

**Bertha Muzzy Sinclair**



*Sawtooth  
Ranch*

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# CHAPTER I

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## LITTLE FISH

Quirt Creek flowed sluggishly between willows which sagged none too gracefully across its deeper pools, or languished beside the rocky stretches that were bone dry from July to October, with a narrow channel in the centre where what water there was hurried along to the pools below. For a mile or more, where the land lay fairly level in a platter-like valley set in the lower hills, the mud that rimmed the pools was scored deep with the tracks of the "TJ up-and-down" cattle, as the double monogram of Hunter and Johnson was called.

A hard brand to work, a cattleman would tell you. Yet the TJ up-and-down herd never seemed to increase beyond a niggardly three hundred or so, though the Quirt ranch was older than its lordly neighbours, the Sawtooth Cattle Company, who numbered their cattle by tens of thousands and whose riders must have strings of fifteen horses apiece to keep them going; older too than many a modest ranch that had flourished awhile and had finished as line-camps of the Sawtooth when the Sawtooth bought ranch and brand for a lump sum that looked big to the rancher, who immediately departed to make himself a new home elsewhere: older than others which had somehow gone to pieces when the rancher died or went to the penitentiary under the stigma of a long sentence as a cattle thief. There were many such, for the Sawtooth, powerful and stern

against outlawry, tolerated no pilfering from their thousands.

The less you have, the more careful you are of your possessions. Hunter and Johnson owned exactly a section and a half of land, and for a mile and a half Quirt Creek was fenced upon either side. They hired two men, cut what hay they could from a field which they irrigated, fed their cattle through the cold weather, watched them zealously through the summer, and managed to ship enough beef each fall to pay their grocery bill and their men's wages and have a balance sufficient to buy what clothes they needed, and perhaps pay a doctor if one of them fell ill. Which frequently happened, since Brit was becoming a prey to rheumatism that sometimes kept him in bed, and Frank occasionally indulged himself in a gallon or so of bad whisky and suffered afterwards from a badly deranged digestion.

Their house was a two-room log cabin, built when logs were easier to get than lumber. That the cabin contained two rooms was the result of circumstances rather than design. Brit had hauled from the mountain-side logs long and logs short, and it had seemed a shame to cut the long ones any shorter. Later, when the outside world had crept a little closer to their wilderness—as, go where you will, the outside world has a way of doing—he had built a lean-to shed against the cabin from what lumber there was left after building a cowshed against the log-barn.

In the early days, Brit had had a wife and two children, but the wife could not endure the loneliness of the ranch nor the inconvenience of living in a two-room log cabin. She was continually worrying over rattlesnakes and diphtheria and

pneumonia, and begging Brit to sell out and live in town. She had married him because he was a cowboy, and because he was a nimble dancer and rode gallantly with silver-shanked spurs ajingle on his heels and a snake-skin band around his hat, and because a ranch away out on Quirt Creek had sounded exactly like a story in a book.

Adventures, picturesqueness, even romance, are recognised and appreciated only at a distance. Mrs Hunter lost the perspective of romance and adventure, and shed tears because there was sufficient mineral in the water to yellow her week's washing, and for various other causes which she had never foreseen and to which she refused to resign herself.

Came a time when she delivered a shrill-voiced, tear-blurred ultimatum to Brit. Either he must sell out and move to town, or she would take the children and leave him. Of towns Brit knew nothing except the post-office, saloon, cheap restaurant side,—and a barber shop where a fellow could get a shave and hair-cut before he went to see his girl. Brit could not imagine himself actually *living*, day after day, in a town. Three or four days had always been his limit. It was in a restaurant that he had first met his wife. He had stayed three days when he had meant to finish his business in one, because there was an awfully nice girl waiting on table in the Palace, and because there was going to be a dance on Saturday night, and he wanted his acquaintance with her to develop to the point where he might ask her to go with him, and be reasonably certain of a favourable answer.

Brit would not sell his ranch. In this Frank Johnson, old-time friend and neighbour, who had taken all the land the government would allow one man to hold, and whose lines joined Brit's, profanely upheld him. They had planned to run cattle together, had their brand already recorded, and had scraped together enough money to buy a dozen young cows. Luckily, Brit had "proven up" on his homestead, so that when the irate Mrs Hunter deserted him she did not jeopardise his right to the land.

Brit was philosophical, thinking that a year or so of town life would be a cure. If he missed the children, he was free from tears and nagging complaints, so that his content balanced his loneliness. Frank proved up and came down to live with him, and the partnership began to wear into permanency. Share and share alike, they lived and worked and wrangled together like brothers.

For months Brit's wife was too angry and spiteful to write. Then she wrote acrimoniously, reminding Brit of his duty to his children. Royal was old enough for school and needed clothes. She was slaving for them as she had never thought to slave when Brit promised to honour and protect her, but the fact remained that he was their father even if he did not act like one. She needed at least ten dollars.

Brit showed the letter to Frank, and the two talked it over solemnly while they sat on inverted feed buckets beside the stable, facing the unearthly beauty of a cloud-piled Idaho sunset. They did not feel that they could afford to sell a cow, and two-year-old steers were out of the question. They decided to sell an unbroken colt that a cow-puncher fancied. In a week Brit wrote a brief, matter-of-fact letter to Minnie

and enclosed a much-worn ten-dollar bank-note. With the two dollars and a half which remained of his share of the sale, Brit sent to a mail-order house for a mackinaw coat, and felt cheated afterwards because the coat was not "wind and waterproof" as advertised in the catalogue.

More months passed, and Brit received, by registered mail, a notice that he was being sued for divorce on the ground of non-support. He felt hurt, because, as he pointed out to Frank, he was perfectly willing to support Minnie and the kids if they came back where he could have a chance. He wrote this painstakingly to the lawyer and received no reply. Later he learned from Minnie that she had freed herself from him, and that she was keeping boarders and asking no odds of him.

To come at once to the end of Brit's matrimonial affairs, he heard from the children once in a year, perhaps, after they were old enough to write. He did not send them money, because he seemed never to have any money to send, and because they did not ask for any. Dumbly he sensed, as their handwriting and their spelling improved, that his children were growing up. But when he thought of them they seemed remote, prattling youngsters whom Minnie was for ever worrying over and who seemed to have been always under the heels of his horse, or under the wheels of his wagon, or playing with the pitchfork, or wandering off into the sage while he and their distracted mother searched for them. For a long while—how many years Brit could not remember—they had been living in Los Angeles. Prospering, too, Brit understood. The girl, Lorraine—Minnie had wanted fancy names for the kids, and Brit



apologised whenever he spoke of them, which was seldom—Lorraine had written that "Mamma has an apartment house." That had sounded prosperous, even at the beginning. And as the years passed and their address remained the same, Brit became fixed in the belief that Casa Grande was all that its name implied, and perhaps more. Minnie must be getting rich. She had a picture of the place on the stationery which Lorraine used when she wrote him. There were two palm trees in front, with bay windows behind them, and pillars. Brit used to study these magnificences and thank God that Minnie was doing so well. He never could have given her a home like that. Brit sometimes added that he had never been cut out for a married man, anyway.

Old-timers forgot that Brit had ever been married, and late comers never heard of it. To all intents the owners of the Quirt outfit were old bachelors who kept pretty much to themselves, went to town only when they needed supplies, rode old, narrow-fork saddles and grinned scornfully at "swell-forks" and "buckin'-rolls," and listened to all the range gossip without adding so much as an opinion. They never talked politics nor told which candidates received their two votes. They kept the same two men season after season,—leathery old range hands with eyes that saw whatever came within their field of vision, and with the gift of silence, which is rare.

If you know anything at all about cattlemen, you will know that the Quirt was a poor man's ranch, when I tell you that Hunter and Johnson milked three cows and made butter, fed a few pigs on the skim milk and the alfalfa stalks

which the saddle horses and the cows disdained to eat, kept a flock of chickens, and sold what butter, eggs and pork they did not need for themselves. Cattlemen seldom do that. More often they buy milk in small tin cans, butter in "squares," and do without eggs.

Four of a kind were the men of the TJ up-and-down, and even Bill Warfield—president and general manager of the Sawtooth Cattle Company, and of the Federal Reclamation Company and several other companies, State senator and general benefactor of the Sawtooth country—even the great Bill Warfield lifted his hat to the owners of the Quirt when he met them, and spoke of them as "the finest specimens of our old, fast-vanishing type of range men." Senator Warfield himself represented the modern type of range man and was proud of his progressiveness. Never a scheme for the country's development was hatched but you would find Senator Warfield closely allied with it, his voice the deciding one when policies and progress were being discussed.

As to the Sawtooth, forty thousand acres comprised their holdings under patents, deeds and long-time leases from the government. Another twenty thousand acres they had access to through the grace of the owners, and there was forest-reserve grazing besides, which the Sawtooth could have if it chose to pay the nominal rental sum. The Quirt ranch, was almost surrounded by Sawtooth land of one sort or another, though there was scant grazing in the early spring on the sagebrush wilderness to the south. This needed Quirt Creek for accessible water, and Quirt Creek, save where it ran through cut-bank hills, was fenced within the section and a half of the TJ up-and-down.

So there they were, small fish making shift to live precariously with other small fish in a pool where big fish swam lazily. If one small fish now and then disappeared with mysterious abruptness, the other small fish would perhaps scurry here and there for a time, but few would leave the pool for the safe shallows beyond.

This is a tale of the little fishes.

# CHAPTER II

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### **THE ENCHANTMENT OF LONG DISTANCE**

Lorraine Hunter always maintained that she was a Western girl. If she reached the point of furnishing details she would tell you that she had ridden horses from the time that she could walk, and that her father was a cattle-king of Idaho, whose cattle fed upon a thousand hills. When she was twelve she told her playmates exciting tales about rattlesnakes. When she was fifteen she sat breathless in the movies and watched picturesque horsemen careering up and down and around the thousand hills, and believed in her heart that half the Western pictures were taken on or near her father's ranch. She seemed to remember certain landmarks, and would point them out to her companions and whisper a desultory lecture on the cattle industry as illustrated by the picture. She was much inclined to criticism of the costuming and the acting.

At eighteen she knew definitely that she hated the very name Casa Grande. She hated the narrow, half-lighted hallway with its "tree" where no one ever hung a hat, and the seat beneath where no one ever sat down. She hated the row of key-and-mail boxes on the wall, with the bell buttons above each apartment number. She hated the jangling of the hall telephone, the scurrying to answer, the prodding of whichever bell button would summon the tenant asked for by the caller. She hated the meek little Filipino boy who swept that ugly hall every morning. She hated the

scrubby palms in front. She hated the pillars where the paint was peeling badly. She hated the conflicting odours that seeped into the atmosphere at certain hours of the day. She hated the three old maids on the third floor and the frowsy woman on the first, who sat on the front steps in her soiled breakfast cap and bungalow apron. She hated the nervous tenant who occupied the apartment just over her mother's three-room-and-bath, and pounded with a broom handle on the floor when Lorraine practised overtime on chromatic scales.

At eighteen Lorraine managed somehow to obtain work in a Western picture, and being unusually pretty she so far distinguished herself that she was given a small part in the next production. Her glorious duty it was to ride madly through the little cow-town "set" to the post-office where the sheriff's posse lounged conspicuously, and there pull her horse to an abrupt stand and point quite excitedly to the distant hills. Also she danced quite close to the camera in the "Typical Cowboy Dance" which was a feature of this particular production.

Lorraine thereby earned enough money to buy her fall suit and coat and cheap furs, and learned to ride a horse at a gallop and to dance what passed in pictures as a "square dance."

At nineteen years of age Lorraine Hunter, daughter of old Brit Hunter of the TJ up-and-down, became a real "range-bred girl" with a real Stetson hat of her own, a green corduroy riding skirt, gray flannel shirt, brilliant neckerchief, boots and spurs. A third picture gave her further practice in riding a real horse,—albeit an extremely docile animal called

Mouse with good reason. She became known on the lot as a real cattle-king's daughter, though she did not know the name of her father's brand and in all her life had seen no herd larger than the thirty head of tame cattle which were chased past the camera again and again to make them look like ten thousand, and which were so thoroughly "camera broke" that they stopped when they were out of the scene, turned and were ready to repeat the performance *ad lib*.

Had she lived her life on the Quirt ranch she would have known a great deal more about horseback riding and cattle and range dances. She would have known a great deal less about the romance of the West, however, and she would probably never have seen a sheriff's posse riding twenty strong and bunched like bird-shot when it leaves the muzzle of the gun. Indeed, I am very sure she would not. Killings such as her father heard of with his lips drawn tight and the cords standing out on the sides of his skinny neck she would have considered the grim tragedies they were, without once thinking of the "picture value" of the crime.

As it was, her West was filled with men who died suddenly in gobs of red paint and girls who rode loose-haired and panting with hand held over the heart, hurrying for doctors, and cowboys and parsons and such. She had seen many a man whip pistol from holster and dare a mob with lips drawn back in a wolfish grin over his white, even teeth, and kidnappings were the inevitable accompaniment of youth and beauty.

Lorraine learned rapidly. In three years she thrilled to more blood-curdling adventure than all the Bad Men in all the West could have furnished had they lived to be old and



worked hard at being bad all their lives. For in that third year she worked her way enthusiastically through a sixteen-episode movie serial called "The Terror of the Range." She was past mistress of romance by that time. She knew her West.

It was just after the "Terror of the Range" was finished that a great revulsion in the management of this particular company stopped production with a stunning completeness that left actors and actresses feeling very much as if the studio roof had fallen upon them. Lorraine's West vanished. The little cow-town "set" was being torn down to make room for something else quite different. The cowboys appeared in tailored suits and drifted away. Lorraine went home to the Casa Grande, hating it more than ever she had hated it in her life.

Some one up-stairs was frying liver and onions, which was in flagrant defiance of the Rule Four which mentioned cabbage, onions and fried fish as undesirable foodstuffs. Outside, the palm leaves were dripping in the night fog that had swept soggily in from the ocean. Her mother was trying to collect a gas bill from the dressmaker down the hall, who protested shrilly that she distinctly remembered having paid that gas bill once and had no intention of paying it twice.

Lorraine opened the door marked LANDLADY, and closed it with a slam intended to remind her mother that bickerings in the hall were less desirable than the odour of fried onions. She had often spoken to her mother about the vulgarity of arguing in public with the tenants, but her mother never seemed to see things as Lorraine saw them.

In the apartment sat a man who had been too frequent a visitor, as Lorraine judged him. He was an oldish man with the lines of failure in his face and on his lean form the sprightly clothing of youth. He had been a reporter,—was still, he maintained. But Lorraine suspected shrewdly that he scarcely made a living for himself, and that he was home-hunting in more ways than one when he came to visit her mother.

The affair had progressed appreciably in her absence, it would appear. He greeted her with a fatherly "Hello, kiddie," and would have kissed her had Lorraine not evaded him skilfully.

Her mother came in then and complained intimately to the man, and declared that the dressmaker would have to pay that bill or have her gas turned off. He offered sympathy, assistance in the turning off of the gas, and a kiss which was perfectly audible to Lorraine in the next room. The affair had indeed progressed!

"L'raine, d'you know you've got a new papa?" her mother called out in the peculiar, chirpy tone she used when she was exuberantly happy. "I knew you'd be surprised!"

"I am," Lorraine agreed, pulling aside the cheap green portières and looked in upon the two. Her tone was unenthusiastic. "A superfluous gift of doubtful value. I do not feel the need of a papa, thank you. If you want him for a husband, mother, that is entirely your own affair. I hope you'll be very happy."

"The kid don't want a papa; husbands are what means the most in her young life," chuckled the groom, restraining his bride when she would have risen from his knee.

"I hope you'll both be very happy indeed," said Lorraine gravely. "Now you won't mind, mother, when I tell you that I am going to dad's ranch in Idaho. I really meant it for a vacation, but since you won't be alone, I may stay with dad permanently. I'm leaving to-morrow or the next day—just as soon as I can pack my trunk and get a Pullman berth."

She did not wait to see the relief in her mother's face contradicting the expostulations on her lips. She went out to the telephone in the hall, remembered suddenly that her business would be overheard by half the tenants, and decided to use the public telephone in a hotel farther down the street. Her decision to go to her dad had been born with the words on her lips. But it was a lusty, full-voiced young decision, and it was growing at an amazing rate.

Of course she would go to her dad in Idaho! She was astonished that the idea had never before crystallised into action. Why should she feed her imagination upon a mimic West, when the great, glorious real West was there? What if her dad had not written a word for more than a year? He must be alive; they would surely have heard of his death, for she and Royal were his sole heirs, and his partner would have their address.

She walked fast and arrived at the telephone booth so breathless that she was compelled to wait a few minutes before she could call her number. She inquired about trains and rates to Echo, Idaho!

Echo, Idaho! While she waited for the information clerk to look it up the very words conjured visions of wide horizons and clean winds and high adventure. If she pictured Echo, Idaho, as being a replica of the "set" used in the movie

serial, can you wonder? If she saw herself, the beloved queen of her father's cowboys, dashing into Echo, Idaho, on a crimpily-maned broncho that pirouetted gaily before the post-office while handsome young men in chaps and spurs and "big four" Stetsons watched her yearningly, she was merely living mentally the only West that she knew.

From that beatific vision Lorraine floated into others more entrancing. All the hairbreadth escapes of the heroine of the movie serial were hers, adapted by her native logic to fit within the bounds of possibility,—though I must admit they bulged here and there and threatened to overlap and to encroach upon the impossible. Over the hills where her father's vast herds grazed, sleek and wild and long-horned and prone to stampede, galloped the Lorraine of Lorraine's dreams, on horses sure-footed and swift. With her galloped strong men whose faces limned the features of her favourite Western "lead."

That for all her three years of intermittent intimacy with a disillusioning world of mimicry, her dreams were pure romance, proved that Lorraine had still the unclouded innocence of her girlhood unspoiled.

# CHAPTER III

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### **REALITY IS WEIGHED AND FOUND WANTING**

Still dreaming her dreams, still featuring herself as the star of many adventures, Lorraine followed the brakeman out of the dusty day coach and down the car steps to the platform of the place called Echo, Idaho. I can only guess at what she expected to find there in the person of a cattle-killing father, but whatever it was she did not find it. No father, of any type whatever, came forward to claim her. In spite of her "Western" experience she looked about her for a taxi, or at least a streetcar. Even in the wilds of Western melodrama one could hear the clang of street-car gongs warning careless autoists off the track.

After the train had hooted and gone on around an absolutely uninteresting low hill of yellow barrenness dotted with stunted sage, it was the silence that first impressed Lorraine disagreeably. Echo, Idaho, was a very poor imitation of all the Western sets she had ever seen. True, it had the straggling row of square-fronted, one-story buildings, with hitch rails, but the signs painted across the fronts were absolutely common. Any director she had ever obeyed would have sent for his assistant director and would have used language which a lady must not listen to. Behind the store and the post-office and the blacksmith shop, on the brow of the low hill around whose point the train had disappeared, were houses with bay windows and porches

absolutely out of keeping with the West. So far as Lorraine could see, there was not a log cabin in the whole place.

The hitch rails were empty, and there was not a cowboy in sight. Before the post-office a terribly grimy touring car stood with its running-boards loaded with canvas-covered suitcases. Three goggled, sunburned women in ugly khaki suits were disconsolately drinking soda water from bottles without straws, and a goggled, red-faced, angry-looking man was jerking impatiently at the hood of the machine. Lorraine and her suitcase apparently excited no interest whatever in Echo, Idaho.

The station agent was carrying two boxes of oranges and a crate of California cabbages in out of the sun, and a limp individual in blue gingham shirt and dirty overalls had shouldered the mail sack and was making his way across the dusty, rut-scored street to the post-office.

Two questions and two brief answers convinced her that the station agent did not know Britton Hunter,—which was strange, unless this happened to be a very new agent. Lorraine left him to his cabbages and followed the man with the mail sack.

At the post-office the anaemic clerk came forward, eyeing her with admiring curiosity. Lorraine had seen anaemic young men all her life, and the last three years had made her perfectly familiar with that look in a young man's eyes. She met it with impatient disfavour founded chiefly upon the young man's need of a decent hair-cut, a less flowery tie and a tailored suit. When he confessed that he did not know Mr Britton Hunter by sight he ceased to exist



so far as Lorraine was concerned. She decided that he also was new to the place and therefore perfectly useless to her.

The postmaster himself—Lorraine was cheered by his spectacles, his shirt sleeves, and his chin whiskers, which made him look the part—was better informed. He, too, eyed her curiously when she said "My father, Mr Britton Hunter," but he made no comment on the relationship. He gave her a telegram and a letter from the General Delivery. The telegram, she suspected, was the one she had sent to her dad announcing the date of her arrival. The postmaster advised her to get a "livery rig" and drive out to the ranch, since it might be a week or two before any one came in from the Quirt. Lorraine thanked him graciously and departed for the livery stable.

The man in charge there chewed tobacco meditatively and told her that his teams were all out. If she was a mind to wait over a day or two, he said, he might maybe be able to make the trip. Lorraine took a long look at the structure which he indicated as the hotel.

"I think I'll walk," she said calmly.

"*Walk?*" The stableman stopped chewing and stared at her. "It's some consider'ble of a walk. It's all of eighteen mile—I dunno but twenty, time y'get to the house."

"I have frequently walked twenty-five or thirty miles. I am a member of the Sierra Club in Los Angeles. We seldom take hikes of less than twenty miles. If you will kindly tell me which road I must take——"

"There she is," the man stated flatly, and pointed across the railroad track to where a sandy road drew a yellowish line through the sage, evidently making for the hills showing

hazily violet in the distance. Those hills formed the only break in the monotonous gray landscape, and Lorraine was glad that her journey would take her close to them.

"Thank you so much," she said coldly and returned to the station. In the small lavatory of the depot waiting room she exchanged her slippers for a pair of moderately low-heeled shoes which she had at the last minute of packing tucked into her suitcase, put a few extra articles into her rather smart travelling bag, left the suitcase in the telegraph office and started. Not another question would she ask of Echo, Idaho, which was flatter and more insipid than the drinking water in the tin "cooler" in the waiting room. The station agent stood with his hands on his hips and watched her cross the track and start down the road, pardonably astonished to see a young woman walk down a road that led only to the hills twenty miles away, carrying her luggage exactly as if her trip was a matter of a block or two at most.

The bag was rather heavy and as she went on it became heavier. She meant to carry it slung across her shoulder on a stick as soon as she was well away from the prying eyes of Echo's inhabitants. Later, if she felt tired, she could easily hide it behind a bush along the road and send one of her father's cowboys after it. The road was very dusty and carried the wind-blown traces of automobile tires. Some one would surely overtake her and give her a ride before she walked very far.

For the first half hour she believed that she was walking on level ground, but when she looked back there was no sign of any town behind her. Echo had disappeared as completely as if it had been swallowed. Even the unseemly