

***HARRY LEON
WILSON***



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I

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MA PETTENGILL AND THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

From the Arrowhead corrals I strolled up the poplar-bordered lane that leads past the bunk house to the castle of the ranch's chatelaine. It was a still Sunday afternoon—the placid interlude, on a day of rest, between the chores of the morning and those of evening. But the calm was for the ear alone. To the eye certain activities, silent but swift, were under way. On the shaded side piazza of the ranch house I could discern my hostess, Mrs. Lysander John Pettengill; she sat erect, even in a rocking-chair, and knitted. On the kitchen steps, full in the westering sun, sat the Chinese chef of the Arrowhead, and knitted—a yellow, smoothly running automaton. On a shaded bench by the spring house, a plaid golfing cap pushed back from one-half the amazing area of his bare pate, sat the aged chore-boy, Boogles, and knitted. The ranch was on a war basis.

And more: As I came abreast of the bunk house the Sabbath calm was punctured by the tart and careless

speech of Sandy Sawtelle, a top rider of the Arrowhead, for he, too, was knitting, or had been. On a stool outside the doorway he held up an unfinished thing before his grieved eyes and devoutly wished it in the place of punishment of the wicked dead. The sincere passion of his tones not only arrested my steps but lured through the open doorway the languorous and yawning Buck Devine, who hung over the worker with disrespectful attention. I joined the pair. To Buck's query, voiced in a key of feigned mirth, Sandy said with simple dignity that it was going to be a darned good sweater for the boys in the trenches. Mr. Devine offered to bet his head that it wasn't going to be anything at all—at least nothing any one would want round a trench. Mr. Sawtelle ignored the wager and asked me if I knew how to do this here, now, casting off. I did not.

"I better sneak round and ask the Chink," said Sandy. "He's the star knitter on the place."

We walked on together, seemingly deaf to certain laboured pleasantries of Mr. Devine concerning a red-headed cow-puncher that had got rejected for fighting because his feet was flat and would now most likely get rejected for knitting because his head was flat. By way of covering the hearty laughter of Mr. Devine at his own wit I asked why Sandy should not consult his employer rather than her cook.

With his ball of brown wool, his needles and his work carried tenderly before him Sandy explained, with some embarrassment as it seemed, that the madam was a good knitter, all right, all right, but she was an awful bitter-spoken lady when any little thing about the place didn't go just

right, making a mountain out of a mole hill, and crying over spilt milk, and always coming back to the same old subject, and so forth, till you'd think she couldn't talk about anything else, and had one foot in the poorhouse, and couldn't take a joke, and all like that. I could believe it or not, but that was the simple facts of the matter when all was said and done. And the Chink was only too glad to show off how smart he was with a pair of needles.

This not only explained nothing but suggested that there might indeed be something to explain. And it was Sandy's employer after all who resolved his woolen difficulty. She called to him as he would have left me for the path to the kitchen door:

"You bring that right here!"

It was the tone of one born to command, and once was enough. Sandy brought it right there, though going rather too much like a martyr to the stake, I thought; for surely it was not shameful that he should prove inept in the new craft.

Nor was there aught but genial kindness in the lady's reception of him. Ma Pettengill, arrayed in Sabbath bravery of apparel, as of a debutante at a summer hotel where the rates are exorbitant, instantly laid by her own knitting and questioned him soothingly. It seemed to be a simple difficulty. Sandy had reached the point where a sweater must have a neck, and had forgotten his instructions. Cordially the woman aided him to subtract fourteen from two hundred and sixty-two and then to ascertain that one hundred and twenty-four would be precisely half of the remainder. It was all being done, as I have remarked, with

the gentlest considering kindness, with no hint of that bitterness which the neophyte had shown himself to be fearing in the lady. Was she not kindness itself? Was she not, in truth, just a shade too kind? Surely there was a purr to her voice, odd, unwonted; and surely her pupil already cringed under a lash that impended.

Yet this visible strain, it seemed, had not to do with knitted garments. Ma Pettengill praised the knitting of Sandy; praised it to me and praised it to him. Of course her remark that he seemed to be a born knitter and ought to devote his whole time to it might have seemed invidious to a sensitive cowman, yet it was uttered with flawless geniality. But when Sandy, being set right, would have taken his work and retired, as was plainly his eager wish, his mentor said she would knit two of the new short rows herself, just to make sure. And while she knitted these two rows she talked. She knitted them quickly, though the time must have seemed to Sandy much longer than it was.

"Here stands the greatest original humorist in Kulanche County," said the lady, with no longer a purring note in her voice. She boomed the announcement. Sandy, drooping above her, painfully wore the affectation of counting each stitch of the flashing needles. "And practical jokes—my sakes alive! He can think of the funniest jokes to put up on poor, unsuspecting people! Yes, sir; got a genius for it. And witty! Of course it ain't just what he says that's so funny—it's the noisy way he says it.

"And you wouldn't think it to look at him, but he's one of these here financial magnets, too. Oh, yes, indeed! Send him out with a hatful of ten-dollar bills any day and he won't

let one of 'em go for a cent under six dollars, not if buyers is plenty—he's just that keen and avaricious. That's his way. Never trained for it, either; just took it up natural."

With drawn and ashen face Mr. Sawtelle received back his knitting. His pose was to appear vastly preoccupied and deaf to insult. He was still counting stitches as he turned away and clattered down the steps.

"Say!" called his employer. Sandy turned.

"Yes, ma'am!"

"You seen the party that stopped here this morning in that big, pompous touring car?"

"No, ma'am!"

"They was after mules."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"They offered me five hundred dollars a span for mine."

"No, ma'am—I mean, yes, ma'am!"

"That's all. I thought you'd rejoice to know it." The lady turned to me as if Mr. Sawtelle had left us. "Yes, sir; he'd make you die laughing with some of his pranks, that madcap would. I tell you, when he begins cutting up—"

But Mr. Sawtelle was leaving us rapidly. His figure seemed to be drawn in, as if he would appear smaller to us. Ma Pettengill seized her own knitting once more, stared grimly at it, then stared grimly down at the bunk house, within which her victim had vanished. A moment later she was pouring tobacco from a cloth sack into a brown cigarette paper. She drew the string of the sack—one end between her teeth—rolled the cigarette with one swift motion and, as she waited the blaze of her match, remarked that they had found a substitute for everything but the

mule. The cigarette lighted, she burned at least a third of its length in one vast inhalation, which presently caused twin jets of smoke to issue from the rather widely separated corners of a generous mouth. Upon which she remarked that old Safety First Timmins was a game winner, about the gamest winner she'd ever lost to.

Three other mighty inhalations and the cigarette was done. Again she took up the knitting, pausing for but one brief speech before the needles began their shrewd play. This concerned the whale. She said the whale was the noblest beast left to us in all the animal kingdom and would vanish like the buffalo if treated as food. She said it was shameful to reduce this majestic creature of the deep to the dimensions of a chafing dish and a three-cornered slice of toast. Then she knitted.

She had left numerous openings; some humorous emprise of Sandy Sawtelle, presumably distressing; the gameness of one Timmins as a winner; the whale as a food animal; the spectacular price of mules broken to harness. Rather than choose blindly among them I spoke of my day's fishing. Departing at sunrise I had come in with a bounteous burden of rainbow trout, which I now said would prove no mean substitute for meat at the evening meal.

Then, as she grimly knitted, Ma Pettengill discoursed of other boasted substitutes for meat, none of which pleased her. Hogs and sheep were other substitutes, there being but one genuine meat, to wit, Beef. Take hogs; mean, unsociable animals, each hog going off by himself, cursing and swearing every step of the way. Had I ever seen a hog that thought any other hog was good enough to associate with

him? No, I hadn't; nor nobody else. A good thing hogs couldn't know their present price. Stuck up enough already! And sheep? Silly. No minds of their own. Let one die and all the rest think they got to die also. Do it too. No brain. Of course the price tempted a lot of moral defectives to raise 'em, but when you reflected that you had to go afoot, with a dog that was smarter than any man at it, and a flea-bitten burro for your mess wagon—not for her. Give her a business where you could set on a horse. Yes, sir; people would get back to Nature and raise beef after the world had been made safe once more for a healthy appetite. This here craze for substitutes would die out. You couldn't tell her there was any great future for the canned jack-rabbit business, for instance—just a fad; and whales the same. She knew and I knew that a whale was too big to eat. People couldn't get any real feeling for it, and not a chance on earth to breed 'em up and improve the flesh. Wasn't that the truth? And these here diet experts, with their everlasting talk about carbos and hydrates, were they doing a thing but simply taking all the romance out of food? No, they were not. Of course honest fish, like trout, were all right if a body was sick or not hungry or something.

Trout reminded her of something, and here again the baleful tooth of calumny fleshed itself in the fair reputation of one Timmins. She described him as "a strange growth named Timmins, that has the Lazy 8 Ranch over on the next creek and wears kind of aimless whiskers all over his face till you'd think he had a gas mask on." She talked freely of him.

"You know what he does when he wants a mess of trout? Takes one of these old-fashioned beer bottles with patent

stoppers, fills it up with unslaked lime, pours in a little water, stops it up, drops it in a likely looking trout pool, and in one minute it explodes as good as something made by a Russian patriot; all the trout in the pool are knocked out and float on the surface, where this old highbinder gathers 'em in. He's a regular efficiency expert in sport. Take fall and spring, when the wild geese come through, he'll soak grain in alcohol and put it out for 'em over on the big marsh. First thing you know he'll have a drunken old goose by the legs, all maudlin and helpless. Puts him in a coop till he sobers up, then butchers him.

"Such is Safety First: never been known to take a chance yet. Why, say, a year ago when he sold off his wool there was a piece in the county paper about him getting eighteen thousand dollars for it; so naturally there was a man that said he was a well-known capitalist come up from San Francisco to sell him some stock in a rubber company. Safety admits he has the money and he goes down to the big city for a week at the capitalist's expense, seeing the town's night life and the blue-print maps and the engraved stock and samples of the rubber and the capitalist's picture under a magnificent rubber tree in South America, and he's lodged in a silk boudoir at the best hotel and wined and dined very deleteriously and everything is agreed to. And the night before he's going to put his eighteen thousand into this lovely rubber stock that will net him two hundred per cent, at the very lowest, on the capitalist's word of honour, what does he do but sneak out and take the train for home on his return ticket that he'd made the capitalist buy him.

"Ever talk to one of these rich capitalists that has rubber stock for sale in South America or a self-starting banana orchard? You know how good they are.

"You're certainly entitled to anything of your own that you've kept after they get through with you. And would you think that this poor, simple-minded old rancher would be any match for their wiles? But if you knew he had been a match and had nicked 'em for at least three hundred dollars, would you still think something malignant might be put over on him by a mere scrub buckaroo named Sandy Sawtelle, that never made a cent in his life except by the most degrading manual labour? No, you wouldn't. No fair-minded judge of criminals would.

"But I admit I had a weak moment. Yes, sir; for a brief spell I was all too human. Or I guess what it was. I was all blinded up with immoral designs, this here snake-blooded Timmins having put things over on me in stock deals from time to time till I'd got to lying awake nights thinking how I could make a believer of him. I wanted him to know there is a God, even if it hadn't ever seemed so to him.

"Of course I knew it would have to be some high-grade felony, he being proof against common depredations. Well, then, along come this Sunday paper, with two whole pages telling about how the meat of the common whale will win the war, with a picture of a whale having dotted lines showing how to butcher it, and recipes for whale patties, and so forth. And next comes the circus to Red Gap, with old Pete, the Indian, going down to it and getting crazy about elephants. And so that was how it happened."

The lady now knitted in silence, appearing to believe that all had been told.

I waited a decent interval, then said I was glad indeed to know how it had all happened; that it was a great help to know how it had happened, even if I must remain forever ignorant of what it was that had happened. Of course I couldn't expect to be told that.

It merely brought more about mules. Five hundred dollars a span for mules looked good until you remembered that you needed 'em worse than the other party did. She had to keep her twenty span of old reliables because, what with the sailors and section hands you got nowadays to do your haying, you had to have tame mules. Give 'em any other kind and they'd desert the ship the minute a team started to run. It cost too much for wagon repairs.

Silence again.

I now said I had, it was true, heard much low neighbourhood scandal about the Timmins man, but that I had learned not to believe all I heard about people; there was too much prejudice in the world, and at least two sides to every question.

This merely evoked the item that Timmins had bought him a thrift stamp on the sole ground that it had such a pretty name; then came the wish that she might have seen him dining in public at that rich hotel where the capitalist paid the bills.

She thought people must have been startled by some of his actions.

"Yes, sir; that old outlaw will eat soup or any soft food with almost no strategy at all."

As we seemed to be getting nowhere I meanly rolled the lady a cigarette.

She hates to stop knitting to roll one, but she will stop to light it.

She stopped now, and as I held the match for her I said quite frankly that it had become necessary for me to be told the whole thing from start to finish. She said she had told me everything—and believed it—but would go over it again if I didn't understand. Though not always starting at command, the lady has really a full habit of speech.

I told you about whales, didn't I? Whales started it—whales for table use. It come in the Sunday paper—with the picture of a handsome whale and the picture of a French cook kissing his fingers over the way he has cooked some of it; and the picture of a pleased young couple eating whale in a swell restaurant; and the picture of a fair young bride in her kitchenette cutting up three cents' worth of whale meat into a chafing dish and saying how glad she was to have something tasty and cheap for dearie's lunch; and the picture of a poor labouring man being told by someone down in Washington, D.C., that's making a dollar a year, that a nickel's worth of prime whale meat has more actual nourishment than a dollar's worth of porterhouse steak; and so on, till you'd think the world's food troubles was going to be settled in jig time; all people had to do was to go out and get a good eating whale and salt down the side meat and smoke the shoulders and grind up some sausage and be fixed for the winter, with plenty to send a mess round to the neighbours now and then.

And knocking beef, you understand, till you'd think no one but criminals and idiots would ever touch a real steak again, on account of its being so poor in food values, like this Washington scientist says that gets a dollar a year salary and earns every cent of it. It made me mad, the slanderous things they said about beef; but I read the piece over pretty carefully and I really couldn't see where the whale was going to put me out of business, at least for a couple years yet. It looked like I'd have time, anyway, to make a clean-up before you'd be able to go into any butcher shop and get a rib roast of young whale for six cents, with a bushel or two of scraps thrown in for the dog.

Then this Sunday paper goes out to the bunk house and the boys find the whale piece and get excited about it. Looks like if it's true that most of 'em will be driving ice wagons or something for a living. They want me to send down for a mess of whale meat so they can see if it tastes like regular food. They don't hardly believe these pictures where people dressed up like they had money are going into spasms of delight about it. Still, they don't know—poor credulous dubs! They think things you see in a Sunday paper might be true now and then, even if it is most always a pack of lies thought up by dissipated newspaper men.

I tell 'em they can send for a whole whale if they want to pay for it, but none of my money goes that way so long as stall-fed beef retains its present flavour; and furthermore I expect to be doing business right here for years after the whale fad has died out—doing the best I can with about ten silly cowhands taking the rest cure at my expense the minute I step off the place. I said there was no doubt they

should all be added to the ranks of the unemployed that very minute—but due to other well-known causes than the wiping out of the cattle industry by cold whale hash in jelly, which happened to be the dish this French chef was going crazy over.

They chewed over that pointed information for a while, then they got to making each other bets of a thousand dollars about what whale meat would taste like; whether whale liver and bacon could be told from natural liver and bacon, and whether whale steak would probably taste like catfish or mebbe more like mud turtle. Sandy Sawtelle, who always knows everything by divine right, like you might say, he says in superior tones that it won't taste like either one but has a flavour all its own, which even he can't describe, though it will be something like the meat of the wild sea cow, which roams the ocean in vast herds off the coast of Florida.

Then they consider the question of a whale round-up in an expert manner. It don't look none too good, going out on rodeo in water about three miles too deep for wading, though the idea of lass'ing a whale calf and branding it does hold a certain fascination. Sandy says it would be the only livestock business on earth where you don't always have to be fearing a dry season; and Buck Devine says that's so, and likewise the range is practically unlimited, as any one can see from a good map, and wouldn't it be fine riding herd in a steam yacht with a high-class bartender handy, instead of on a so-and-so cayuse that was liable any minute to trade ends and pour you out of the saddle on to your lame shoulder.

They'd got to kidding about it by this time, when who should ride up but old Safety First Timmins. They spring the food whale on Safety with much flourish. They show him the pictures and quote prices on the hoof—which are low, but look what even a runt of a yearling whale that was calved late in the fall would weigh on the scales!—and no worry about fences or free range or winter feeding or water holes; nothing to do but ride round on your private steamboat with a good orchestra, and a chance to be dissolute and count your money. And look what a snap the pioneers will have with all the mavericks; probably not a single whale in the ocean yet branded! And does Timmins want to throw in with us? If he does mebbe they can fix up a deal with me because I want a good business man at the head of the new outfit.

But Safety says right off quick that it's all a pack of nonsense. He says it's the mad dream of a visionary or feeble-minded person. He don't deny there would be money in whales if they could be handled, but you couldn't handle anything that had the whole ocean to swim in that covers three quarters of the earth's surface, as he has often read. And how would you get a branding iron on a whale, and what good would it do you? He'd beat it out for Europe. He said they was foolish to think whales would stay in a herd, and he guessed I'd been talking just to hear myself talk, or more likely I'd been kidding 'em to get a good laugh.

Sandy says: "Well, I wasn't going to tell you at first, but I guess it'll be safe with you, you being a good friend of the Arrowhead, only don't let it go no farther; but the fact is the boss is negotiating for the whale privilege in Great Salt

Lake. Yes, sir, she's bribing the Utah legislature this very minute to let the bill go through! And I guess that don't look much like kidding. As soon as the governor has signed the bill she'll put in a couple of good three-year-old bull whales and a nice little herd of heifers and have the world's meat supply at her finger ends in less than five years—just killing off the yearling steers."

Safety looks a bit startled at this, and Sandy goes on to say that though whale meat is now but a fad of the idle rich it's bound to be the meat of rich and poor alike in future. He'd bet a thousand dollars to a dime that by the time the next war come along the first thing they'd do would be to establish a whaleless day. He said whale meat was just that good.

Safety chewed his gum quite a time on this—he says if a man chews gum he won't ruin himself in pocket for tobacco—and he read the whale article over carefully and looked at the pictures again, but he still said it didn't sound to him like a legitimate business enterprise. He said for one thing there'd be trouble shipping the original herd up to Salt Lake. Sandy said it was true; there would be the initial expense of loading on to flat cars, and a couple of tunnels would have to be widened so the bulls wouldn't be rasped going through, but that I have already taken this up with the railroad company.

Safety says that may all be true, but, mark his words, the minute my herd gets into inland waters it will develop some kind of disease like anthrax or blackleg, and the whole bunch will die on me. Sandy says it will be a simple matter to vaccinate, because the animals will be as affectionate as

kittens by that time through having been kindly handled, which is all a whale needs. He says they really got a very social nature and are loyal unto death. Once a whale is your friend, he says, it's for life, rain or shine, just so long as you treat him square. Even do a whale a favour just once and he'll remember your face, make no difference if it's fifty years; though being the same, it is true, in his hatreds, because a whale never forgives an injury. A sailor he happens to know once give a whale he had made friends with a chew of tobacco just for a joke and the animal got into an awful rage and tried to tear the ship down to get at him, and then he followed the ship all over the world waiting for this sailor to fall off or get wrecked or something, till finally the hunted man got so nervous he quit the sea and is now running a news stand in Seattle, if Safety don't believe it. It just goes to show that a whale as long as you're square with him is superior in mind and morals to a steer, which ain't got sense enough to know friend from foe.

Safety still shakes his head. He says "safe and sane" has been his motto throughout a long and busy life and this here proposition don't sound like neither one to him. The boys tell him he's missing a good thing by not throwing in with us. They say I'm giving 'em each a big block of stock, paid up and non-assessable, and they don't want him to come round later when they're rolling in wealth and ask why they didn't give him a chance too.

"I can just hear you talk," said Sandy. "You'll be saying: 'I knew that whole fool bunch when not one ever had a dollar he could call his own the day after he was paid off, and now look at 'em—throwing their hundreds of thousands right and

left; houses with pianos in every room; new boots every week; silver-mounted saddles at a thousand each; choice wines, liquors, and cigars; private taxicabs; and Alexander J. Sawtelle, the wealthy banker, being elected to Congress by an overwhelming majority!' That's the way you'll be talking," said Sandy, "with regret eating into your vitals like some horrible acid that is fatal to man and beast."

Safety says he thinks they're all plumb crazy, and a fool and his money is soon parted—this being a saying he must have learned at the age of three and has never forgotten a word of—and he comes up to the house to see me. Mebbe he wanted to find out if I had really lost my mind, but he said nothing about whales. Just set round and talked the usual hard luck. Been in the stock business thirty years and never had a good year yet. Nothing left of his cattle but the running gear; and his land so poor you couldn't even raise a row on it unless you went there mad; and why he keeps on struggling in the bitter clutch of misfortune he don't know. But I always know why he keeps on struggling. Money! Nothing but money. So when he got through mourning over his ruined fortunes, and feebly said something about taking some mules off my hands at a fair price, I shut him off firmly. Whenever that old crook talks about taking anything off your hands he's plotting as near highway robbery as they'll let him stay out of jail for. He was sad when I refused two hundred and fifty dollars a span for my best mules.

He went off shaking his head like he hadn't expected such inhumanity from an old friend and neighbour to one who through hard luck was now down and out.

Well, I hear no more about whales; but a circus is coming to Red Gap and old Pete, the Indian, says he must go down to it, his mind being inflamed by some incredible posters pasted over the blacksmith shop at Kulanche. He says he's a very old man and can't be with us long, and when he does take the one-way trail he wants to be able to tell his friends on the other side all about the strange animals that they never had a chance to see. The old pagan was so excited about it I let him go. And he was still more excited when he got back two days later. Yes, sir; he'd found a way to fortune.

He said I'd sure think he was a liar with a crooked tongue and a false heart, but they had an animal at that circus as big as our biggest covered mess wagon and it would weigh as much as the six biggest steers I ever shipped. It has a nose about five feet long—he was sure I wouldn't believe this part—that it fed itself with, and it carried so much meat that just one ham would keep a family like Pete's going all winter. He said of course I would think he was a liar, but I could write down to Red Gap to a lawyer, and the lawyer would get plenty of people to swear to it right in the courthouse. And so now I must hurry up and stock the place with these animals and have more meat than anybody in the world and get rich pretty quick. Forty times he stretched his arms to show me how big one of these hams would be, and he said the best part was that this animal hardly ate anything at all but a little popcorn and a few peanuts. Hadn't he watched it for hours? And if I didn't hurry others would get the idea and run prices up.

I guess Pete's commercial mind must of been engaged by hearing the boys talk about whales. He hadn't held with the whale proposition, not for a minute, after he learned they live in the ocean. He once had a good look at the ocean and he promptly said "Too much water!" But here was a land animal packing nearly as much meat as a whale, eating almost nothing, and as tame as a puppy. "I think, 'Injun how you smart!'" he says when he got through telling me all this in a very secret and important way.

I told him he was very smart indeed and ought to have a job with the Government at a dollar a year telling people to quit beef meat for the elephant. I said I was much obliged for the tip and if I ever got to going good in elephants I'd see he had a critter of his own to butcher every fall. So Pete went out with all his excitement and told the boys how I was going to stock the ranch with these new animals which was better than whales because you wouldn't have to get your feet wet. The boys made much of it right off.

In no time at all they had all the white-faces sold off and vast herds of pure-bred elephants roaming over the ranch with the Arrowhead brand on 'em. Down on the flat lands they had waving fields of popcorn and up above here they had a thousand acres of ripening peanuts; and Sandy Sawtelle, the king of the humourists, he hit on another idea that would bring in fifty thousand dollars a year just on the side. He said if a crowd come along to a ranch and bought the rancher's own hay for the sake of feeding it to his own steers they would be thought weak-minded. Not so with elephants. He said people would come from far and near and bring their little ones to buy our own peanuts and

popcorn to feed our own elephants. All we needed to do was put the stuff up in sacks at a nickel a throw. He said of course the novelty might die out in time, but if he could only get the peanut-and-popcorn concession for the first three years that would be all he'd want for his simple needs of living in a swell marble house in Spokane, with a private saloon and hired help to bring him his breakfast in bed and put on another record and minister to his lightest whim. Buck Devine said he'd be able to throw his own good money right and left if he could get the ivory privilege, which is made from the horns of the elephant and is used for many useful purposes; and one of the other boys says they'll develop a good milk strain and get a dairy herd, because the milk of this noble animal ought to be fine for prize fighters and piano movers.

In about ten minutes they was doing quite a business for old Pete's benefit, and Pete very earnest about it. He says I've promised him a young animal to butcher every fall, and they tell him there ain't no meat so good as a prime young popcorn-fed elephant, and he'll certainly live high. And just then up rides old Safety First again. So they get silent and mysterious all at once and warn Pete, so Safety will hear it, not to say a word to any one. Pete looks secretive and hostile at the visitor and goes back to his woodpile. Safety naturally says what fool thing have they got into their heads now, and he supposes it's some more of that whale nonsense.

The boys clam up. They say this is nothing like whales, but a dry-land proposition too important to talk about; that I've sworn everyone to secrecy, but he'll see soon enough

what it is when the big money begins to roll in. They don't mind telling him it's an African proposition of new and nourishing food, a regular godsend to the human race, but they got to keep quiet until I get my options bought up so I'll have the cream of the business.

Safety sniffs in a baffled manner and tries to worm out a hint, but they say it's a thing would go like wildfire once it got known, being so much tastier than whale meat and easier to handle, and eating almost nothing.

"Whales was pretty good," says Sandy; "but since the boss got a line on this other animal she's disposed of her whale interests for seventy-three thousand dollars."

Buck Devine says I showed him the check, that come in yesterday's mail, and let him hold it a minute so he could say he once held seventy-three thousand dollars in his hand just like that. And the money was to be put into this new business, with the boys being let in on the ground floor, like they had been with the whales. Sandy says that in probably a year from now, or eighteen months at the most, he won't be a thing but a dissipated millionaire. Nothing but that!

Safety is peculiar in his mind. If you told him you found a million gold dollars up in the top of that jack pine he wouldn't believe it, yet still and all he'd get a real thrill out of it. He certainly does cherish money. The very notion of it is romantic to him. And he must of been thrilled now. He hung round, listening keenly while the boys squandered their vast wealth in various reprehensible ways, trying to get some idea about the new animal. Finally he sniffed some more, and they was all crazy as loons, and went off. But where does he go but over to old Pete at the woodpile and

keeps him from his work for ten minutes trying to get the new animal's name out of Pete. But he can't trap the redman into any admissions. All he can find out is that Pete is serious and excited.

Then he come up to ask me once more if he couldn't take some mules off my hands. He found out quick and short that he couldn't. Still he hung round, talking nonsense as far as I could make out, because I hadn't yet been let in on the new elephant proposition. He says he hears I'm taking up a new line of stock, the same not being whales nor anything that swims, and if it's more than I can swing by myself, why, he's a good neighbour of long standing, and able in a pinch, mebbe, to scrape up a few thousand dollars, or even more if it's a sure cinch, and how about it, and from one old friend to another just what is this new line?

Being busy I acted short. I said I was sticking to cattle in spite of the infamous gossip against 'em, and all reports to the contrary was mere society chatter. Still he acted like I was trying to fool him. He went out saying if I changed my mind any time I was to let him know, and he'd be over again soon to talk mules at least, if nothing else, and anything he could do for me any time, just say the word, and try some of this gum, and so forth. I was right puzzled by these here refined civilities of his until Pete comes in and tells me how the boys have stocked the old ranch with elephants and how Safety has tried to get him to tell the secret. I tell Pete he's done right to keep still, and then I go down to the bunk house and hear the whole thing.

By this time they're shipping thousands of steer elephants at top prices; they catch 'em up off soft feed and

fatten 'em on popcorn and peanuts, and every Thanksgiving they send a nice fat calf down to the White House, for no one looks at turkey any more. Sandy is now telling what a snap it will be to ride herd on elephants.

"You pick out a big one," he says, "and you build a little cupalo up on top of him and climb up into it by means of a ladder, and set there in this little furnished room with a good book, and smoke and pass the time away while your good old saddle elephant does the work. All you got to do is lean out of the front window now and then and jab him in the forehead with an ice pick, whichever way you want him to turn."

I said trust a cow-puncher to think up some way where he'd have to do as little work with his hands as he does with his head. But I admitted they seemed to have landed on old Timmins for once, because he had tried to get Pete to betray the secret and then come wheedling round to me about it. I said I could talk more intelligently next time, and he would sure come again because he had lavished two sticks of gum on me, which was an incredible performance and could not have been done except for an evil purpose.

"Now say," says Sandy, "that does look like we got him believing. I was going to kid him along about once more, then spring elephants on him, and we'd all have a good laugh at the old wolf. But it looks to me like a chance for better than a laugh; it looks to me like we might commit a real crime against him."

"He never carries anything on him," I says, "if you're meaning something plain, like highway robbery."

Sandy says he don't mean that; he means real Wall Street stuff, such as one gentleman can pull on another and still keep loose; crooked, he says, but not rough. I ask what is the idea, and Sandy says get him more and more feverish about the vast returns from this secret enterprise. Then we'll cut out a bunch of culls—thin stuff and runts and cripples—and make him give about four times what they're worth on a promise to let him into the new deal; tell him we must be rid of this stuff to make room for the new animals, and naturally we'll favour our friends.

"There, now!" says Sandy. "I should be in Wall Street this minute, being able to think up a coop as pernicious as that: and I would of been there, too, only I hate city life."

"For once in the world's history," I says, "there may be a grain of sense in your words. Only no cows in the deal. Even to defraud the old crook I wouldn't let him have hide nor hair of a beef, not since he worked on my feelings in the matter of them bull calves two years ago. Mules, yes. But the cow is too worthy a beast to be mixed up in anything sinful I put over on that profiteer. Now I'll tell you what," I says, very businesslike: "you boys tole him along till he gets hectic enough to take that bunch of mule runts down in the south field, and anything you get over fifty dollars a head I'll split with you."

Sandy hollers at this. He says this bunch ain't mules but rabbits, and that I wouldn't refuse forty a head for 'em this minute. He says even a man expecting to be let in on a sure-thing elephant ranch would know something wicked was meant if asked to give even as much as fifty dollars for these insects. I tell him all very true; but this is just the

margin for his lasting financial genius which he displays so little reticence about that it'll get into the papers and make him a marked man from coast to coast if he ain't careful. He says oh, all right, if I want to take it that way, and he'll see what he can do. Mebbe he can get fifty-five a head, which would not only give the boys a good laugh but provide a little torch money.

I left 'em plotting against a man that had never been touched by any plot whatever. I resolved to remain kind of aloof from their nefarious doings. It didn't seem quite dignified for one of my standing to be mixed up in a deal so crooked—at least no more than necessary to get my share of the pickings.

Sure enough, the very next day here come the depraved old outcast marauding round again at lunch time and et with the boys in the kitchen. He found 'em full of suppressed excitement and secret speech and careless talk about large sums of money. It must of been like sweetest music to his ears. One says how much would it be safe to count on cutting up the first year—how much in round numbers; and another would say that in round numbers, what with the expense of getting started and figuring everything down to the last cent, it wouldn't be safe to count on more than a hundred thousand dollars; but, of course, for the second year, now, why it would be nearer two hundred thousand in round numbers, even figuring everything fine and making big allowance for shrinkage. After that they handed money back and forth in round numbers till they got sick of the sound of it.

They said Safety set and listened in a trance, only waking up now and then to see if he couldn't goad someone into revealing the name of this new animal. But they always foiled him. Sandy Sawtelle drew an affecting picture of himself being cut off by high living at the age of ninety, leaving six or eight million dollars in round numbers and having his kin folks squabble over his will till the lawyers got most of it. They said Safety hardly et a morsel and had an evil glitter in his eyes.

And after lunch he went out to the woodpile where old Pete was working and offered him two bits in money to tell him the secret, and when old Pete scorned him he raised it to four bits. I guess the idea of any one refusing money merely for a little talk had never seemed possible to him. He must of thought there was sure something in it. I was away that day, but when I got back and heard about his hellish attempt to bribe old Pete I told the boys they sure had the chance of a lifetime. I said if there was a mite of financial prowess in the bunch they would start the price on them runt mules at one hundred dollars flat, because it was certain that Safety had struck the skids.

Next day it looked better than ever. Safety not only appeared in the afternoon but he brought me a quart jar of honey from his own bees. Any one not having looked up his criminal record would little understand what this meant. I pretended to be too busy to be startled at the gift, which broke thirty years of complete inactivity in that line. I looked worried and important with a litter of papers on my desk and seemed to have no time to waste on callers. He mentioned mules once or twice with no effect whatever,