Peter!"

At the other end of the rope that Sandy had thrust into his hands, a three-month-old calf pulled and fought for freedom. From its head, where the dehorning shears had already performed their work a dark sickening stream dripped. Sandy had twisted the rope partly around the post but it still remained unknotted.

Someone was calling something across the

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corral. Cheerio found himself going around and around the post. Suddenly a wild bawl of anguish from the tortured animal sent him staggering back and at the same moment the calf seemed to plunge against him and the hot blood spurted against his face.

At that moment he clearly heard again the crisp whipping words of his captain, scorching his soul with its bitter ring of hatred and scorn. The rope slipped from his hand. He threw up his arm blindly, shrinking back. His breath caught in the old craven sob. Down into deep depths of space he sank, sickened.

Hilda McPherson had leaped down from the rail and with an inarticulate cry, she gathered Cheerio's head into her arms. It was the coarse sneering voice of Holy Smoke that recalled her and forced her to see that shining thing that was pinned to the breast of the unconscious man.

"Wearin' her over his heart, huh!" chuckled Ho, one thick, dirty finger upon the locket, while his knowing glance pinned the stricken

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one of the girl. With a sob, Hilda drew back, and came slowly to her feet, her eyes still looking down at the unconscious face with an element of both terror and anguish.

He returned with a cry—a startling cry of blended agony and fear, for the odour of blood was still in his nostrils and all about him was the tumult of the battlefield; but all that Hilda noted was that his first motion was that grasp at his breast. His hand closed above the locket. He sat up unsteadily, dazedly. He even made an effort now to smile.

“That’s f-funny. Carn’t stand the blood. M-makes me f-funky. C-c-constitutional—” His words dribbled off.

Hilda said nothing. She continued to stare down at him, but her face had hardened.

“What t’ ’ell’s the matter?” snarled Ho. “Ain’t yer fit to stand the gaff of a bit of brandin’ even?”

The girl’s averted face gave him no encouragement, and Cheerio went on deliriously, slipping deeper and deeper into the mire of disgrace.

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"C-carn't stand the b-b-blood. M-makes me sick. Constitutional. Affected me like that in France. I w-w-went f-funky when they needed me m-most—dr-opped out, you know—r-r-r-ran away and——"

Ho, hand cupped at the back of his ear, was drinking in every word of the broken confession, while his delighted eyes exchanged glances with the girl. Her chin had gone to a high level. Without looking at Cheerio, she said:

"Say no more. We have your number."

"Better get to the bunkhouse," said Ho. "This ain't no place for a minister's son."

Cheerio managed somehow to come to his feet. He still felt fearfully weak and the persisting odour of blood and burnt hide made him sick beyond endurance. Limping to the gate, he paused a moment to say to the girl, with a pathetic attempt at lightness of speech:

"'Fraid I'm not cut out for cowboy life. I'd j-jolly well like to learn the g-game. I d-don't seem exactly to fit."

She was leaning against the corral gate.

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Her face was turned away, and the averted cheek was scarlet. He felt the blaze of her scornful eyes and suffered an exquisite pang of longing to see them again as sometimes, after the readings in the evening, humid and wide, they had looked back at him in the twilight.

"No, you don't fit," she said slowly. "It takes a man with guts to stand our life—a dead game sport, and not—not——"

She left the sentence unfinished, leaving the epithet to his imagination. She turned her back upon him. He limped to the house. For a long time he sat on the steps, his head in his hands.

Slowly there grew into his consciousness another scene. He had come to suddenly out of just such a moment of unconsciousness as that he had suffered at the corral. Then there had flooded over him such an overpowering consciousness of what had befallen him that he had staggered, with a shout, to his feet. At the psychological moment, when his company had started forward, he had welched, stumbled

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back, and, with the anguished oaths of the captain he loved ringing in his ears, Cheerio had gone down into darkness. He had come to as one in a resurrection, born anew, and invigorated with a passionate resolve to compensate with his life for that error, that moment of weakness.

There was an objective to be taken at any cost. The men had gone on. He found himself crawling across No Man's Land. But a hundred feet away he came to his company. Upon the ground they lay, like a bunch of sheep without a leader. There was not an officer left, save that one who had been his friend and who had cursed him for a renegade when he turned back. Fearfully wounded, his captain was slowly pulling his way along the ground, painfully worming toward that clump of wood from which the sporadic bursts of gun fire were coming. Cheerio understood. Someone had to put that machine-gun out of commission or they would all be annihilated. He was crawling side by side with his captain, begging him to turn back and to trust him to

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take his place. He was pleading, arguing, threatening and forcing the wounded man down into a shell-hole where he could not move. Now he was on his own job.

Alone, within forty or fifty yards of the machine-gun, he paused, to take stock of what he had in the way of ammunition with him. He found he had a single smoke bomb and resolved to use it. Getting into a shell-hole, he unslung his rifle and placed the bomb into it and prepared it for firing. He waited for the right wind to shift the smoke and then carefully fired the gun.

By some remarkable stroke of fortune, it fell and exploded in such a position that the wind carried the smoke in a heavy cloud immediately over the German machine-gun post, rendering the operators of the machine absolutely powerless. At that moment Cheerio leaped from the shell-hole, and rushing forward, pulled a pin from a Mills bomb, as he ran. When about twenty yards away, he threw the bomb into the smoke and fell to the ground

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to await the explosion. It came with a terrific crash, fragments of the bomb bursting overhead. Jumping up and grasping his rifle firmly, he plunged into the smoke which had not yet cleared. Suddenly he fell into a trench, and he could not restrain a cheer to find that the machine-gun was lying on its side. It was out of action.

There was no time to survey the situation, for two of the enemy had rushed toward him swinging their "potato mashers" as the British soldiers were wont to call this type of bomb. Now that he realized that he had accomplished his objective, his elation had turned to the old sickening feeling of terror, as he watched one of the Germans pull the little white knob and throw the grenade. It missed him and struck the parapet of the trench. About to rush him, the Germans were restrained by an officer who had come up unobserved until then. He would take the Englishman prisoner. There were questions he desired to put to him. Yelling: "Komm mit!" they pushed him to his feet, and with

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prods of the bayonet, Cheerio went before the Germans.

His hands swept his face as if by their motion he put away that scene that had come back so clearly to memory. No! Not even the girl he loved—for in his misery, Cheerio faced the fact that he loved Hilda—not even she could truthfully name him—coward!

CHAPTER XIII

HARD as it is to build up a reputation in a cattle country, which has its own standards of criticism as everywhere else in the world, it is not difficult to lose that reputation. From tongue to tongue rolled the story of Cheerio's weakness and confession at the branding corral, and that story grew like a rolling snowball in the telling, so that presently it would appear that he had confessed not merely to the most arrant cowardice at the front, but gross treachery to his country and his king.

Every man at O Bar O was a war veteran. Few of them, it is true, had seen actual service at the front. Nevertheless, they had acquired the point of view of the man in the army who is quick to suspect and judge one he thinks has "funked." The most jealous and hard in their judgment were they who were licked in by the long arm of conscription and who

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had "served" at the Canadian and English camps.

When Cheerio, clean and refreshed by a dip in the Ghost River, came in late to the cook-car and cast a friendly glance about him, not even Hootmon or Pink-Eyed Jake looked up from their "feeding." An ominous silence greeted him, and the tongues that were buzzing so loudly prior to his entrance were stuck into cheeks, while meaning glances and winks went along the benches, as his grey eyes swept the circle of faces.

"Cheerio! Fellows!" said Cheerio gently, and fell to upon his dinner.

Chum Lee slapped down the soup none too gently into his bowl and as he did so, the Chinaman said:

"Sloup velly good for men got cold fleet! Eat him quick!"

Bully Bill, his ear inclined to the moving mouth of Holy Smoke, arose solemnly in his place at the head of the long table, slouched down the line of men, came to where Cheerio

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was beginning on that hot soup that was good for "cold fleet," and:

"Hi you!" he growled, "pack down your grub P. D. Q. Then git to hello to the bunk-house. Git your traps together. Report at the house for your pay. You're fired!"

CHAPTER XIV

AT the ranch house, P. D. McPherson alternately paced the living-room, the hall, the dining-room, the kitchen and the back and front verandahs.

Fourteen times he called for his daughter and twice fourteen times he had roared for his son.

The morning's mail (brought on horseback seven miles from Morley post-office by an Indian) contained a letter that P. D. had been waiting for all of that summer. It was brief and to the point almost of curtness. It consisted of one line scrawl of a certain famous chess player in the City of Chicago and was to the effect that the writer would be pleased to accept the challenge of the Canadian player for November 30th of the current year.

If P. D. had drunk deeply and long of some inebriating cup he could not have felt any more exhilarated than after reading that epistle.

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On November thirtieth—scarce two months off—he, P. D. McPherson, chess champion of Western Canada, was to go to the City of Chicago, in the State of Illinois, there to sit opposite the greatest chess player in the United States of America and at that time demonstrate to a skeptical world that Canada existed upon the map.

He'd show 'em, by Gad! Yanks! (The average Canadian refers to the average American as "Yank" or "Yankee" regardless of the part of the States of which he may be a resident. P. D. knew better than to refer to a Chicagoan as a Yank, but had acquired the habit, and in his heart he was not fussy over designations.)

Yanks! Hmph! P. D. snorted and laughed, and G.D.'ed the race heartily and without stint. Not that he had any special animus against Americans. That was just P. D.'s way of expressing himself. Besides he was still smarting over having been ignored and snubbed for long by those top-lofty, self-satisfied, condescending lords of the chess

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board. For two years P. D. had banged at the chess door and only now had he at last been reluctantly recognised. He'd show 'em a thing or two in chess.

Yanks as chess players! It was to laugh! P. D. had followed every printed game that had been published in the chess departments of the newspapers and periodicals. His fingers had fairly itched many a time when a game was in progress to indite fiery instructions to the d-d-d-d-d-d-d-fool players, who were alternately attacking and retreating at times when a trick could be turned that would end hostilities at a single move. P. D. knew the trick. It was all his own. He had invented it; at least, he thought he had invented it, and had been angry and uneasy at a suggestion put out by a recent player that it was a typically German move.

Two months! Two months in which to practice up and study for the mighty contest, which might mean that the winner would be the chosen one in an international tournament that would include all the nations of the world.

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Ah ha! He'd waste not a precious moment.
He'd begin at once! At once!

"Hilda! Hilda! Hilda! Where's that girl? Hilda! Hi, you there, G— D— you Chum Lee, where's Miss Hilda?"

"Me no know, bossie. Chum Lee no sabe where Miss Hilda go on afternoon."

"Didn't you see her go by?"

"No, bossie, me no see Miss Hilda. Mebbe she like go see him blandie" (brand).

"Beat it over to the corral and tell her I want her—at once—at once!"

"Hilda! Hil-l-lda!"

He made a trumpet of his hands and roared his daughter's name through it.

"Hil-lda! Where in the name of the almighty maker of mankind is that girl! Hilda!"

Yanks indeed! Dog damn their souls! Their smug satisfaction with themselves; their genius for bragging and boasting; their ignorance concerning any other part of the earth save the sod on which their own land stood—their colossal self-esteem and intolerance—all

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this was evidence of an amazing racial provincialism that P. D. proposed to expose and damn forevermore.

"Hilda! Damn it all, where are you?"

"Hilda! You hear me very well, miss!"

Tramp, tramp, tramp. Round and round the house, inside and out, hands twitching behind, holding still to that precious letter.

"Sandy! Sandy! Sa-nn-n-ndy! Where's that boy gone?"

Tramp, tramp again and:

"Sandy! You come here, you red-haired young whipper-snapper—You hear me very well. Sandy! Sandy! San-n-dy!"

No reply. It was evident that the house was empty and his son and daughter nowhere within hearing unless in hiding. Chum Lee scurried past back from the corrals, and apparently unconscious of the amazed and furious string of blistering epithets and cusses that pursued him from his "bossie."

From the direction of the corrals a din surged, the moaning, groaning calves and the mothers penned in the neighbouring field.

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These cries were not music to the ears of the formerly proud owner of the cattle. It mattered not this day to P. D. whether a brand was slapped on true or banged on upside down; whether it were blurred or distinct. It mattered not whether the dehorning shears had snipped to one inch of the animal's head as prescribed by law, or had clipped down into the skull itself. He paid a foreman crackajack wages to look after his cattle. If he could not do the work properly, there were other foremen to be had in Alberta. P. D. had no desire whatsoever to go to the corrals and witness the operations. His place at the present time was the house, where one could occupy their minds with the scientific game of chess.

"Sandy! Sandy!"

Back into the house went the irate P. D. The chess table was jerked out and the chess board set up. P. D. propped up a book containing illustrations of certain famous chess games, before him, and set his men in place.

P. D. began the game with a dummy part-

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ner, making his own move first and with precise care his partner's. Fifteen minutes of chess solitaire and then out again, and another and louder calling for his son and his daughter.

No doubt they were at the corrals, dog blast their young fool souls. What was the matter with that bleak nit-wit of a foreman? He was hired to run a ranch, and given more men for the job than that allotted by any other ranch for a similar work. What in blue hades did he mean by drawing upon the house for labor? The son and daughter of P. D. McPherson were not common ranch hands that every time a bit of branding or rounding-up was done they should be pulled out to assist with the blanketty, blistering, hell-fire work.

Raging up and down, up and down, through the wide verandah and back through the halls and into the living-room again and again at the unsatisfactory chess solitaire, the furious old rancher was in a black mood when voices outside the verandah caused him to jerk his chin forward at attention. The missing miscreants had returned!

CHAPTER XV

"SAN-NDY!"

The three on the verandah jumped. That crisp summons, that peculiar inflection meant but one thing. Chess! Sandy cast a swift agonized glance about him, seeking an immediate mode of escape. He was slipping cat-footed and doubled over along the back of the swinging couch on the verandah, when again came the imperative summons, this time with even more deadly significance.

"Sandy! In here, sir!"

"Yessir, I'm comin', sir."

Now it happened that the foreman of O Bar O had come especially over to the ranch house, accompanied by the son and daughter of P. D. to announce to his employer the discharge of Cheerio. It was an ironclad rule of O Bar O that no "hand" upon the place should be dismissed without his case first being examined before the final court of judgment in the

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person of P. D. This was merely a formality, for P. D. was accustomed to O. K. the acts of his foreman. Nevertheless, it was one of the customs that could not be ignored. What is more, a man reported for his final pay to the supreme boss of the ranch.

It was also the law at O Bar O that such discharges and reports should be made after the working hours in the field. In the present instance, Bully Bill had harkened to the advice of his assistant and discharged Cheerio at the noon hour. O Bar O, he contended, could not afford to risk its prestige by having in its employ for even a few more hours a man who had acted at the corrals as had the Englishman. Therefore, having put his men back to work at the corrals, Bully Bill had come to the house to report to his employer.

That Sandy summons was unmistakable. The noble and ancient game was about to be played. It was well-known lese majeste to interrupt when the game was in progress. Bully Bill and the young McPhersons looked at each other in consternation and dismay.

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Sandy, in his ragged and soiled overalls, one of the "galluses" missing and the other hitched in place with a safety pin, groaned aloud, then shuffled unwillingly into the house. Rebellion bristled and stuck out of every inch of the reluctant and disgusted boy. At that moment Sandy loathed chess above everything else on earth. It was a damfool game that no other boy in the country was forced to play. Sandy could not see why he should be singled out as a special victim. Sullenly he seated himself before the hated board. Blindly he lifted and moved a black pawn forward two paces. His father's eyes snapped through his glasses.

"Since when did it become the custom for the Black to move before the White?" he demanded fiercely.

Sandy coughed and replaced the pawn. His father took the first move with his white pawn.

Now when Sandy McPherson entered thus unwillingly into the ranch house he passed not alone into the place. Close upon his heels, silently and unseen by the absorbed master of

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the house, followed the yellow dog, Viper. He slunk in fact along behind chairs and tables, for well Viper knew he was on forbidden and hostile territory. Reaching the great, overstuffed sofa that stood in soft luxury before the big stone fireplace, Viper leaped soundlessly aboard, and a moment later was snuggled well down among the numerous sofa pillows and cushions that were the creations of Hilda's feminine hands.

P. D. McPherson had his scientific opinion touching upon the subject of dogs. To a limited extent, he had experimented upon the canine race, but he had not given the subject the thought or the work bestowed on his other subjects, as he considered animals of this sort were placed on earth more for the purpose of ornament and companionship rather than for utilization by the human race, as in the case of horses, cattle, pigs, etc. O Bar O possessed some excellent examples of P. D.'s experiments. He had produced some quite remarkable cattle dogs, a cross between collie and coyote in looks and trained so that they

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were almost as efficient in the work of cutting out and rounding-up cattle as the cowboys. These dogs had been duly exhibited at the Calgary Fair but the judgment upon them had so aroused the wrath of the indignant P. D. that after a speech that became almost a classic in its way, because of the variety and quality of its extraordinary words, P. D. departed from the fair ground with his "thoroughbred mongrels" as the "blank, blank, blank fool judges" had joshingly named them. P. D. was not finished with his dog experiments "by a damn sight." However, his subjects at this time were held in excellent quarters pending the time when P. D. would renew work upon them. Occasionally, said dogs were brought forth for the inspection of their creator, but even they, good products and even servants of O Bar O, knew better than to intrude into his private residences.

Of Viper's existence at the present stage in his career, P. D. was totally ignorant. He supposed, in fact, that this miserable little specimen of the mongrel race had been duly

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executed, for such had been his stern orders, when at an inconvenient time Viper had first thrust himself upon the notice of his master's father.

P. D. knew not that such execution was stayed through the weakness of the executioner, who had hearkened to the heartrending pleas for clemency and mercy that had poured in a torrent from Sandy, supported by the pitying Hilda. Sandy had pledged himself moreover to see that his dog was kept out of sight and sound of his parent.

Of all his possessions, Sandy valued Viper the most. Ever since the day when he had traded a whole sack of purloined sugar for the ugly little yellow puppy, Sandy had loved his dog. He had "raised" him "by hand," in the beginning actually wrapping the puppy up in a towel and forcing him to suckle from a baby bottle acquired at the trading-post especially for that purpose. All that that dog was or would be, he owed to Sandy McPherson. Sandy considered him "a perfect gentleman" in many ways, one who could "put

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it all over those pampered kennel fellows." Viper could bark "Thank you" for a bone as intelligibly as if he had uttered the words; he could wipe his mouth, blow his nose, suppress a yawn with an uplifted paw, and weep feelingly. He could dance a jig, turn somersaults, balance a ball on his nose, and he could laugh as realistically as a hyena. Not only was he possessed of these valuable talents, but Viper had demonstrated his value by services to the ranch which only his master fully appreciated. The barns, when Viper was at hand, were kept free of cats and poultry and other stock that had no right to be there, and Sandy's job of bringing home the milk cows in the morning and evening was successfully transferred to Viper. Sandy had merely to say:

"Gawn! Git 'em in," and the little dog would be off like a flash, through the barnyard, out into the pasture, and up the hill to where cattle were grazing. He would pick out from among them the ten head of milk stock, snap at their heels till they were formed

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into a separate bunch, and drive them down to the milk sheds.

Viper's continued existence at O Bar O, therefore, was most desired by his master. By some miracle, due largely to P. D.'s absorption in his own important affairs, the little dog had escaped the notice or especial observation of Sandy's father. Once he had indeed looked absently at the dog as he passed at the heels of Sandy, and he had actually remarked at that time on the "Indian dogs" that were about the place, and that should be kept toward the camps.

In the hurry and rush of events of this especial day, Viper was forgotten, and the excited Sandy had omitted to lock him up in the barn, as was his custom, when he went to the house.

So far as P. D. was concerned, Viper was a dead dog. Very much alive in fact, however, was Sandy's dog, as curled up on that couch of luxury he bit and snapped at elusive fleas that are no respectors of places and things and thrive on a dog's back whether he be lying

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upon a bed of straw or sand or, as in the present instance, curled up on an overstuffed sofa.

Meanwhile, as Sandy made his unwilling moves, and while Viper disappeared into the land of oblivion through the medium of dog sleep, a whispered council of war was held on the front verandah.

"Go in and speak to him now. The game may run on till midnight. You know Dad! If, by any chance, Sandy puts up a good fight and prolongs the game, he'll have it to do all over again and again until Dad beats him hard, and if Sandy plays a poor game, then he'll be as sore no one'll be able to go near him and he'll make me take his place. So there you are. You may as well take the bull by the horns right now, and hop to it."

The woman tempted and the man did fall.

The foreman of O Bar O, endeavouring to put firmness and resolution into his softened step, took his courage into his hands and entered the forbidden presence of the chess players. Hat in hand, nervously twisting it about, tobacco shifted respectfully into one

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cheek, this big, lanky gawk of a man cleared his throat apologetically. Only a slight twitch of one bushy eyebrow betrayed the fact of P. D.'s irritated knowledge of the presence of intruders.

"Dad!" Hilda's voice trembled slightly. She appreciated the gravity of interrupting her father's game, but Hilda was in that exalted mood of the hero who sacrifices his own upon the altar of necessity and duty. What had occurred at the corrals was a climax to her own judgment and condemnation of the prisoner before the bar.

P. D. affected not to hear that "Dad!" On the contrary, he elaborately raised his hand, paused it over a knight, lifted the knight and set it from a black to a red square. Dangerous and violent consequences, Hilda knew, were more than likely to follow should she persist. A matter of life and death concerned not the chess monomaniac when a game was in progress. Not till the old gambler could shout the final:

"Check to your king, sir! Game!" should

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man, woman, child, or dog dare to address the players.

"Dad!"

P. D.'s hand, which had just left the aforementioned Knight, made a curious motion. It closed up into a fist that shot into the palm of his left hand. Up flashed bright old eyes, glaring fiercely through double-lensed glasses. Up lifted the shaggy old head, jerked amazedly from one to the other of the discomfited pair before him.

"What's this? What's this? Business hours changed, heh? Who the——"

Bully Bill cleared his throat elaborately and lustered a clumsy step forward.

"Just come over to the house to tell you I've fired his royal nibs, sir, and he'll be over for his pay."

"You've *what?*"

"Fired——"

Half arising from his feet, P. D. emitted a long, blood-curdling, blistering string of original curses that caused even his hardened foreman to blench. That raised voice, those

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unmistakable words of wrath penetrated across the room and into the cocked ear of Sandy's sleeping dog. Full and exciting as the owner of Viper made all of his days, the exhausted animal never failed, when opportunity offered, to secure such rest as fate might allow him from the wild career through which his master daily whirled him. Nevertheless that raised and testy voice, for all Viper knew, might be directed against the one he loved best on earth.

Viper turned a moist nose mournfully to the ceiling, and ere the last of the scorching words of P. D. McPherson had left his lips, a low moan of exquisite sympathy and pain came from the direction of the overstuffed couch. Instantly the red, alarmed flush of guilt and terror flooded the freckled face of the owner of the dog, as wriggling around to escape that raised hand of his furious parent, Sandy added chaos to confusion by upsetting the sacred chess board.

There was a roar from the outraged chess player, a whining protest from the boy, duck-

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ing out of his way, and at that critical moment, Viper sprang to the defence of his master. Planting himself before P. D. McPherson, the little dog barked furiously and menacingly, and then fled before the foot kicked out for dire punishment. Pandemonium broke loose in that lately quiet room, dedicated to the scientific, silent game of chess.

"Who let that dog in?" roared the enraged ranchman.

"He come in himself," averred Sandy, quailing and trembling before his father's terrible glance, and casting a swift, furtive look about him for an easy means of exit.

"Get him out! Get him out! Get him out!" shouted P. D., and, seizing a golf club, he jabbed at the swiftly disappearing animal. For awhile, dog and boy cavorted through the room, the one racing to safe places under sofas and behind chairs and piano, and the other coaxing, pleading, threatening, till at last, crawling cravenly along the floor on his stomach, Viper gave himself up to justice.

"Hand him over to me," demanded P. D.

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"Wh-what're you goin' to do to him?" quavered the boy, an eye on the niblick in P. D.'s hand, and holding his treasured possession protectingly to his ragged breast.

"Never mind what I'm going to do. You hand that dog to me, do you hear me, and do it G— D— quick!"

"Here he is then," whimpered Sandy, and set the dog at his father's feet.

There was a flash, a streak across the room, and the dog had disappeared into some corner of the great ranch house. The boy, with a single glance at his father's purpling face, took to his heels as if his life were imperilled and followed in the steps of his dog.

CHAPTER XVI

BULLY BILL stretched his long neck, and appeared to be troubled with his Adam's apple. His eye did not meet the ireful one of his employer.

"I came over to the house," he repeated, with elaborate casualness, "to tell you I've fired his royal nibs."

"Fired what? Who? The King of the Jews or who in the name of chattering crows do you mean?"

"And you come to me at the hour of two-thirty in the afternoon to announce the discharge of an employee of the O Bar O? Eh?"

"Wa-al, I reckon, boss, that O Bar O can't afford to keep no white-livered hound in its employ for even the rest of the day."

"What crime has he committed?"

"Well, it ain't a crime exactly, but—well, boss, I give him an easy job to do—a kid's job—Sandy could a done it, and I'm switched

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if he didn't double over and faint dead away at the first bat of the brand. Never seen nothing like it in my life. At the first sniff! Why, a baby could——"

"Do you wish me to understand that you fired an employee of my ranch because he had the temerity to be *ill*?"

His irritation, far from being appeased, was steadily mounting.

"Dad," interrupted Hilda, stepping forward suddenly. "It wasn't illness. It was worse than that. It was plumb cowardice."

"Cowardice! Look in the dictionary for the proper definition of that word, young woman. A man doesn't faint from cowardice. He runs away—hides—slinks off——"

"That's what he did—in France. He confessed it when he came to. Tried to excuse himself by saying it was constitutional. Just as if anyone could be a constitutional coward. Bully Bill is right, Dad. O Bar O cannot employ that kind of men."

"Who is running this ranch?" demanded P. D., with rising wrath, thumping upon the

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table, and upsetting the last of the chess men and then the table itself.

"But, Dad——"

"Silence!"

Mutinously, the girl stood her ground, catching her breath in sobbing excitement.

"But, Dad, you don't understand——"

"One more word from you, miss, and you leave the room. One more word, and we'll cut out the gymkhanna at Grand Valley next week."

Turning to the foreman:

"Now, sir, explain yourself—explain the meaning of this damnation, unwarranted intrusion into my house."

Slowly, gathering courage as he went along, Bully Bill told the tale of the branding.

P. D., finger tips of either hand precisely touching, heard him through with ill-concealed impatience and finally snapped:

"And you adjudge a man a coward because of a few words said while in a condition of semi-hysteria and delirium. Pi-shshsh! Any half-baked psychologist would tell you that

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a man is not responsible for his vague utterances at such a time. The evidence you adduce, sir, is inconclusive, not to say preposterous, and damned piffling and trifling. By Gad! sir, the rôle of judge and jury does not become you. You're hired to take care of my cows, not to blaggard my men. What's been this man's work?"

"General hand, sir."

"Efficient?"

"Ain't no good at chores. He's the bunk at fencing. Ain't a bit o' help with implements; no account in the brush; ain't worth his salt in the hay field; but—" reluctantly the foreman finished, "—he's a damned good rider, sir. Best at O Bar O, and he's O. K. with the doegies."

"And you ask me to fire a first-class rider at a time when the average 'bo that comes to a ranch barely knows the front from the hind part of an animal?"

"Dad," interjected Hilda again, her cheeks aflame. "Look here, you may as well know the truth about this man. He was engaged

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in the first place as a joke—nothing but a joke, and because Bully Bill was late at the haying and said we'd have to cut out the races this year, and things were dull, and he took him on to liven things up, didn't you, Bill?"

Bully Bill nodded.

"Well, we've had tenderfeet before at O Bar O, and we've all taken a hand stringing them, as you know, but this one was different. I—I disliked him from the very first, and——"

"Ah, g'wan! You're stuck on him, and you know it!"

Sandy, who had returned as far as the door, gave forth this disgusted taunt. Upon him his sister whirled with somewhat of her father's fury.

"How *dare* you say that?"

"'Cause it's true, and I told him so, too."

"You told *him—him—that I—I—I——*"

Hilda was almost upon the verge of hysterics. She was inarticulate with rage and excitement. The thought of Sandy confiding in Cheerio that she was "stuck" on him was unendurable.

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"Why so much excitement?" queried her father. "Do you realize that the flood of words you have unharnessed would have force and power enough, if attached to machinery, to run——"

"Do you think I'm going to stand for that—that—*mutt* accusing me of caring for a—*coward*?"

At that moment, a gentle cough at the door turned all eyes in its direction. Natty and clean, in his grey English suit—the one he had worn that first day he had come to O Bar O—Cheerio was standing in the room looking about him pleasantly at the circle of expressive faces. No sooner had the girl's angry glance crossed his own friendly one, than out popped the despised word:

"Cheerio!" said Cheerio.

His glance rested deeply upon Hilda for a moment, and then quietly withdrew. Sandy, whose allegiance to his former hero and oracle had been somewhat shattered by the corral incidents, suddenly grinned at his friend and favoured him with a knowing wink.

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"Aw, she's hot under the collar just 'cause I told her I told you about her being stuck on you."

"*I—I*—just fancy *me* stuck on him! Just as if *any* one could be stuck on someone they—they—despised and hated and——"

The words were pouring out breathlessly from the almost sobbing Hilda. Cheerio regarded her gravely and then looked away. At sight of the upturned chess table, he whistled softly, stepped forward and set it in place. Stooping again, he picked up the scattered chessmen and then, to the amazement of all in that room, Cheerio calmly proceeded to set the men precisely in place upon the board. As he put the King, the Queen, the Bishop, the Knight and the Castles into their respective places, a curious expression, one of amazement not unmingled with joy, quivered over the weatherbeaten face of old P. D. McPherson. When the pawns were upon their squares, almost mechanically the Chess Champion of Western Canada pulled up his chair to the

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table. Over his glasses he peered up at the Englishman.

"You play chess, sir?"

"A bit."

A speck of colour came out on either of the old man's high cheek bones.

"Very good, sir. We will have a game."

"Awfully sorry, sir. I'd jolly well like a game, b-b-but the fact is, I'm—er—what you call in Canada—hiking."

"Hiking—nothing," muttered P. D., as he set his own side into place. "I allow you the Whites, sir. First move, if you please."

"Awfully sorry, sir, b-but the fact is, I'm d-d-d-discharged, you know. Mr. Bully Bill here——"

"Damn Bully Bill! I'm the boss of the O Bar O! Your move, sir."

Cheerio blinked, hesitated, and then lifted his pawn and set it two paces forward.

Slowly, carefully, P. D. responded with a black pawn in the same position.

Cheerio made no second move. He was leaning across the board, looking not at the

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chessmen but straight into the face of his employer.

"Tell you what I'll do, governor" (he had always referred to P. D. as "governor") "I'll play you for my job. What do you say? One game a night till I'm beat. I'll work through the day as usual, and play for my job at night. There's a sporting proposition. How about it?"

A snort came from Sandy and a smile from Hilda.

"The poor simp!" audibly chuckled the boy. Hilda was laconic and to the point:

"Hm! You'll be hitting the trail in short order."

P. D. merely looked over his glasses with a jerk, nodded and grunted:

"Very good, sir, I accept your terms. Your move!"

Cheerio's Knight made its eccentric jump, and after a long pause the ranchman's Bishop swept the board. Cheerio put forward another pawn, and down came P. D.'s Queen. His opponent's King was now menaced from

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two sides, on the one by P. D.'s Queen and on the other by his Bishop. Cheerio's expression was blank, as after a pause he neatly picked up and put another pawn one pace forward. P. D. was holding his lower lip between forefinger and thumb, a characteristic attitude when in concerned thought. There was deep silence in the room, and it was fifteen minutes before the ranchman made his next move; ten before the Englishman made his.

Hilda's breath was suspended, her cheeks scarlet, her eyes wide with excitement, while Sandy, his mouth agape, watched the moves with unabated amazement.

Bully Bill, meanwhile, discreetly departed. Once Cheerio had taken his seat opposite the old chess monomaniac his foreman realized that "the jig was up." He did not admit defeat to his men. That would have been a reflection upon his own influence at O Bar O. Bully Bill gave forth the information that Cheerio had given a satisfactory explanation of his action at the branding, and the "confession" which Holy Smoke had overheard

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must 've been "a sort of a mistake. Because there ain't nothing to it," said Bully Bill, chewing hard on his plug, and avoiding the amazed eye of the injured Ho.

Meanwhile, in the living-room of O Bar O, two more moves had been made and the chessmen faced each other in an intricate position for the one side. With eyes bulging, Sandy leaned forward, staring at the board, while Hilda drew her chair close to her father's. Slowly there dawned upon the son and daughter of P. D. McPherson—no mean chess players, despite their aversion for the game—the realization that a trap was being deliberately forged to close in upon their father's forces. Hilda wanted to cry out, to warn her old Dad, but a pronounced twitching of P. D.'s left eye revealed the fact that he was sensitively cognizant of his danger. Hilda's hand crept unconsciously to her throat, as if to still her frightened breathing, as she gazed with incredulous eyes at the diabolical movements of the man she now assured herself she bitterly and positively detested and loathed.

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There was a long silence. Another move and a longer pause. P. D.'s trembling old hand poised above a Knight. Pause. A pawn slipped to the left of the Knight. The Knight half raised—no place to go—sacrificed. Out came the Queen. A pause. The Englishman's Bishop swept clear across the board and took up a cocky position directly in the path of P. D.'s King. He moved to take the Bishop, saw the Castle in line, retreated, and found himself facing Cheerio's Queen. Another move, and the Knight had him. A very long pause. A search for a place to go. P. D.'s dulled eyes gazed through their specs at Cheerio, and the latter murmured politely:

"Check to your king, sir. Game."

The dazed P. D. stared in stunned silence at the board, forefinger and thumb pinching his underlip.

"Holy Salmon!" burst from Sandy. A sob of wrath came from the big chair where sat the daughter of the former chess champion.

"Awfully sorry, governor," said Cheerio, gently.

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P. D. reached across a shaking old hand.

"I congratulate you, sir," said the defeated one. "You play a damned good game."

For the first time in his chess life, P. D. McPherson had been soundly licked.

CHAPTER XVII

THE news fled like a prairie fire. From ranch to ranch, from the trading stores that dotted the foothill country, up to Banff, where P. D.'s packhorses were carrying the tourists into the supposed wilds of the Rocky Mountains and down to the cowtown of Cochrane. Here the news was received with consternation and amazement.

P. D.'s name was a household word. His cattle, his grain, so ran the legend, had made this part of the country famous throughout the civilized world. And as for chess: The country people knew but vaguely the meaning of the word; but they did know at least that it was associated in some illustrious way with their distinguished neighbour, P. D. McPherson. He was a Chess Champion. "Champion" was a name to conjure with. It put P. D.'s name upon several occasions into the newspapers; in obscure parts where they

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printed riddles and conundrums and funny stuff for children, but also whenever P. D.'s exploits at the cattle fairs were summed up in the local press, and his picture appeared on the front page and he gave out interviews predicting the ruin of the country or its ascendancy above all other countries in the world, there was always a line included about P. D. being the Chess Champion of Western Canada and potential champion of all of Canada.

Even the riders on the range and the crews at the road and lumber camps stopped each other to gossip about the incredulous news.

"Did you hear about P. D.?" one would inquire.

"No, what about him?"

"He got beat. Beat at chess."

"G'wan!"

"Sure did."

"You don't say. Who done it? Betchu some Yank come on over from the States, huh?"

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"Not on your life. One of his own men done it."

"G'wan! Who?"

"Well, that English fly, the Cheerio Duke they call him, the one they picked off the road in July—he licked the pants off P. D."

"You don't say. *Him!* Why, he's nothing but a tenderfoot. He don't know nothing."

"Don't he, though! That's where you're off your bat. What he don't know, ain't worth knowing, believe me."

"Well, you hear all sorts o' tales about him. Who is he, anyway?"

"Dunno, and nobody else does. But one thing's sure, he licked P. D. Licked him the first time they played, and he's kept it up every night since. They's a bet on. He's to hold his job till P. D. licks him, and from the looks of things, 'pears like he's got a permanent job. And say— I heard that the old man ses he ain't goin' over to the States to play for championship there until he's trimmed Cheerio chap."

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"I want to know! The Calgary *Blizzard* had a whole column 'bout him goin' over to the States to beat the Champion there."

"Well, he's got his hands full right here."

"Guess I'll ride over and take a look-in at O Bar."

"Not a chance. Say, the old man's sore as a dog. Ain't lettin' a soul into the house. Has himself shut in and ain't taking a bite of air and hardly any eats. Just gone plumb crazy on that chess game. It's something like checkers, only it ain't the same. You got to use your nut to play it."

"Well, here's to old P. D. Hope he wins."

"Here's to him, as you say, but he ain't got a chance. That Cheerio duke ain't no ama-choor."

Alberta, as all the world is beginning to know, is a gambler's paradise. In this great boom land, where every day brings its new discoveries of gold, oil, coal, silver, salts, platinum and all the minerals this world of ours hides within herself, one tosses a penny on life itself. From all parts of the world come peo-

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ple whose lives and hopes are dependent upon games of chance, be they of the board, a pack of cards, the stock market, the oil fields or the great gamble of the land. Gambling is instinctive and intuitive in Alberta. A chance is taken on anything. The man in the city and the man upon the land throwing the dice of fate upon the soil are equally concerned in gambling.

Cheerio's proposition, therefore, and the way in which it was rumoured he continued to beat the veteran chess player appealed to the sporting sense of the country. It was not long before money was up and bets were on the players. News of the game swept down finally to Calgary, and a sporting editor dispatched a reporter upon the job. The reporter liked his assignment first rate, since it included a trip into the foothills and an indefinite leave of absence. He was not, however, received with open arms at O Bar O.

Hilda, when he revealed the fact that he was a reporter, snapped the screen door closed, and only after the most diplomatic argument

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on the part of the newspaper man finally consented to announce his presence at O Bar O to her father.

"Just tell him," said the reporter, "that I only want a word or two from him, and I'll not print a line that he doesn't approve of."

To this perfectly amicable message, P. D. (invisible but plainly heard shouting his explosive reply) returned:

"No, G— D— it. I'll see no snooping, spying, G— D— reporter. I'll have none of 'em on my place. I'll have 'em thrown off. This is no public place, and I'll have no G— D— reporter trespassing upon my G— D— privacy."

Hilda, back at the screen door:

"My father says he doesn't want to see you, and if I were you, I'd beat it, because we've got some pretty husky men on this place and you don't look any too strong. There's no telling what might happen to you, you know."

"Will you just ask your father, then, if he will give me, through you, a statement as to the chances of Canada winning the World

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Championship, either through him or his present opponent. What we are chiefly interested in—that is to say, the readers of the *Calgary Blizzard*—is whether or not we are to have the Cup for Canada. It doesn't matter whether Mr. McPherson or his opponent gets it for us."

"Oh, doesn't it, though!" Hilda could have hit him with pleasure. So it didn't matter to the big, heartless public whether her Dad or that Englishman won or not.

"Well, would you mind asking your father just that?"

Hilda, inside:

"Dad, he wants to know whether either you or—*him*" (Hilda referred always to Cheerio as "him" or "he") "will be going to Chicago for the tournament now."

"You tell that bloody young news hound that he'll do well to clear off the place in a damn quick hurry, or we'll make it a damned sight hotter for him than the place he's eventually headed for."

Hilda, back at screen door:

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"My father says for you to clear off the place, and I advise you to, too. You've a nerve to come here to get stuff to print against my father in the paper. I'd just like to see you dare to print anything about us. It's none of the newspapers' business, and my father will win, anyway."

"Thank you. I'm glad to have that line on the game. Did he win last night?"

"I'm not going to answer a single question. We don't want a single thing to get in the papers."

"But it's already been in the paper."

"What?"

"Here you are—half a column story."

Hilda came out on to the porch, and seized and scanned the paper. Her face burned as she read, and the hot, angry tears arose in her eyes. How dared they publish for all the world to read that her old dad was being beaten each night by that Englishman? She whirled around on the inoffensive reporter.

"Who wrote that beastly stuff? It's a

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damned shame. Just goes to show what your old newspapers are. Did you write it?"

"No, no," hastily denied the reporter. "I was only assigned to the job to-day. That's some outside stuff telephoned in, probably by one of your neighbours. I'm here to follow up—to get a special story, in fact. And look here, Miss McPherson—you're Miss McPherson, aren't you?—well, look here, it's better for us to get the dope directly from yourselves than have to make it up. I'm here to get a story, and I'm going to get it."

"Well, let me tell you, you'll have some sweet time getting it."

"I intend to stay here till I do."

"Here on our steps? I'd like to see you."

"Well, not exactly on the steps—but on the job, at all events. I'll camp down the road by the river, and I can cover the story just as well from there."

Hilda threw him a look of withering scorn. Pushed the screen door open, and banged it, as well as the inside door, in the reporter's face.

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He stood in thought a moment on the steps and then he jotted down :

“Beautiful young daughter of P. D. McPherson on guard over father. Inherits famous disposition. Declares that her father will win. Intimates that he, not his hitherto victorious opponent, will go to Chicago——”

At this juncture, and while he was jotting down the notes anent Hilda McPherson, Cheerio came up the steps and crossed the verandah toward the front door, followed by Sandy, who, much to the bitter indignation of his sister, was once again the Englishman's satellite and admirer.

“Good evening,” said the reporter, cordially.

“Hello!” returned the unsuspecting Cheerio, and returned the grip of the newspaper man's hand.

“I wonder if you could give me some information about this Englishman who's playing

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opposite Mr. P. D. McPherson for the Western Championship and——”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what f-f-for?” stammered Cheerio, taken aback by the question.

“I’m from the Calgary *Blizzard* and——”

“G-g-g-good God!”

“If you know the man who——”

“Gee! He’s him hisself!” chortled Sandy.

Cheerio was punching the electric bell persistently. Hilda, hurrying at the summons, opened the door inside, cast a haughty look from the reporter to Cheerio, and then reluctantly unhooked the latch and let the latter in. She closed both doors again with a snap.

Sandy, who had not followed Cheerio into the house, stood grinning up at the reporter, and the latter was seized with an inspiration. He returned the jeering stare of P. D.’s son with a man-to-man look of confidence. Nonchalantly, he brought forth a cigarette case and, extending it carelessly to Sandy, invited him to have one. Sandy, whose young lips had never touched the forbidden weed, helped himself with ostentatious carelessness and even

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accepted the light tendered from the other's half finished stub.

"In a hurry?" asked the newspaper man.

"Nope."

"Suppose we sit over here."

The reporter indicated the steps, and Sandy leaned back against the pillar with the cigarette alternately between his two fingers or between his young lips.

"You're P. D. McPherson's son, are you not?"

"Yeh."

"Well, what about this Englishman? I wonder if you can tell me something about him."

"Sure," said Sandy, ignoring a sudden quaking at the pit of his stomach, and blowing out an elaborate whiff of smoke. "Sure, I c'n tell you all about him."

CHAPTER XVIII

IF the orders issued from headquarters (viz. P. D. McPherson) had been implicitly obeyed, the life of the newspaper man would have been most uncomfortable. Even as it was, he was prudent enough to give the house a wide berth. "Dunc" Mallison was fond of fishing, and his assignment was in the nature of a vacation for him. He possessed a "dinky" little flivver, whose front seat turned back on hinges, transforming the interior into a tolerably comfortable bed, a la Pullman. Scouting along the banks of the Ghost River, which bounded one side of the O Bar O ranch, the newspaper man found an ideal place for a camp, not far from the cave where Cheerio painted of a Sunday in secret.

Though "Dunc" fished the greater part of the day, he nevertheless dispatched bulletins to his paper in town, and began work on a feature story concerning P. D., the mysterious Cheerio, Hilda McPherson, "beautiful daugh-

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ter of the Chess Champion and famous rancher," Sandy, the wise young son and heir of O Bar O, and the various other folk who made up that temperamental ranch. The reporter depended not upon personal interviews with P. D. himself after that first explosive-forced session, through the medium of the evidently belligerent Hilda. Sandy, the guileless and the garrulous, himself interested in the attractions of the Ghost River canyon, was a mine of information upon which the reporter drew at length. Sandy was unable to resist the cigarette case, nor did the resulting tumult in his stomach of that first day's indulgence prevent his appearance at the newspaper man's camp and the reindulgence in the noxious weed, which his father had once vehemently declared was "purely poisonous."

Besides Sandy, Mallison had made the acquaintance of Cheerio. The latter, on his way to his "cave studio," had paused at the sight of the reporter, fishing in the forbidden waters of the Ghost River. Now P. D. had nailed at the Bridge on the Banff Road, large signs,

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warning all aspiring fishermen to keep away from the Ghost River, and these prominent notices were signed "P. D. McPherson, Fish and Game Warden." Cheerio, an employe of the O Bar O, was puzzled for a moment what to do in the circumstances, but the triumphant smile of the reporter as he held up three shining-bodied trout, disarmed the Englishman, who grinned back in sympathetic response, and a moment later was sitting on the bank beside the trespasser, filling his pipe from his old rubber pouch.

All of that quiet Sunday morning, the two fished and smoked, and though their conversation practically consisted of monosyllabic remarks about the water or the possibility of there being a pool farther up the river where their chances might be even better and grunts of satisfaction or exclamations of delight when something nibbled or bit at the end of the lines, almost unconsciously a quiet feeling of comradeship grew up between them, and each took the measure of the other and knew him for a kindred spirit.

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In the middle of the afternoon, they counted with pride the results of the day's work. Cheerio made a "rock stove" and built a fine bonfire in it, while Mallison cleaned and prepared the fish. While the bacon was spluttering upon the pan, Sandy came down through the bush, and squatting down before the reporter's improvised table of an upturned suit case, he sniffed the odour of frying bacon hungrily and said vehemently, as his hands rested upon his stomach, "Oh, boy!" Mallison was an excellent cook, and Cheerio and Sandy were excellent eaters and they did justice to the fare set before them by the camper.

After the meal, the three "chinned," as Sandy expressed it, until the deepening of the sun glow showed the end of the approaching day, and Sandy's drowsy head slipped back upon the grass and his questions came irregularly and presently not at all. Then Cheerio dumped his pipe, shook the half-asleep boy, and said:

"Come on, old man. Time to get back," and Sandy sat up with a start, rubbed his

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eyes, yawned, and unwillingly arose and moved toward Silver Heels, whose bridle had slipped down the slender trunk of the tree to which it had been loosely tied.

At the ranch house, the nightly games proceeded. Sometimes a game would end with a single night's playing; at other times a game would drag along for a week.

Cheerio had won three games in succession, when he suggested that his opponent should be allowed a handicap. P. D. received this generous suggestion with hostility and fury.

"What for? What for? Because you win a damnation game or two, do you mean to insinuate that I am out of your class?"

"Nn-n-not at all, sir," stammered Cheerio, "b-b-but you see, I've a b-b-bit of an advantage over you, sir. B-b-been playing ch-chess for a long time b-b-before coming to the ranch."

It was true enough, P. D. admitted, that he was off his game on account of having had "only children and amateurs" to play with. Nevertheless he had not fallen to the damned

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handicap class. There were thirty-one days in the month; they had been playing but ten inconclusive and insignificant days; he was neither a cripple nor a moron and he'd give his opponent a dashed stiff fight before he was through with him, and he asked for no quarter whatsoever now.

The fierceness with which the old man took his well-meaning suggestion caused Cheerio to stammer further explanations. During his recent stay in Germany, so he said, he had played constantly, and the Germans were excellent players.

This was the first intimation that he had been in Germany, and the information passed over P. D.'s head as of no especial interest, but Hilda's eyes narrowed and she began to speculate upon the cause of his presence in their late enemy's country. From day to day, Hilda had been hardening her heart more and more against him and she was ready to believe the worst. Hilda had her opinion of a man who pretended to be a cowpuncher, who wore a piece of jewellery dangling from a black

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fob at his waist. She despised the type of man, so she told herself, who carried a woman's face in a locket. Only a "sissy" would do an asinine and slushy thing like that, and sissies were not popular in the ranching country. However, apparently unconscious of, or indifferent to, her glance of scorn at the depised locket, he continued daily to wear it, and quite often, right before her eyes, even lovingly and tenderly toyed with it.

"What were you doing in Germany?" queried Sandy, pop-eyed with interest.

Cheerio moved uneasily, thrust his hand through his hair, looked dashed and worried, and shook his head.

"*When* were you there?" persisted Sandy. "Was it when the war was on?"

"Y-y-y-yes, I believe it wa ." admitted Cheerio, uncertainly.

"Believe it was!" said Hilda. "Don't you *know* when you were there?"

"Well—" began Cheerio, miserably, "you see——"

He was interrupted by P. D., whose exas-

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perated glare turned from his son to his daughter.

"Is this a game of chess, or a quizz concerning international questions touching upon the infernal recent war?"

"Chess, by all means, sir." Thus Cheerio, placatingly, and with evident relief at the change of subject. To Sandy, he promised:

"Tell you all about Germany some day, old man, wh-wh-when I'm f-ff-feeling a b-bit more f-fit to tackle the s-ssubject." To P. D. persuasively:

"How about it, governor? It's quite fair under the circumstances that I should yield you something. What do you say to a Castle? One will do me first-rate."

"Sir, when I want quarter, I'll ask for it. I'll have you know that I have never yet taken a dashed flippity handicap and when the time comes for me to do that, by Gad! I'll cease to play. I play, sir, chess, and I want no damned favouritism. I'll be placed under no G—D—oblig—D—igation to any man."

"Righto! Your move, sir."

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P. D. was indeed off his game. He was, moreover, the victim of a creeping panic. He made longer pauses, debated a move for a solid hour, in the meanwhile moving (in his head) every single man upon the board; imagine their effect in such and such a position, then presupposing a move which his opponent never intended to make, with a crafty quiver of a bushy eyebrow old P. D. would move to the attack, when the position of his King called for defense.

Once Cheerio made an obviously bad and wild move. This was when looking up unexpectedly he had found Hilda regarding him, not with her usual expression of hate and scorn, but with her dark eyes brimming with something that brought a strange tug to his heart and dimmed his own eyesight.

At that bad move, P. D.'s amazed eyes shot up above his glasses and he coughed angrily. If his opponent were attempting to curry favour with him by playing badly, he would receive no thanks. P. D. removed Cheerio's valuable Bishop which had been sacrificed by

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his absent move, and snarled across the board:

"Damned curious move, sir. You wish to stop for to-night?"

"M-m-m-ore c-c-careful next time," murmured Cheerio, stiffened by the fact that Hilda had blinked the brightness out of her eyes, and her chin was at a most disdainful angle. More careful he was; wary, keen and cunning. Before the clock pointed to nine o'clock, Cheerio murmured his firm, if slightly regretful:

"Check! Game!"

P. D. studied the board, his eyebrows twitching. His King was enclosed on all sides. Not even a chance for stalemate. This, though Cheerio had sacrificed his Bishop. P. D. blinked behind his glasses, cleared his throat noisily and grunted:

"Four games for you, sir." After another noisy clearing of throat:

"Tides turn, sir. Tides turn. He 'laughs best who laughs last.' "

"Oh, rather," agreed Cheerio eagerly.

Undemonstrative Hilda came behind her

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father, solicitous and sweet, hovered above him a moment, sat on the arm of his chair, put her arm about his shoulders, cuddled her warm cheek lovingly against the top of his grey head. P. D. jerked up, shaking the embracing arms irritably from his shoulders.

"Well, well, what's this? What's this? Stop pawing me," he objected. "What in the name of Holy Christmas are you whimpering about? I don't like it. Women's tears are a scientific evidence of a weak intellect. Stop sniffing, I say! Stop leaking on my neck! Damn dash it all! Get away! Get away!"

Hilda's rare tears, dropping like pearls down her russet cheeks, described as leaks! In the presence of that man, stooping above the chess board the better to hide the amused grin that would show despite his best efforts, despite indeed the stony glare (if eyes moist with running-over tears could stonily glare) that Hilda favoured him with.

She had no soft thoughts for him now. If she could have forgotten his confession at the

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corrals, Hilda felt that she never, never could forgive his treatment of her father.

Just what Hilda would have desired him to do in the circumstances, cannot be said. She would have shared her father's resentment had Cheerio purposely played a poor game, in order to give the older man an opportunity to win. Nevertheless she bitterly resented the fact that his victories were crushing the spirit of the old chess warrior. There had been some discussion—an idea, in fact, put out in the newspaper of that miserable reporter who was camped down by the river, on the edge of the O Bar O lands, that in the event of P. D.'s failure to beat the Englishman that the latter should take his place in Chicago, so that Canada's chances of the world championship might be more likely assured.

That story, read by Hilda in the newspaper brought her from the camp by Sandy, and jealously hidden from her father, caused the girl's heart to ache. She was intensely patriotic, was Hilda, and she desired, as any good Canadian would, to see the championship

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wrested from the U. S. A., but she loathed the thought of the wrestler being Cheerio. She had fondly hoped to see her father in that desired role. Her heart coiled in tenderness about the crochetty, thorny old man, with his stumbling moves. She could not recall when her father had played so poorly or so uncertainly. He seemed to have lost all of his former skill. His confidence in himself as a chess player was completely gone. Anyone could have seen that after watching the old man play. Even the winning of one game might have a good effect and restore P. D.'s former confidence and craft. It was the daily absorption in the game, and the constant losing which was having its bad psychological effect upon him. Hilda knew that if P. D. failed to keep that Chicago engagement, he would suffer the bitterest disappointment of his life. She feared, indeed, it would seriously affect his health. He would lose his interest in chess forever, and for P. D. to lose interest in chess was tantamount to losing interest in life itself.

CHAPTER XIX

AUTUMN came late to Alberta that year, and in the month of November, the cattle were still upon the range. The experienced cowman in Alberta is never deceived by the long sun-laden days of however warm an Autumn. Well he knows that the climate of Alberta is like unto a temperamental woman whose tantrums may burst forth into fury even while her smile lingers.

It is no uncommon thing in Alberta for a period of warm and balmy weather to be electrically broken by amazing storms and blizzards which spring into being out of a perfectly clear blue sky. Sometimes they last but a few hours; sometimes they rage for a week, during which period the effect is devastating to such of the cattlemen who have their stock still upon the range. The cattle caught unawares in the Autumn blizzard upon the open range will sometimes drift for miles before it

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and have been known to perish literally by the hundreds when trapped in coulie and gulch or driven for shelter against fence line, lie buried body on body. Because, therefore, blizzards are dangerous matters for the cattle to contend with, it is the custom in Alberta to round up in the month of October, and some outfits round up as early as September.

At O Bar O this year there was an atmosphere of restlessness and uncertainty. The riders were all at hand, awaiting word from the chief to set forth upon the Fall round-up; to bring in the cattle loose on the winter range to the home fields, where they would find ample protection under the long cattle sheds, and be given proper care and attention over the winter months.

For more than a month streams of cattle belonging to other outfits had been passing daily along the Banff Highway, coming down from the summer range on the Indian or Forest Reserve, en route to their winter homes on the ranches. This steadily moving army kept the O Bar O outfit on tenter-hooks.

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Bully Bill, chewing, spitting, moving restlessly about, eager to be off, kept his own counsel so far as the murmuring crew were concerned; but a suggestive question however humourously or pacifically couched anent the matter of O Bar O round-up aroused his irritation and profanity to a hair-splitting degree. The harassed foreman was beside himself with anxiety and uncertainty. The sight of his men slouching about the corrals and the yards aroused both his wrath and his grief. He had worked his wits all through the month of October to find sufficient work to keep his men going, but the work created by the foreman was of a sort for which a rider feels only contempt. November the fifth, and *riders*—cowpunchers of the great O Bar O ranch hauling logs for fire wood or fence posts! Puttering with fencing, brush-cutting—Indians' work, by Gad! Snugging up the bunkhouse and barn with dirt and manure for the winter! By Gravy! Those were jobs for tenderfeet and Indians. Not for self-respecting riders. No wonder the fellows were beginning to

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growl among themselves and cast black looks at the ranch house. Two of them had quit the service of the old ranch, two first-class men, at that, and Bully Bill noted them later upon the Banff Highway, riding with a hated rival outfit.

The O Bar O prided itself on maintaining a prize crew of men. They knew every inch of the range which extended over a hundred and fifty thousand acres into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. They knew the brands of half the cattlemen in Alberta. They could pick out O Bar O stock even when the brand was overgrown. At this time of year, skilled labour of this sort were in great demand and could choose their own jobs and demand their own price. If P. D. failed to find them regular men's jobs, his foreman knew that presently they would give ear to the solicitations of rival outfits.

"Whispering Jake," owner of the Bar D Ranch in the Jackass Valley, kept his eye "peeled" always for O Bar O hands. Himself unable to keep his men for long, he was satis-

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fied to engage men trained at O Bar O and discharged for one cause or another. "Whisper," as he was more popularly known—the name having been given to him in derision, because he talked always at the top of his immense voice—had been over the last few weeks, supposedly to look for a roan heifer, which he declared had strayed on to O Bar O. Bully Bill knew very well that the cowman had come, in fact, to look the O Bar O men over and to drop a hint of the amount of advance he was willing to pay over what the men were getting from P. D. "Whisper" made a point of going up \$20 a month over O Bar O wages; but he dropped his men as soon as the rush season was over and left them high and dry for the winter. On the other hand, P. D. did not raise his men's wages in the busy seasons, but kept them on all winter, regardless of slack periods and the drop of price in cattle. At Christmas, moreover, if the stock were in healthy shape and the profit of the business warranted it, O Bar O men received an annual bonus.

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This year "Whisper" had learned, through the medium of Holy Smoke, that during the period when the hands of O Bar O were idling about waiting for P. D. to give the order to set out upon the round-up, considerable of the men's wages had disappeared in poker games played in the bunkhouse, and also at times in the newspaper man's camp. The losers, needing immediate funds, wavered toward the promises of the other cattlemen, and especially toward "Whispering Jake."

Chafe and fret and rage internally as Bully Bill might, no word came forth from the ranch house, where for more than a month the Chess Champion of Western Canada and the potential challenger of the world had been closeted each night with Cheerio. When the third man left the service of O Bar O, Bully Bill hearkened to the suggestion of his assistant and accompanied by him paid a visit to the ranch house, where he requested Chum Lee to ask Miss Hilda to come to the front door.

Hilda, in the living-room, intently watching every move upon the board, looked up sur-

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prised at the whispered message of the Chinaman. Glad to escape from what she clearly perceived was practically the end of another game, the girl joined the foreman and his assistant upon the verandah.

"Miss Hilda" began Bully Bill, "Ho and I are here to-night to ask you what're we goin' to do about the cattle? We can't afford to wait no longer."

Hilda debated the matter, hand on chin. She was looking off quite absently and suddenly she said to Bully Bill:

"Look here, Bill, if Dad had only moved his Knight instead of his Castle, he could have checked his King from both ends of the board and the jig would have been up. But Dad's losing his nerve. He's been beat too often lately. I can just see him fairly breaking. It's telling on him. He's an old man, my Dad is, and it's terrible at his age to lose confidence. So long as Dad knew he was the best player in the West, he was just as cocky and spunky as a two-year-old, but you ought to see him now. Bunched up in his chair, his old

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eyes dim, and the eyebrows sticking out and his lip bulged. You'd hardly know him. Oh! if he had only moved his Knight! I could just have slapped him when he lifted that darned Castle. I tell you, Bill, Dad has simply *got* to beat him. He's got to win at least one game. He'd never survive a permanent defeat, and apart from Dad's feelings, neither would I!"

"But, look-a-here, Miss Hilda, what're we all agoin' to do till then? We can't allow them cattle to be out till end of November. Why, them cattle——"

"Oh, the cattle! The cattle! You give me a pain! Can't you think of anything but cattle, cattle, cattle? I guess there's people in the world as well as cattle, cattle!"

"So there are, miss, but at this time of year we got to think of the cattle first, or they'll get thinking with their own feet and first thing we know they'll wander off somewheres where you ain't goin' to see them no more. Just let 'em get awandering up in them hills near Broken Nose Lake, and I betchu that'll be the

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last of 'em. Besides, I heered down in Coch-rane that there's a sight of rustlers prowlin' around this year, and the Indians ain't any too scrupilous and when they're hungry, they ain't depising no handy beef. Why, Jim Lame-Leg's doin' time now for as slick a trick as ever I heerd of. Drive a cow over a canyon, and then git the job of haulin' her out, and when she's out she's got her leg broke and she dies on his hand, and the owner pays for the haulin' of the cow out with the dead carcass. Lee caught 'im breakin' a leg of one of the Lazy L's stock and the boss told him to go ahead and shoot her and keep the carcass, till someone put him wise, and he had the Mounty down from the Reserve and Jim Lame-Leg's doin' time now. If we don't look out there'll be others just as smart as Jim and when we come to countin' up stock, I betchu we'll be out a dozen head and more."

"Well, it's pretty bad, I know, but I won't have Dad bothered about cattle. He's got enough on his mind right now. Anyway, I believe the cattle are all right. What's the

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matter with the herders, anyway? They're still out, aren't they?"

"Herders! My foot! Excuse my cussing, miss, but when you talk of herders,—my gosh! Herders ain't a bit of good when the cold snap comes. They keep in their tents and holler for the riders and that's what the riders is for."

"But then, look at the weather this year. The cattle'll get along for a month yet, I do believe. Last year we had soft weather clear up till Christmas. You know that and lots of cattle people were sorry they hadn't taken advantage of the weather and left the cattle on the range. Anyway, they'll come trailing home gradually themselves. Have all the gates down."

"Some'll come home, sure enough, but we got a lot of new stuff and they ain't broke to this range. We threw some of the best stock you ever set eyes on over to the north of Loon Lake. If a storm comes up——"

Holy Smoke, plaiting a long cowhide bull-whip had taken no part in the conversation,

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but his ears were pricked up and his crafty eyes scarcely left the girl's face.

"I tell you what you'd better do," suggested Hilda, "get your men together and start on off. Dad won't mind, and it's the only thing to do."

"He won't mind! He threw a million fits last year when I just gathered in the lighter stuff before he said the word—stuff that was right at the gate, at that. Orders is flat, nothing doing till he says the word. He's God Almighty on the O Bar O—begging your pardon, Miss Hilda—and he wants every Son-of-a-Gun on the place to know it."

"I'll say so!" declared P. D.'s daughter with pride. "Go along in, then, and put your cards on the table before him."

"Nothing doing. Tried the job last week. He was out on this verandy and he was walkin' up and down, with his hands behind him and his head dropped, and I ses to myself, 'Mebbe he's through. I'll tuck in a word edgeways now.' So I slipped over and——"

"What did Dad say?"

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Hilda was leaning forward, wide-eyed with delighted interest. Dad's utterances were always matters of the profoundest psychological interest and pride to his admiring daughter.

Bully Bill lowered his voice confidentially.

"Miss Hilda, I ain't got the nerve to repeat to you the curious string of damns and cusses that your father give me and——"

Hilda laughed, a rippling girlish chuckle of genuine pride and delight.

"Isn't Dad a perfect peach when he starts swearing? Don't you love it? It sounds so—so—healthy, somehow. Can't he just rip out the dandiest string of swear words you ever did hear? I'll bet there's not another man in the entire country can cuss as my Dad can. Most of 'em run off just the ordinary common old damns, but Dad—why *Dad* can—can—literally coin cuss words. I'd rather hear my Dad cuss than—than—hear a prima donna sing. Why, do you know, the very first word that either Sandy or I learned to speak was 'damn'!"

Up tossed the young head. Hilda's white

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teeth shone as her fresh laughter rippled forth, and at that musical sound, and the sight of the beautiful, laughing young woman before him, moved by an irresistible impulse, Holy Smoke, who had been squatting at his work, jumped restlessly to his feet. Hilda's back was to the door. The hall was dark behind her.

"Miss Hilda," said Ho, ingratiatingly, "we thought as how if you would ask your father and——"

"I? Not on your life. It's all I can do to induce him to eat, let alone talk of anything else in the world except chess—Kings, Queens, Knights, Bishops, Rooks, Pawns! Gods and devils! Why did he make this move, and what object he had in making that, and if he had done this and hadn't done that such and such a thing might have happened. Why, Dad's just plumb chess crazy!"

"You said it," grinned Ho delightedly, eager to ingratiate himself by agreeing with her, and at the same time voice his own thought regardless of the consequences. "This

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ain't no cattle ranch no longer. It's a loon ranch."

"What's that you say?"

Hilda's voice had risen with excitement. Someone came out of the living-room inside, and paused half-way across the hall on his way to the verandah.

"I said—" repeated Holy Smoke, feeling a curious excitement and delight in the flaming anger he had aroused—"I said that this aint' no longer a cattle ranch but a loon ranch."

"How dare you say a thing like that about O Bar O. A lot you know about ranching. You come on over from the States with your wind and your brag and there's no one believes a word you say. You dare to insinuate that my father is——"

"When I said 'loon,' Miss Hilda, I wasn't mentioning no names, but s'long as you're barkin' up the wrong tree, I'll tell you that I was thinkin' of that English fly, him that's made all of the trouble here. My hands is itchin' to lariat him and take it out o' his hide.

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You say the word, Miss Hilda, and there'll be a bunch of us turn the trick to-night!"

At the mention of Cheerio, the dark blood had rushed into the face of the girl. Her glance was full of contempt and hatred now.

"You, Holy Smoke! Yes, you'd *need* to rope your man. I'm thinking otherwise you'd have your hands D-d-d-d-d-full if you tried to tackle him man to man with your hands, for, take it from me, he'd make you eat your words and twist!"

Holy Smoke's voice was husky:

"Look ahere, d'you mean to say——"

"Yes, I do mean to say—the very worst there is about you, and you can get right off O Bar O the minute your month is up. I'll undertake to be responsible to my father and——"

Ho's tongue searched his cheek. An ugly chuckle came from him and his slow words caused the girl to draw back as if struck.

"Since you're so stuck on him——"

Hilda was aware that the door behind her had opened and then was banged to. She whirled around, and found herself face to face

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with Cheerio. Even in the moonlight, she could see that his face was set and stern as his glance passed by her and rested upon the shifting gaze of Ho, who suddenly, hurriedly moved away.

There was no sound now but the sobbing breath of the excited Hilda. Bully Bill had followed his assistant. She was alone on the verandah with Cheerio. A moment she looked up in the quiet moonlight at the man she had told herself so often that she hated.

What must he think of her now? Had he heard Holy Smoke's taunt? Would he believe then that she— The thought was intolerable—an agony; but her agony was turned to a curious bliss, when, quite suddenly, she felt her hand warmly enclosed. For a long moment, he held her captive and she felt the deep gaze of his eyes searching her own. Then she was released, and like one in a dream she heard rather than saw him moving away from her. Unconsciously, a sob in her throat, Hilda McPherson held out her arms toward him. But he did not see her. She had a sudden

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frantic apprehension that he would go after Holy Smoke—that there would be a fight and he— An almost primitive fear of harm befalling him, sent Hilda along to the edge of the verandah. Then she heard something that stopped her flight, and held her there, straining to hear the last note of that long, soft whistle which rose in crescendo like a bird's song that dropped across the silence of the night and slowly melted away.

Something rose in a suffocating flood in the heart of the Alberta-born girl. Spellbound and shaken, suddenly Hilda consciously faced the truth: She loved!

CHAPTER XX

THE shooting season was at hand. At frequent intervals along the fence lines of O Bar O, big square slabs of white enamelled wood were nailed to fence posts, bearing in great black letters the legend :

TRESPASSING FORBIDDEN

Punished to fullest extent of law.

BEWARE THE DOGS

P. D. MCPHERSON, Owner.

These daunted not the more persistent and intrepid of the hunters, who slipped into this game paradise through the medium of the gate under the Ghost River Bridge on the Banff Highway. Pitching camp near the road, they penetrated up the great canyon and into the luring woods of the forbidden country.

Duncan Mallison, whose vacation was drawing to a close, resented any intrusion upon

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his privacy. He had begun almost to regard the place as his own private and personal preserve. Trespassers irritated and interrupted him. Reluctantly, he made a final shoot of Hungarian partridge and prairie chicken—enough to go the rounds of the newspaper office—packed his camping outfit, and prepared to depart from the vicinity of O Bar O.

He had a moderately good feature story, but had been obliged to do a lot of padding, elaborating and exaggerating on the amount of gambling done and the odds on P. D. He was not satisfied with his "story." He just "sniffed the edges" of a story big enough to syndicate in a dozen or more papers over the country and perhaps find a place also across the line. His nose for news and his inherent sense of romance scented another kind of story at O Bar O. This Englishman—whatever his name was (of course, Cheerio was merely a nickname) interested the reporter. It was plain that he was no ordinary ranch hand. Who, then, was he, and what was he doing working on a ranch?

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"Younger son," and, for that matter, older sons, were not uncommon in the Alberta ranching country. It was in fact, an ideal place, for the disposal of ne'er-do-wells, and if they had the "stuff" in them to make real men of them. The reporter had come into contact with a great many of these quite likable chaps from the old country, especially upon those periodical occasions when remittances from home were due, they came to town to spend a monthly allowance in a single night, or several days of unadulterated spreeing. They were not noted especially for their love of work, though there was good stuff in most of them as was proved when the war broke out and a large percentage of the men who marched from Alberta were of English birth.

This Cheerio fellow was somehow different. Mallison could not exactly place him. He worked. In point of fact, Cheerio was reputed to be one of the best workers at O Bar O and really earned his modest \$50 a month. Nevertheless, the newspaper man recognised him at once as a man of education and breed-

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ing. Mallison had heard the story of the branding, and of the confession that had followed. Sandy was prone to exaggeration, and the reporter, sifting the facts in the case, was disposed to question whether this incident should be regarded seriously. From Cheerio himself he learned scarcely nothing. Several times intent upon acquiring a real interview with the man, he was exasperated to discover after Cheerio had left him that Cheerio, on the contrary, had interviewed him. He was extremely interested, apparently, in newspaper work, and asked the reporter many questions concerning the sort of papers supported by the City of Calgary, and also what opportunity there might be for a man to get a berth on one of these as a caricaturist or newspaper artist.

Ruminating over the matter, the reporter lay flat upon the ground on his back, hands under the back of his head, staring straight up at the interlacing branches of a giant spruce tree, through which the sunlight glistened and danced. Presently his reverie was disturbed. There was the flurry and flutter of wings and

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up out of the bush there arose a couple of grouse—wavered above his head a moment, then dropped down behind the somewhat fantastic rock that jugged out above the river.

“Doggone those hunters!”

They were a distinct menace in the woods of O Bar O. They shot at anything and everything.

The bushes at the back of the reporter were violently agitated, and a fat red face presently was thrust cautiously through. A man carrying a shot-gun, and dressed in knickers and khaki hunting coat with numerous little shell pockets, trod through the bush. Reporter and hunter scowled at each other. Here was no entente cordiale.

“Did you see where my birds dropped?”

“Did you see those trespass signs along the road?” was the reply.

“Did you see them yourself?” retorted the other.

“You bet I did, and I’m here to see that others see them, too.”

Turning back his coat, Mallison revealed a

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bright star pinned to his vest. Now, that star represented the fact that the reporter had certain rights at fires and other places where the press is permitted to be represented; but to the hunter it looked fearfully like the star that a game warden might carry. He essayed a conciliating laugh, while backing hastily toward the exit at the bridge outside of which his Studebaker was parked. He got into it in a great hurry.

Grinning, Mallison sat up, his eye upon the out-jutting rock where the grouse had fallen. Lazily he stretched himself; leisurely he climbed up the cliff to the rock and lightly he dropped down in Cheerio's cave.

He swung around in a circle, blinking his eyes and emitting a long, amazed whistle.

For the next half hour he was a very busy reporter. Aladdin's cave could have afforded him no more satisfaction or interest.

The Indian pictures were ranged along a shelf in the natural gallery that stretched under the rock for a space of about thirty feet. It was amply lighted and completely shel-

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tered. As Mallison went down the line of pictures he realized that here was indeed a rare find.

Colour had been splashed prodigally upon the canvasses. Maroon, lemon, magenta, scarlet, vivid purple, cerise, blues, flame colour. Indian colours! Indian faces! Here was more than a mere tribe of Indians. The artist had stamped indelibly upon the canvas a revelation of the history of a passing race. He had painted the Iliad of the Indian race.

Here was an ancient chief, grave, stern as a judge, with the dignity of a king and a pride that all the squalor and poverty and starvation of a long, hard life, the repression and tyranny at the hands of successive Indian agents and parasites upon his race, had been unable to quench.

Here, the infinitely old and wrinkled, toothless, witch-like great-great-grandmother of the tribe, a crone who mumbled prophetic warnings to which the lightest-hearted paid superstitious heed. And here the blind Medicine Man.

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Smiling, wheedling, begging, the pleasantly-plump shining-faced squaws. The Braves, young and old, variously clad, some clinging to the garb of their ancestors, or wearing the holiday dress, gaudy Hudson's Bay blankets and rugs and headdresses of eagle or turkey feathers; others in the half cowboy, half Indian clothes, and others again poorly attired in the mockery of the white man's clothes.

Thin faces, deep and hungry-eyed, with that subdued look that tells not so much of the conquering hand of the white man as of the insidious effects of the great white plague.

Tragic faces of half-breeds, pawns of an undesired fate. Something of smouldering wildness, something of sadness, something of intense longing and wistfulness looked from the strange eyes of the breeds, legally white and permitted the "privilege" of the franchise, subject to conscription and taxation, yet doomed to live among their red kindred.

Beauty peered from the half-lifted ragged magenta shawl of an Indian Madonna, upon

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whose back the tiny blonde head of a blue-eyed papoose told a story more eloquent than words.

This, then, was the "find" of the newspaper man. Of the pictures, he selected six. He had no compunction about helping himself. It was part of his trade, and he had discovered the cave. What is more, he cherished the enthusiastic ambition of making the unknown artist famous. There were people in Calgary who would appreciate what this man had done. Mallison intended to show his find to these connoisseurs.

From the Indian pictures, he turned to the portfolio of sketches. Several of Sandy and the ranch hands, one of Bully Bill, with the quid of tobacco in his cheek, a characteristic bit of old P. D., one of Viper at the heels of the milk cows, a stream of cattle pouring over the hill, and—Hilda! One hundred and eighteen sketches of Hilda McPherson. Now the reporter understood, and he chuckled with sympathy. He did not blame the man. He had seen Hilda!

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From the portfolio, Mallison selected two or three sketches of P. D., one of Sandy, three of Hilda, and a single photograph of Cheerio, taken evidently in France, and in uniform. He was easily recognizable. There was no mistaking that boyish and friendly smile, that seemed somehow to irradiate and make singularly interesting the essentially sensitive features of the young Englishman.

CHAPTER XXI

EVERY night, after his dinner, P. D. would take what he termed a "cat-nap." Not even chess interrupted these short dozes on the comfortable couch by the pleasantly-crackling logs heaped upon the big fireplace.

There would be an interval, then, when Cheerio and Hilda would find themselves practically alone in the living-room. Sometimes Cheerio would look across expectantly at Hilda, and she would turn away and stare with seeming absorption out of the window. Then he would bring forth his tobacco pouch, fill and light his pipe and dip down in the pocket of his old coat and bring up a book. Hilda's absorption in the outside view would undergo a swift change. Against her will, she found herself watching him furtively. It fascinated her to see the way in which he would handle a book, his fingers seeming sensitively to caress the pages. He always closed the

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book reluctantly and would return it carefully to his pocket as if it were something precious. She had satisfied her curiosity as to the titles and the authors of the books he read. She had never heard the names before, and suffered a pang that he should be close to matters concerning which she was totally ignorant. She tried to comfort and reassure herself. Even if one had missed school and college, even if one had been side-tracked all of her life on an Alberta ranch, even if a girl's solitary associates and friends, over all the days of her life, had been merely the rough types peculiar to the cattle country, *he* had said that a world might be discovered right within the pages of a book. There was hope, therefore, for the unhappy Hilda.

He had made that remark to no one in particular one night, as he gently closed the book in his hand, and reached for the tobacco pouch in his rough tweed pocket. Then he had filled his pipe, beamed upon the sleeping P. D., and with his brown head against the back of the Morris chair, Cheerio had lapsed into what

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seemed to be a brown study in which Hilda and all the rest of the world appeared to disappear from his ken.

Cheerio had a trick of disappearing, as it was, in this manner—disappearing, mentally. Always there would then arise something torturing in the breast of Hilda McPherson. She had a passionate curiosity to know where the mind of the dreaming man had leaped in thought. Across the water—Ah! there was no doubt of that! Back in that England of his! Figures rose about him. Hilda had an intuitive knowledge of the types of people who were his familiars on the other side. Always among them was the smiling woman, whose hair was gold and whose lazy eyes had a lure in them that to the downright and unsophisticated Hilda spelled the last word in fascination. “Nanna”! A foolish name for a lady, thought the girl throbbingly, and yet a love name. It was undoubtedly that.

If the motherless girl could but have found a confidante on whom to pour out all the torturing doubts and longings of these days,

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something of her pain would have been surely assuaged. Chaotic new emotions were warring within her breast. Her wild young nature found itself incapable of wrestling with the exquisite impulses that despite her best efforts she could not control. Hilda told herself that she hated. An alarming voice seemed to retort from the depths of her heart that that was but another name for Love. This—Love! She could not—would not—dared not believe it. And yet the simple motion of this man's strong white hand, the slight quizzical uplift of his eyes had the power to cause her to hold her breath suspended and send the blood racing to her heart.

Hilda was not subtle enough to search her soul or that of another. She could not diagnose that which overwhelmed her. In a way she was like one overtaken, trapped in a spell from which there was no door through which she might escape. She had reason for believing him to be unworthy—a man who put to a crucial test, had failed miserably; one who

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had confessed to a flagrant and criminal weakness.

She had judged him relentlessly, for youth is cruel, and love and jealousy create a torment which is hard to bear.

CHAPTER XXII

DUNCAN MALLISON pushed the little swinging gate open with his knee and sauntering across to the City desk, threw a bundle down upon it.

"Why, hello, Dunc! Back?"

"Hi, there, Dunc!"

Several heads bent above typewriters raised long enough to call across a word of greeting. Charley Munns, City Editor of the Calgary *Blizzard*, his desk heaped high with an amazing mass of papers, glanced up with a detached query in his harassed young blue eyes.

"Well?"

Mallison proceeded to untie the string about his package. Munns glanced at the first of the pictures, jerked his chin out and looked again. Mallison showed the second and then, slowly, the third. Munns had pushed back the heap of papers. Pipe in hand, tired young blue eyes suddenly bright and alert, he examined

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the remarkable sketches. An interested group had gathered at the back of the city editor's chair, and the sketches passed from hand to hand. Mallison who had, without words, merely laid the package of sketches before his city editor, continued reticent when questioned by the staff.

"Whose work was it? Where had he got them? Had they been exhibited? What were they doing in Calgary?" and so forth.

Oh, they were the work of a friend of his. Didn't matter who. None of them knew his name. No, they hadn't been exhibited.

Then he sat him down by the "Chief's" desk, hugged his chin, and stared gloomily before him. The men were back at their desks, and Munns signed some slips, and then turned his attention back to his reporter.

"Good work. Typical Stoneys, eh? Don't know who your friend is, Dunc, but it is worth two sticks—more if you're personally interested. By the way, about P. D.? How'd you come out?"

The city editor had picked up again one of

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the sketches and was examining it interestedly. It was of a young girl, standing on the top of a hill, her horse, reins dropped, behind her, its mane blowing in the wind. She was in breeks, with a boy's riding boots and her sweater was a bright scarlet. On her head was a black velvet tam. Something in the wide-eyed dreaming look of the girl, as if she were gazing across over an immense distance, seeing probably hills yet higher than the one on which she stood, with the clear blue skies as her only background, held the attention of the jaded city editor.

"That's really great. Fine! Who's the girl, by the way?"

"Hilda McPherson."

"Oh ho!"

Mallison pulled out the slat of the desk, rested his elbows upon it, and began talking. As he talked, his city editor's eyes returned time and again to the sketches, and suddenly he ejaculated:

"Hello! What's this?"

Absently turning over the sketches, the pho-

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tograph of Cheerio was suddenly revealed. Charley Munns' brows were puckering. One other talent this man possessed. An almost uncanny gift of memory. It was said of him that he never forgot a face once seen.

"Half a mo'l"

He had swung around a rickety file, that revolved on low wheels. Digging into it, he presently found the "obit" that he sought, and slapped down upon the desk a pile of press clippings, duplicate of the photograph which the reporter had found at O Bar O, and a concise, itemised description of the man in question.

Editor and reporter scanned the story swiftly. There was no question now as to the identity of the man at O Bar O. Cheerio's obit read like a romance. Son and heir of Lord Chelsmore, he had left his art studios in Italy to return to England, there to enlist as a common soldier in the ranks. Among those missing in France, posthumous honors had been bestowed upon him. Soon after this, his father had died, and his younger brother had

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succeeded to the title and estates and had married his former fiancée.

Charley Munns glanced through the various clippings, nodded his head, and slapped them back into the big manila envelope.

"I think you've stumbled across a big thing," he said. "This man is probably the real Lord Chelsmore. Find out just what he's doing up here. Not only a good news story here, but a fine feature story, if you want to do it."

But the reporter was staring out angrily before him. Certain instincts were warring within him. He wanted to shove his knees under that typewriter desk and begin pounding out a story that would proclaim Cheerio's secret to the world. But a feeling of compunction and shame held him back.

After all, the fellow had a right to his own secret. He had been darned nice to the reporter. Was a darned good friend. Mal-lison's mind went back to those long, pleasant Sundays, when they had talked and smoked together. He recalled a day, when with a friendly smile, Cheerio had tossed from his

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horse into Mallison's arms a fine haunch of venison. A man couldn't buy venison from the Indians, nor, at that time, could he shoot deer. The Indians alone had that right, and while they were not permitted to sell venison to the white men, there was no law to prevent them from making gifts of the desired meat. Nor was there any law that prevented the white man returning the compliment with a bag of sugar or a can of molasses or whatever sweet stuff the red man might demand. Cheerio remarked that he had no use for the venison at the ranch house and the stuff was a hanged sight better cooked over a camp fire, so "There you are, old man. One minute, and I'll give you a hand."

He had built the fire and he had cut up and broiled the venison, and he had spread it thickly with O Bar O butter, and with a friendly grin, he had dished it out to the camper.

Mallison felt himself shrivelling under a mean pang. It was a dirty trick to have taken the sketches, though Mallison proposed to

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show them to certain prominent folk of Calgary who might help the fellow who was a ranch hand. He had not intended to exploit his friend. He had a good enough story about P. D., and he had been sent to "cover" P. D. and the chess game. So why——

His chair scraped the floor. He leaned heavily across the city desk.

"I say, Chief, I don't need to find out what he's doing up here. I know. He's up here so's not to stand in the way of his brother's happiness. That's how I dope it out. And he's a darned good sort, and I'm hanged if I want the job of writing a story like that. He's a friend of mine, and it'd be a scurvy trick. It's none of our dashed business, anyway."

"It's a good newspaper story," said the city editor without emphasis.

"Oh, I dunno. Who gives a hang in this country about an Englishman? You can dig up a dozen stories like that any day up here in Alberta."

"Maybe you can."

Charley Munns answered five telephone

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calls in succession, signed two slips brought to him by a boy, read a telegram, called an assignment across to a reporter who rose from his typewriter and made an instant exit, and then turned back to the gloomy Mallison at his elbow. A grin twisted the city editor's mouth, and a humorous twinkle lighted up his tired eyes.

"Suit yourself, Dunc. Give's a column, then, about old P. D. and the chess, and run a few of the Indian pictures and the one of the old man—the one with the pipe and the hat. Cut out the Cheerio man, then. If he's satisfied where he is, let him stay—among those missing. We should worry."

Duncan Mallison grinned delightedly.

"Thanks! I'll tell him what you said."

CHAPTER XXIII

A MIGHTY panorama of golden hills swelled like waves on all sides and vanished into cloud-like outlines of yet higher hills that zigzagged across the horizon and merged in the west into that matchless chain of rugged peaks. Snow crowned, rosy under the caress of the slowly sinking sun, bathed in a mystic veil of gilded splendour, the Canadian Rockies were printed like an immense masterpiece across the western sky.

Hilda rode slowly along, her gaze pinned upon the hills. Yet of them she was thinking but vaguely. They were a familiar and well-loved presence that had been with them always. To them she had turned in all her girlish troubles. To them she had whispered her secrets and her dreams.

As she rode on and on, her thoughts were all of those strange evenings in the company of this man—the too-short, electrical half hour

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or so when they would be alone together before her father awoke.

Her reins hung loose over her horse's neck; her hands were in the pockets of her hide coat; her head slightly bent, Hilda gave herself up to a long, aching, yet singularly glowing day dream. Daisy made her own trail, idly loping along above the canyon that skirted the Ghost River, stopping now and then to nibble at the sweet grass along the paths.

The woods were very still and lovely. Wide searchlights of the remaining sunshine pierced through the branches of the trees and flickered in and out of the woods, playing in golden, dancing gleams upon the green growth.

Brown and gold, deeply red, burnt yellow, and green, the trees were freighted with glorious beauty. Masses of the leaves fluttered idly to the ground, moved by the soft fragrant breeze and the branches on bush and tree seemed lazily to shake themselves, as if succumbing unwillingly to the slumberous spell of the quiet Autumn day.

The flowers beneath the trees still shone,

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their radiance but slightly dulled by the touch of the night frosts, seeming lovelier indeed, as if veiled by some softening web-like touch. Scarlet and bright, all through the wooded growth, the wild-rose berries grew.

Coveys of partridge and pheasants fluttered among the bush, peeked up with bright, inquiring eyes at the girl on horse, then hopped a few paces away, under the thick carpet of leaves.

In an open field, swiftly running horses raced to meet them. Like playful children, they ran around and in front and on all sides of Hilda's mare, thrusting their noses against hers, and laying their faces across her slender back, utterly unafraid of the rider, yet timorous and moving at Hilda's slightest affectionate slap or word of reproof when they pressed too closely.

She was off again. This time a race across a wide pasture and into the hills to the west, turning at the end of a long, wooded climb up an almost perpendicular slope, to come out upon the top of one hill, to climb still higher

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to another, into a wide, open space, and again to a higher hill, till, suddenly, she seemed to be on the very top of the world.

Below her, nestling like a small city, the white and green buildings of the ranch showed. Very near it seemed, and yet in fact a distance of two or three miles. From this highest point, the girl on horse paused to cast a long, lingering look over the surrounding country that lay spread below her.

To the north were dim woods, thick and dark. An eagle soaring overhead.

To the east, the wide-spreading pastures and the long, trailing road to Banff. Dim forms of cattle and horse observable in the still lingering light, moving specks upon the gracious meadows.

To the south, the lower chain of hills and the sheep lands. A coyote's wild moaning call. A hawk circling toward the ranch house.

Shining like a jewel in the mellow glow, the long, sinuous body of the Bow River, rushing swiftly to make its junction with the more leisurely flowing Ghost, upon whose surface the

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logs from the Eaue Claire Lumber Camp were being borne by the hundreds upon the first lap of their journey to Calgary.

In the West, hill upon hill and still farther hill upon hill, and beyond all, the snow crowned, inescapable immortal range of Rocky Mountains, a dream, a miracle, emblematic of eternity and peace.

It was hard indeed to tear her gaze from the last lingering gleams of that marvellous sunset. There was that about it that uplifted and comforted the aching heart. Hilda sighed and at last her long gaze was reluctantly withdrawn, dropped lower over the hill tops, the woods, and came to rest, alertly and still, upon a moving shadow that slipped in and out of the bush in a direct line with the barbed wire fencing.

She rode slowly, leisurely, but her reins were now in her hands. In all her young life, Hilda McPherson had known not the meaning of the word fear. Anger, pain, pity and now love, had shaken her soul, but of fear she knew nothing. That anyone should wish to

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harm her, was beyond her comprehension. So she rode forward quietly, almost indifferently. Nevertheless, Hilda knew that someone was trailing her. An O Bar O "hand" or a neighbour would have come out into the open. Whoever was following her was keeping purposely under the shadow of the bush. Nor could it be an Indian. Hilda knew the Stoneys well. An Indian does not molest a white woman.

She pondered over the purpose of the man who was following her. What did he want? Why did he not come out into the open? Thieves and rustlers would not have ventured as near to the ranch house as this. Their work was upon the range.

Hilda's horse was now climbing down the other side of the hill slope, directly toward the ranch. O Bar O was fenced and cross-fenced with four wires, every field being laid out for especial stock. In a country like Alberta, where ranching is done on a large scale, stock are seldom penned in barn or stable. They are loose upon the range. Between each field,

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antiquated barbed wire gates were kept tightly closed. These were difficult to open. They consisted of three or four strands of barbed wire nailed to light willow fence posts at a space of about a foot apart. These swung clear from the ground and when closed fastened by a loop of the wire to the stout post at the end of the fencing. They were nasty things to open, even for the toughened hands of the cowboy. Hilda seldom used these gates. She would go around by the paths that opened to the main trails where were the great gates that swung from their own weights and were made of posts ten feet long. These, however, were not as desirable for dividing fields, since they swung too easily and were a temptation to leave open. The old type were preferred by the ranchers. They kept the cattle more securely separated.

This evening, Hilda came over the hill by the shorter trail, and now she was before the first of the wire gates.

The days were getting shorter and already, though it was scarcely six o'clock, the shadows

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were closing in deeply. The rosy skies were dimming and the pressing shadows crept imperceptibly over the gilded sky.

Quite suddenly darkness fell. The trail, however, was close to the gate and her horse knew the way. Hilda did not dismount. Leaning from her horse, she grasped the post and tugged at the tightly wedged ring of wire.

Her first knowledge of the near presence of the man who had followed her came when something thudded down at her horse's feet. In the half light of the fading day Hilda saw that uncoiled rope.

The lariat!

Now she understood and a gasp of rage escaped her. The man had attempted to rope her. The lariat had fallen short! She, Hilda McPherson, daughter of O Bar O, to be lariat-ed like a head of stock!

As she watched the rope slowly being coiled in, the sickening thought rushed upon her that presently it would be thrown again, and that second throw might fall true. Instantly she was off her horse, had grasped the end of the

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lariat, whipped it about the gate post, tied a tight knot, ducked under the wire of the fence, and secure in the knowledge that her pursuer would be held back by the closed gate, unless he dismounted and took her own means of passing through, Hilda ran like the wind straight along the trail to O Bar O, shouting in her clear, carrying young voice, the Indian cry:

“Hi, yi, yi, yi, yi, yi, yi, yi, yi! Eee-yaw-aw-aw-aw-aw-aw!”

As she called, as she ran, an answering shout came from the direction of the ranch, still more than a mile away; but he who had answered her call for help was even then coming over the crest of the last hill, and the silhouette in the twilight of man and horse stopped the girl short and sent her heart racing like a mad thing in her breast. He was riding as only one at O Bar O could ride. Reining up sharply before Hilda, Cheerio swiftly dismounted and was at her side.

“Hilda! You’ve been thrown!”

Oh, how that voice, with its unmistakable

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note of deep anxiety in her behalf, made Hilda's heart leap. Even in her excitement, she was conscious of a strangely exultant pang at the thought that he should have been the one to have come to her in her need. She could scarcely speak from the excitement and terror of her recent experience, and for the tumultuous emotions at the sight of the man she loved.

"Over there—a man! He followed me—Oh—has been trailing me through the woods, and at the gate—the gate—he threw the lariat—the lariat!"

Her voice rose hysterically.

"It missed us—just touched Daisy. I—I—tied it to the gate post. Gate's closed. He can't come through on horse. Look! There he is! There he is! See—see—white chaps! Look!"

She was speaking in little sobbing gasps, conscious not of the fact that she was held in the comforting curve of the man's strong arm.

Dimly the vanishing form of horse and man showed for an instant in the half light and dis-

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appeared into the dense woods beyond. Cheerio made a motion as if to remount and follow, but Hilda clung to his sleeve.

"Oh, don't leave me. Please don't leave me. I'm—I'm—afraid to be alone"

"N-not f-for worlds," he said, "but d-d-dear—" Through all her pain she heard that soft term of endearment, "He's left the lariat. Couldn't stop to get it. Come, we'll get it. It may furnish a clue."

Back at the gate, they untied the knotted lariat and Cheerio recoiled it and attached it to his own saddle.

"We'll keep this as a memento. Maybe there's a man at O Bar O short a lariat."

"No man at O Bar O would do a coyote's trick like that," said Hilda, faintly.

She had recovered somewhat of her composure, though she still felt the near influence of the man walking beside her, leading his horse with one hand, and holding her arm with the other. Her own mount had gone free and would not be recovered till the morning. She

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would not follow his suggestion to mount his horse.

And so they came down over the hill together. Just before they passed into the ranch yard, Cheerio controlled his fluttering tongue and stammered something that he had been trying to say to her all of the way down the hill.

"Hilda, I'm a f-f-f-fortunate d-dog. I'm jolly glad I w-w-went out to look for you to-night."

"*Were* you looking for me, then? Why?"

"C-can't explain it. S-something m-made me go. I had to f-find you, Hilda."

Now they were at the steps of the ranch house. Hilda went up one step, paused, went up another and stopped, unable to go further. Cheerio leaned up and tried to see her face in the semi-light that was now silvering the land from the broad moon above. What he saw in Hilda's face brought the word bursting to his lips:

"M-my *dear* old girl!" he said. "I'm dashed jolly glad I'm alive."

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Hilda said in a whisper:

“Ah, so am I!”

And then she fled—fled in panic-stricken retreat to the house. Blindly she found her way to her room, and cast herself down upon her bed. She was trembling with an ecstasy that stung her by its very sweetness.

CHAPTER XXIV

OF all the emotions, whether sublime or ridiculous, that obsess the victim of that curious malady of the heart which we call Love, none is more torturing or devastating in its effect than that of jealousy with its train of violent reactions.

Love affected and afflicted Hilda and Cheerio in different and yet in similar ways.

Hilda, kneeling by her bed, her arms clasped about her pillow, into which she had buried her hot young face, gave herself up at first to the sheer ecstasy and glow of those first exalting, electrical thrills. All she comprehended was that she was in love.

Love! It was the most beautiful, the most sacred, the most precious and the most terrible thing in all the universe. That was what Hilda thought. Gradually her thoughts began to assemble themselves coherently. Sitting upon the floor by her bed, Hilda brought back to mind every incident, every word and look

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that had passed between her and Cheerio that she could recall since first he had come to O Bar O.

Who was this man she loved? What was he doing at O Bar O? Where had he come from? Who were his people? She did not even know his name. The very things that had aroused the derision of the men, his decently-kept hands, the daily shave and bath, his speech, his manner, his innate cleanliness of thought and person—these bespoke the gentleman, and Hilda McPherson had the ranch girl's contempt for a mere gentleman. In the ranching country, a man was a man. That was the best that could be said of him.

With the thought of his past, came irresistibly back to torment her the woman of the locket—"Nanna," for whom he had come to Canada to make a home. She had never been wholly absent from Hilda's thought and unconsciously now, as in the midst of her bliss she came back vividly to mind, a little sob escaped her. She tried to fight the encroaching thought of this woman's claim.

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"Suppose he had been in love with her, I've cut her out! She is done for."

Thus Hilda, to the unresponsive wall facing her.

Suppose, however, they were engaged. That was a word that was followed by marriage. This thought sent Hilda to her feet, stiff with a new alarm. The unquiet demon of Jealousy had struck its fangs deep into the girl's innermost heart. She no sooner tried to recall his face as he had looked at her in the moonlight, the warm clasp of his hand, the term of endearment that had slipped from his lips, when the knife was twisted again within her, and she saw the lovely face of the other woman smiling at her from the gold locket, with her fair hair enshrined on the opposite side.

The recollection was intolerable—unendurable to one of Hilda's tempestuous nature. Suppose she should come to Alberta! Perhaps she would not release him, even if he desired it! Suppose she should come even to O Bar O. How would she—Hilda—bear to

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meet her? Her wild imagination pictured the arrival, and Hilda began to walk her floor. Love was now a purgatory. What was she to do? What was she to do? Hilda asked herself this question over and over again, and then when her pain became more than she could bear, she turned desperately to her door. At any cost, however humiliating to her pride, she would learn the truth. She would go directly to him. She would ask him point-blank whether from this time on it was to be her or —Nanna!

She had done without her dinner. She could not have eaten had she been able to force herself to the table. Her father had called her, Sandy had pounded upon her door. It mattered not. Hilda was deaf to all summons, save those clamouring ones within her.

As far as that goes, she was not the only one at O Bar O who had gone supperless.

Cheerio, after she had left him, remained at the foot of the steps, just looking up at the door through which the world for him seemed to have vanished. How long he stood thus,

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cannot be estimated by minutes or seconds. Presently he sat down upon the steps, and soon was lost in a blissful daze of abstraction.

Above him spread the great map of the skies, at this time of year especially beautiful, star-spotted and slashed with the long rays of Northern lights and the night rainbows. Still and electric was the night. Keen and fresh the air. The ranch sounds were like mellow musical echoes. Even the clang of Chum Lee's cow-bell, calling all hands to the evening meal, seemed part of the all-abiding charm of that perfect night.

The voices of the men en route from bunkhouse to cook-car, the sharp bark of the dog Viper, and the answering growls of the cattle dogs, the coyote, still wailing wildly in the hills.

Lights were low in the bunkhouse and on full in the cook-car. The absorbing job of "feeding" was now in process.

All these things Cheerio noted vaguely, with a gentle sort of delight and approval. They were all part of the general beauty of

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life on this remarkable ranch. He was conscious of a big, uplifting sense. He wanted to shout across the world praise of this new land that he had discovered; of the utter peace and joy of ranching in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains; of the girl of girls who was more to him now than anything else on earth.

A wide moon was now overhead, and the country was bathed in a silvery light. The skies were star-spotted, and alive with mystery and beauty.

Snatches of poetry sang in his head, and for the first time since the days when he had penned his boyish love lyrics to Sybil Chenoweth, Cheerio indited new ones to Hilda, the girl he now loved:

“Oh, Hilda, my darling, the sky is alive,
And all of the stars are above;
The moon in her gown of silvery sheen—
She knows of my love—my love.”

It mattered not to the lover whether his verses were of a high order from a critical

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point of view. They were heartfelt—an expression of what seemed surging up within him. He needed a medium through which he might speak to Hilda. On the back of an envelope, he scratched:

“Hilda of the dark brown eyes
And lips so ripe and red.
Hilda, of the wilful ways,
And small, proud, tossing head.”

And so it went. But, like Hilda, the first incoherent rhapsody gave way presently to soberer thoughts. He was inspired by a desire to do something to prove himself worthy of the girl he loved. He was overtaken with an appalling realization of his shortcomings. What had he to offer Hilda? What had he done to deserve her? He was but one of twenty or more paid “hands” on her father’s ranch. He was penniless; nameless!

She was no ordinary girl. That brown-eyed girl, with her independent toss of head and her free, frank nature, he knew had the ten-

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der heart of a mother. Cheerio had watched many a time when she knew it not. He had seen her with the baby colts, the calves, the young live-stock of the ranch; the hidden litter of kittens in the barn, whose existence was so carefully hidden from her father. He had watched Hilda caring for the sick little Indian papoose, wrapping antiseptic salve bandages on a little boy's sore arm, and stooping to kiss the brown face and pat the shoulder of the little Indian mother. No wonder she was adored by half the country-side. No wonder the Indians called her "little mother" and friend. She was as straightforward, honest, and clean as a whistle. She was fearless and fine as a soldier. There was about her slim, young grace a boyish air of courage. Hilda! There never was another girl like his in all the whole world.

Now Cheerio felt humbled, unworthy. Followed a boyish desire to give Hilda things. He regretted his poverty, and suffered a sense of resentment and irritation for the first time at the thought of the power and pride of a

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great family name that should by rights be his and Hilda's. What had he to offer her? Nothing—but the trifling trinket, a family heirloom, in which long since he had replaced the picture of the English girl with the one Sandy had given him of Hilda. Automatically his hand closed about the locket. It was a fine old antique. Hilda would appreciate it. He would show her her own and Nanna's face inside it. He pictured her shining eyes as she would take the trinket from his hand. Once she had told him she possessed not a single piece of jewellery. P. D. had denounced them as "baubles, suitable for savages only—relics of days of barbarism. The modern woman who pierced her ears," said P. D. McPherson, "and hung silly stones from them was little better than the half-naked black women who hung jewels and rings from their noses."

But Hilda did not share her father's opinion. She had spoken wistfully, longingly, enviously. This was after reading a chapter

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concerning Anne of Austria's diamonds and D'Artagnan's famous recovery of the same.

Well, Hilda should have her first piece of jewellery from his hands. The ancient Chelsmore locket. It would take the place of the ring between them. It would be the symbol of their love.

CHAPTER XXV

AS a boy, Cheerio's inability swiftly to explain or defend himself, had resulted in many unjust punishments. He was not stupid, but became easily confused, and with the best of intentions, he bungled into unfortunate situations. His brother, Reggie, swift-witted and glib of tongue, was far better equipped to defend and care for himself than the often bewildered and stammering Cheerio. He had changed very little, and his love had made him now almost obtusely blind.

As he hurried eagerly across the verandah to meet Hilda who was hastening in her direct way for that "show down" which her peace of mind demanded, Cheerio held out toward her the intended gift.

In the bright moonlight, Hilda saw the locket in his hand, and she stopped short in her impetuous approach. Speech at that moment failed her. She felt as if suddenly

choked, struck, and her heart was beating so riotously that it hurt her physically. A primitive surge of wild, ungovernable rage surged up within her.

In a far worse dilemma was the unfortunate and deluded and misunderstood Cheerio. At that psychological moment, when he would have given his life for eloquent speech in which to tell the girl before him of his love, he was overtaken with panic and confusion. The hostile attitude of the girl reduced him to a state of incoherent stuttering as he continued foolishly to extend the locket.

“Ww-w-w-w-w-w-w——”

She gave him no help. Her angry, wounded stare was pinned condemningly upon him.

“Www-w-w-w-w-w-will you accept this l-little m-m-m-m—memento of——”

“Accept *that!*”

Hilda said “That” as if referring to something loathsome.

“What should I want with *it?*”

“It” also was spoken as “that.”

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Like a tidal wave, the girl's anger overwhelmed her. Hell, which the proverb assures us, hath no fury like a woman scorned, raged indeed in the ungoverned breast of the girl of the ranching country. She was neither equipped by nature or training with those feminine defenses that might have shielded her. She was in a way as uncivilized as the savage woman who beats her untrue mate. All she was fiercely conscious of was her raging indignation at the imagined affront offered her by Cheerio. He, who but a short time since she had been deluded enough to believe actually loved her was now flaunting before her that hateful locket in which she knew was the picture of the woman he had come to Canada to make a home for.

Her eyes were aflame. Her anger dominated her entirely.

Crestfallen and surprised, Cheerio drew back a pace:

"I s-say," he persisted stupidly, "I only w-wanted you to have it. It's a n-nice old thing, you know, and——"

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"How dare you offer me a thing like that?" demanded Hilda, in a level, deadly voice. "How dare you! How dare you!"

Her voice rose. She stamped her foot. Her hands clinched. It would have relieved her to hurt him physically. Surprised and dejected, he turned away, but his movement whetted her anger. Her fiery words pursued him.

"What do you take me for? Do you think I want your silly old second-hand jewellery? Why don't you wrap the precious thing up in white tissue paper and send it across the sea to the woman that's in it?"

At that a light of understanding broke over Cheerio. He moved impetuously toward her:

"Hilda, don't you know that you—you are——"

He got no further, for at that moment a loud cough behind him interrupted him. In their excitement neither Hilda nor Cheerio had noted the car ascending the grade to the ranch and then circling the path. Duncan Mallison had come up the stairs and across the verandah

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and had coughed loudly before either Cheerio or Hilda were aware of his presence.

"Good evening, everybody," said the newspaper man. "How's chess?"

Cheerio had recovered himself sufficiently to return the grip of the other's hand.

"Why, hello!"

Mallison chuckled.

"Didn't expect to see me back, did you? I'll tell you just what I'm up for. No—not after a chess story this time. Do you remember talking to me about a job on the *Blizzard*? Well, Munns—our city editor—thinks he can make a place for you."

It was the snapping closed of the door that apprised them of the departure of Hilda. Cheerio looked at it thoughtfully, with an element of sadness, and perhaps of new resolve.

"Look here," he said to his friend. "You've come in the n-nick of time, I might say. Fact is, old man, I—I'd like most awfully a chance to see to—to—demonstrate m-m-my ability—t-to do s-something worth while, you know.

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C-carn't go on being a beggar, you understand. G-got to s-s-succeed, don't you know."

Mallison did know. He grinned appreciatively.

"Then you'll go back with me to Calgary to-night?"

"Can't do that very well, old man."

He thought a moment, and then added brightly:

"To-morrow morning. Put you up for to-night, and we'll leave first thing. You see, I've one more game still to do."

CHAPTER XXVI

P. D. WAS taking his "cat-nap" that evening in his "office," a room that opened off from the dining-room, where the old rancher kept his account books and other papers connected with the running of his business. He was enjoying a sweet sleep, in which he dreamed of three white pawns checking a black King. The three pawns were his. The King was Cheerio's. Something unpleasant and having nothing to do with the soothing picture he was enjoying, awoke him. He blinked fiercely, cleared his throat, sat up in the big chair, and glared disapprovingly at his daughter who had precipitated herself almost into his lap.

"What is the meaning of this? Is it, then, 8.30?"

"No, Dad. You've quarter of an hour still."

"Then what in thunderation do you mean by waking me for, then? Get away! Get away!"

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I don't like to be pawed over in this manner."

"Dad, I want to talk to you about something. I—I must talk to you."

"When you wish to talk to me, you will choose an hour when I have the leisure to hear you."

"Dad, you won't let me speak to you through the day. You always say you're calculating something, and now you simply *must* listen to me. It's vitally important that you should. You *must*!"

"Must, heh?"

"*Please*, Dad!"

"Well, well, what is it? Speak up. Speak up."

He took his watch out, glanced at it, scowled, paid no attention to what his daughter was saying until the word "chess" escaped her, when his glance fixed her.

"What's that?"

"I said if you'd only *defend* your King instead of everlastingly attacking, don't you see, you'd stand a better chance. I've noticed on

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two or three occasions that he's left great openings where I'm sure you could——"

"Are you trying to teach your father the game of chess?"

"Oh, no, Dad, but you know, two heads are better than one. I've heard you say so."

"Two *mature* heads——"

"Mine's mature. I'm eighteen, and I think——"

"You're not supposed to think. You're not equipped for thinking. Women have a constitutional brain impediment that absolutely prevents them coherently or rationally——"

"Dad, look here. Don't you know that it's November 20th? The cattle are still on the range and everybody in the country is talking about us. They think we've gone plumb crazy. And why? Just because *he* wants to go on and on beating you and——"

"What's this? What's this? A discourse of depreciation of a prized employee of O Bar O?"

"Father!" Hilda seldom called her father

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"Father," but she believed herself to be in a desperate situation and desperate speech and measures were necessary. "Father, you have simply got to beat him to-night. You——"

"You leave the room, miss,"

"Dad, I——"

"Leave the room!" roared P. D.

"Oh, if you only knew how unhappy I am," cried Hilda piteously. Her father took her by the shoulders and turned her bodily out, closing the door sharply between them, and returning to pace the floor of his own office, and work off some of the upsetting influences which might not be well for that calmness and poise of mind necessary for a game of chess.

The ranch house was a great, unwieldy building, with a wide hall dividing on one side the enormous living-room and on the other the dining-room, beyond which was P. D.'s office and study.

Hilda shot out of her father's office into the darkened dining-room, and from there into the lighted hall, where she collided with the

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entering Cheerio. On him, she turned the last vials of her wrath.

"I've something to say to you. Everything on this ranch is at a standstill on your account. If we don't gather in our cattle soon, there'll be a lot of lost and dead O Bar O stock when the first blizzard comes. I wish you'd never come here. You've pulled my old Dad down, and look what you've done to me—look!—I'm glad you're going away! I don't want ever to see your face again!"

Even as she said the words, Hilda longed to recall them. Cheerio's hurt look was more than she could bear, and she fled up the stairs like one pursued. He heard the bang of her door, and a strangely softened look stole into his face as he turned into the living-room.

The chess board was still set up, the men standing on the positions of the previous night, when the game had remained unfinished at the ending hour of ten o'clock. Cheerio cast a swift glance about him, studied the board a moment, and then with another furtive glance, quickly changed the position of a Black Queen

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and a White Pawn. His hand was scarcely off the board when Hilda McPherson slipped from between the portieres.

As swiftly and passionately as she had fled up the stairs, so she had run down again, compunction overwhelming her, torn and troubled by that look on the man's face. But her reaction turned to amazement and indignant scorn as she watched him at the chess board. If she had repented her harsh treatment of him before, now, more than ever, she ascended in judgment upon him. His glance fell guiltily before her accusing one. Hilda seized upon the first word that came to her tongue, regardless of its odiousness.

"Cheat! Cheat! Now I understand how you've been beating my Dad! You've been changing the positions. You can't deny it! I've caught you red-handed. Oh, oh! I might have guessed it. To think that for a single moment I believed in you, and now to discover you're not only a——"

He flinched, almost as if physically struck, and turned white. Then his face stiffened.

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His heels came together with that peculiarly little military click that was characteristic of him when moved. His face was masklike as he stared straight at Hilda. Something in his silence, some element of loneliness and helplessness about this man clutched at the stormy heart of the girl, and stopped the words upon her lips, as her father came into the room. Hilda had the strange feeling of a wild mother at bay. Angry with her child, she yet was ready to fight for and defend it. All unconsciously, she had covered her lips with her hands to crush back the hot words that were surging up to expose him to her father.

"What's this? Why so much excitement? Why all this hysterical waste of force? It carried even to my office—electrical waves of angry sound. No doubt could be heard across at the bunkhouse or the barns. I'll make a test some day. Sit down, sit down. If you wish to witness our game, oblige us with silence, if you please.

To Cheerio he said:

"Be seated, sir. You will pardon the ex-

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citement of my daughter. Youth is life's tempestuous period—hard to govern—hard to restrain, a pathological, problematical time of life. Be seated, sir. My move, I believe, sir.”

Hilda felt weak and curiously broken. She sat forward in her chair, her eyes so dark and large that her face, no longer rosy, seemed now peculiarly small and young.

Old P. D. scratched his chin and pinched his lower lip as he examined the board through his glasses. Cheerio was not looking at the board, his sad, somewhat stern glance was pinned upon Hilda.

There was a pause, and suddenly P. D.'s face jerked forward. A crafty twitch of the left eyebrow. He glanced up at Cheerio, moved a Bishop three paces to the right. Cheerio withdrew his eyes reluctantly from the drooping Hilda, looked absently at the board and made the obvious move. Instantly P. D.'s hand shot toward his Queen. A pause, and then suddenly through the room, like the pop of a gun, P. D.'s shout resounded:

“Check!”

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Pause.

"Check!"

This time louder.

"Check to your King, sir! Game! Game!"

Up leaped P. D. McPherson, sprang toward his opponent, smashed him upon the shoulder, gripped him by both hands, and shouted:

"Beat you! By Gad! I'd rather beat you than go to Chicago. Damn your hands and feet, you're a dashed damned fine player, and it's an honour to beat you, sir! Come along with me, sir!"

He dragged his opponent out, and arm and arm they hurried across to the bunkhouse to proclaim the "damnfine news" and to order all hands of the O Bar O to set out on the following morning upon that annual Fall round-up which had been put off for so long. But before Cheerio had left the room, and even while her father was all but embracing him, his glance had gone straight into the eyes of Hilda, pale as death and slowly arising.

Like one moving in sleep, feeling her way as she passed, Hilda McPherson followed her

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father and Cheerio. But she could go no farther than the verandah. There she sat crouched down on the steps, her face in her hands, overwhelmed by the unbearable pain that seemed to clutch at her heart. The truth had shocked Hilda into a realization of the inexcusable wrong and insult that she had dealt to this man. No words were needed. She comprehended exactly what had happened in that room. Cheerio, she now knew, had changed the men on the board for her father's advantage. And she had called him a cheat!

She took her hands down from her face, and spoke the words aloud:

"I called him a cheat! I called him a—coward! Oh, what am I to do?"

The man who had been sitting in the swinging couch, and whom she had not seen, strolled across the verandah and came directly down the steps to where the unhappy Hilda was crouched.

"Miss McPherson! Can I do anything for you?"

Hilda was in too much pain to feel either

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surprise or resentment for the intrusion. She said piteously:

"I called him a cheat! a coward!"

"A coward—*him!*"

Duncan Mallison's face darkened with an almost angry red.

"You may as well know this much at least," he said roughly. "The man you called a coward won the Victoria Cross for an act of sublime heroism during the war."

Hilda stood up. She looked beaten and small. She was wrenching her hands together as she backed toward the door. Her lips were quivering. She tried to speak, but the words could not come, and she shook her head dumbly.

The reporter, who probably understood human nature far better than the average person, was touched by the girl's evident misery. He put his hand under Hilda's arm, and guided her to the door. There he said soothingly:

"Now, don't worry. Everything's all right, and you're in luck. We're going to take him

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on the paper. Fine job. He'll make out great. So, don't worry. First thing in the morning we'll be off, and you can depend upon me to do the best I can for him. He's a darned good pal."

CHAPTER XXVII

HILDA awoke with a sob. She sat up in bed, pressing her hands to her eyes. Slowly, painfully, she recalled the events of the previous night.

She had called him a cheat—a coward! She had said that she never wished to see his face again! She had driven him from O Bar O. He had gone out of her life now forever.

Hilda could see the dim light of the approaching dawn already tinting the wide eastern sky. It was a chill, raw morning. He would walk out from O Bar O, with his old, battered grip in his hand and that gray suit that had so edified the ranch hands. Her breast rose and swelled. The tears of the previous night threatened to overwhelm her again. Hilda had literally cried practically all of the night, and her hour's sleep had come only through sheer exhaustion.

The unhappy girl crept out of bed and knelt

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by the window, peering out in the first grey gloom of the Autumn morning, toward the bunkhouse. She fancied she saw something moving in that direction, but the light was dim, and she could not be sure.

It was cold and damp as she knelt on the floor. No matter. He would be cold and chilled, too, and she had driven him from O Bar O!

A light gleamed now in the dusk over at the saddle rooms. A glance at her watch showed it was not yet six o'clock. He would make an early start, probably leaving before the men started off on the round-up—they were to leave for the range at seven that morning.

Without quite realizing what she was doing, Hilda dressed swiftly. The cold water on her tear-blistered face soothed and cooled it. She wrapped a cape about herself, put on a knitted tam.

The halls were dark, but she dared not turn on the electric lights, lest she should awaken Sandy or her father. Feeling her way along the wall, she found the stairs, and clinging to

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the bannister went quickly down. A moment to seek the door knob, and swing the big door open. At last she was out of the house.

The cold air smote and revived her. It gave her courage and strength.

The darkness was slowly lifting, and all over the sky the silvery waves of morning were now spreading. Hilda sped like a fawn across the barn yard, through the corrals and directly to the saddle room, from whence came the light. The upper part of the door was open, and Hilda pushed the lower part and stepped inside.

A man in white chaps was bending over a saddle to which he was attaching a lariat rope. As the lower door slammed shut behind Hilda, he started like an overtaken thief, and jumped around. Hilda saw his face. It was Holy Smoke.

All at once Hilda McPherson knew that before her stood the man who had tried to lariat her in the woods. She stared at him now in a sort of fascinated horror. A cunning look of surprised delight was creeping over the

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man's face. Hilda put her hand behind her and backed for the door. At the same time, once again she raised her voice, and sent forth that loud cry of alarm:

"Hi-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi-iiii-i-i-i-i!"

The cry was choked midway. She was held in a strangling hold, the big hand of the cow-puncher gripped upon her throat.

"There'll be none of the Hi-yi-ing for you to-day! If you make another peep, I'll choke you to death! I'm quittin' O Bar O for good and all to-day, but before I go you and me has got an account to settle."

She fought desperately, with all her splendid young strength, scratching, kicking, biting, beating with her fists like a wild thing at bay, and, with the first release as he staggered back, when her sharp teeth dug into his hands, again she raised her voice; but this time her cry was stopped by the brutal blow of the man's fist. She clutched at the wall behind her. The earth seemed to rock and sway and for the first time in all her healthy young life, Hilda McPherson fainted.

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She lay on a sheepskin, a man's coat beneath her head. Chum Lee knelt beside her, cup in hand. She swallowed with difficulty, for her throat pained her and she still felt the grip of those terrible fingers. Hilda moaned and moved her head from side to side. The Chinaman said cheerfully:

"All lightee now, Miss Hilda. Chum Lee flix 'im fine. Slut 'im. Bang 'im. Slut 'im up till Mr. Cheerio come. Big fight!" Chum Lee's eyes gleamed. "All same Holy Smoke bad man. Take 'im gun. Banfi! Slood Mr. Cheerio. Velly good, now lide on lail."

Hilda understood only that Holy Smoke had shot Cheerio.

She clutched the Chinaman's arm, and forced herself to her feet. Pushing Chum Lee aside, Hilda made her way from the saddle shed, where they had laid her.

Outside, the sharp cold air of the Fall morning was like a dash of bitter water and brought its revivifying effect. Hilda turned in the direction of the voice she now heard clearly, for sound carries far in a country like Alberta,

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and although Hilda could clearly hear the voices of the men, they were in fact more than a mile from the ranch. She was obsessed with the idea that Cheerio had been killed and that her men had taken his murderer into the woods and were hanging him. Oh! she wanted a hand in that hanging. Everything primitive and wild in her nature surged now into being, as she made her way blindly down that incredibly long hill and ran stumblingly through the pasture lands to where the group of men were about some strange object that was tied and bound half sitting on a rail. Then Hilda understood, and waves of unholy joy swept over her in a flood. They were tarring and feathering Holy Smoke!

Above the deafening roar of the cheering shouting voices, presently rose the clear call of the one she knew. No fluttering, stammering tongue now. The voice of a captain, a leader among men:

“One, two, three! In she goes!”

The rail was swung back and forth, and at that “Three,” with a roar from twenty or

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thirty throats, it was released from the hands gripping it at either end and plunged into the muddy water of the shallow slough. It described a somersault. Head downward went the man they had tarred and feathered. The rail jerked over, and the head of Holy Smoke arose out of the water, a grotesque paste of mud and tar covering it completely. Loud shouts of glee arose from the men. They jeered and yelled to the struggling wretch in the water.

From the direction of the ranch, came the sound of the loud clanking breakfast bell of Chum Lee. In high good humour, with appetites whetted and vengeance satisfied, the men of O Bar O retraced their steps toward the ranch, prepared for that hearty breakfast which should stiffen them against the invigorating work of at last rounding up.

Cheerio alone remained by the slough, and Hilda, watching him from the little clump of bush, witnessed a strange and merciful act on his part; the sort of thing a man of Cheerio's type was accustomed to do at the front, when

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an enemy, hors de combat, needed final succour. Cheerio thrust two long logs into the mud of the slough, very much as he had done when he had rescued the heifer in the woods. Now also he went out across the logs and cut the ropes that bound the man to the rail. Holy Smoke grasped after the logs, clung to them desperately, and Cheerio gave his stiff order to him to get off the place as expeditiously as possible if he valued his hide.

Having set the man free, Cheerio returned to the bank, stopped to clean the mud off his boots with a handy stick and then moved to follow after the men, now at a considerable distance.

Hilda, her blue and red cape flapping back from her as she came from the little bush toward him, was holding out both her hands, but as Cheerio stopped short they dropped helplessly at her side. His grave eyes slowly travelled over the piteous little figure in his path. The eyes that had been so stern now softened, but Cheerio could not speak at that moment. Something rose in his throat and held him

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spellbound, looking at the girl he loved and whom he had expected never to see again. Hilda's eyes were unnaturally wide and dark; her lips were as tremulous as a flower and quivering like those of a hurt child. The flag of hostility and hate was down forever. She was pathetic and most lovely in her humility.

Cheerio murmured something unintelligible and held out his arms to her. Hilda would have gone indeed directly to that haven; but there was Sandy racing along the trail on Silver Heels, shouting like an Indian excited queries and shrilly demanding to know why he had been "left out of the fun." Nevertheless, Cheerio had sensed the unconscious motion of the girl, and a light broke over his face, driving away the last shadow. His wide, boyish smile beamed down upon her. Speech failed him not at that blessed moment.

"*Darling!*" said Cheerio, in such a voice that Hilda thought the word an even more beautiful one than the "Dear" he had once before called her.

"Hi, Hilday! What's all the racket about?"

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What they done to Ho? Where is he? Dad's goin' to kill 'em. He's gone plumb crazy at the house. Chum Lee come on in an tol' 'im that he beat you up. Is that true?"

Cheerio answered for her.

"He's a bad lot, Sandy, and he's got his deserts." His eyes were still on Hilda. It didn't seem possible that he could withdraw them. Over her pale cheeks a glow was coming like the dawn, and her shy glance trembled toward his own.

"My! Dad's hoppin' mad. Ses hangin' ain't too good for him, the dirty dog, an I say it too! What'd he do to you? What was you doin' in the barn at that hour?"

Hilda shook her head. Her eyes were shining so that even Sandy was nonplussed.

"You don't *look* beaten up," said her brother, and Hilda laughed and then unexpectedly her eyes filled with tears and she sobbed.

"Gee! I wish someone'd waked me up. Doggone it, I don't see why I was left out. Wish I'd caught him hittin' my sister! Dad's

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nearly crazy. You better hustle along home, Hilda. You'd think you were the only person at O Bar O now to hear Dad talk. He's thinkin' up every mean thing he ever said to you and he's cryin' like a baby."

"Poor old Dad!" said Hilda, softly.

A movement on the edge of the slough now attracted the incredulous eyes of Sandy McPherson. He was shuffling into the clothes left for him on the bank. Instantly Sandy had reined up beside him. He yelled insults and epithets down at the shivering wretch on the bank, stuck his fingers into his mouth and produced a hooting whistle, then Sandy played at lariatting the man, but Ho, with a venomous look, grasped the rope as it fell in a ring near him, and there was a tug of war for its possession between man and boy. Sandy let go the rope and concentrated upon the nine foot long bull whip in his other hand. Yelling to the man to move along swiftly and to get "to hello" off O Bar O, Hilda's brother pursued her assailant.

Meanwhile, Hilda and Cheerio seized the

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opportunity to continue that interrupted dialogue. He said suddenly, after a rapt moment:

"Hilda, you don't hate me then, do you, dear?"

In a little voice, Hilda said:

"No."

"And you d-don't want me to go away, do you?"

Hilda shook her head, too moved for more speech, but her eyes brimmed at the mere thought of his going. That was too much for Cheerio, and regardless of Sandy, he took Hilda's hand.

"Then I'll stay," he said, softly.

Hand in hand, they were moving homeward, walking in an entranced silence, the glow of the early morning drawing them under its golden spell; but before Sandy had joined them, all that they had yearned to say and hear was spoken.

"Hilda! I love you!"

"Oh, do you? Then—then—that Nanna—"

"Nanna is seventy-four. My old nurse,

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Hilda. When I returned from—Germany—I was a prisoner there nine months, Hilda—Nanna was the only one at home who knew me. You see—you see—it was better that they shouldn't know me. M-m-my brother was in my place. And you see, Hilda, I c-came out here, and N-Nanna planned to f-follow me. She is seventy-four."

"Seventy-four! Oh, I thought—I thought—that picture in the locket——"

"That was Sybil—now my brother's wife."

Wonderful things were happening to Hilda. She wanted to laugh; she wanted to cry, and the pink cheek wavered from him, and then came to rest against his rough sleeve. Cheerio never even glanced back to see if Sandy were at hand. He placed his arm completely and competently around Hilda's waist. Their lips were very close. This time it was Hilda who whispered the words, and Cheerio bent so close to hear them that his lips came upon her own.

"Oh, I loved you all the time!" said Hilda McPherson.

At this juncture, they stopped walking, for

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one may not kiss as satisfactorily while moving along.

When Hilda regained her power of speech, she said:

"I'm never going to say another unkind thing to you."

"You can say anything you want, sweetheart," said Cheerio. "Whatever you say will sound just right to me—dearest old girl."

It occurred to Hilda that he possessed a most wonderful and extensive vocabulary. She had never heard such terms before, and when she had read them Hilda had felt embarrassed, and in her rough way had thought: "Oh, slush!"

But somehow the words had an almost lyrical sound when uttered by the infatuated Cheerio.

They were brought back to life by the yipping, jeering Sandy.

"Geel! I believe you two's struck on each other!"

He reined up beside them and examined the

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telltale faces with all a boy's cunning and disgusted amusement.

"Say, are you goin' to git married?"

"You better believe we are!" laughed Cheerio, falling easily into the slang of the country.

"Holy Salmon! Well, there's no accountin' for tastes," said Hilda's young brother, with disparagement. Then resignedly: "But, I betchu Dad'll be tickled. He'll have a life partner for chess. Gee! Here's where I escape!"

He kicked his heels into his horse's flanks and with the grace and agility of a circus rider, with neither saddle nor bridle merely a halter—Sandy was off. He turned bodily around in his seat on the running horse's back to yell back at them as he rode, hand to mouth:

"Aw, cut out the spoons! I'm going to hustle home and break the news to fa-ather! Let 'er go, bronc! Let 'er fly! Let 'er fly!"

They smiled after the vanishing boy, smiled into each other's faces and smiled at the sunshine and the gilded hills, now shining in the

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full light of the marvellous Alberta sun. After a moment, shyly, despite the fact that she was held closely to him:

"What's your real name?"

"Edward Eaton Charlesmore of Macclesfield and Coventry."

"You're making fun of me."

"N-no, I'm not, darling. That's my real name."

Hilda smiled delightedly.

"But what do they call you?"

He laughed, squeezed her tightly, kissed her and then kissed her again.

"Cheerio!" he said.

"But that's not a real name!"

"It's good enough for me. You gave me it, you know."

"And—and are you really a duke or something like that?"

Again he laughed.

"You bet I am."

Her face fell. She regretted his high estate. Cheerio put his lips against her small pink

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ear, and he kissed it before he whispered what he said was a great secret:

“Hilda, I’ll tell you who I am: Cheerio, Duke of the O Bar O, and you’re the darling Duchess!”

“That’s Jake!” said Hilda.

THE END

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