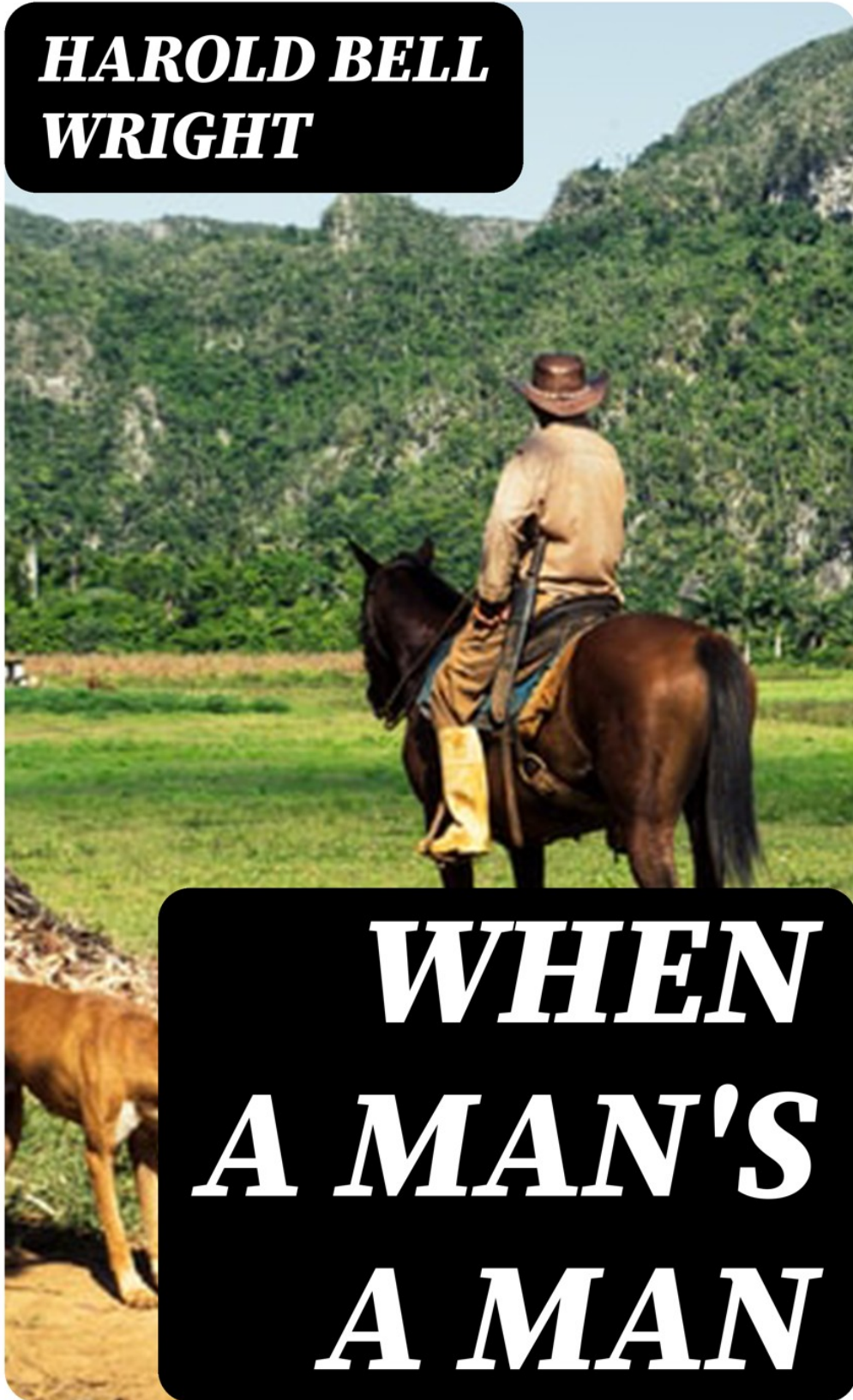


***HAROLD BELL
WRIGHT***



***WHEN
A MAN'S
A MAN***

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Harold Bell Wright

When A Man's A Man

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TO MY SONS

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GILBERT AND PAUL NORMAN

**THIS STORY OF MANHOOD
IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED
BY THEIR FATHER**

Acknowledgment

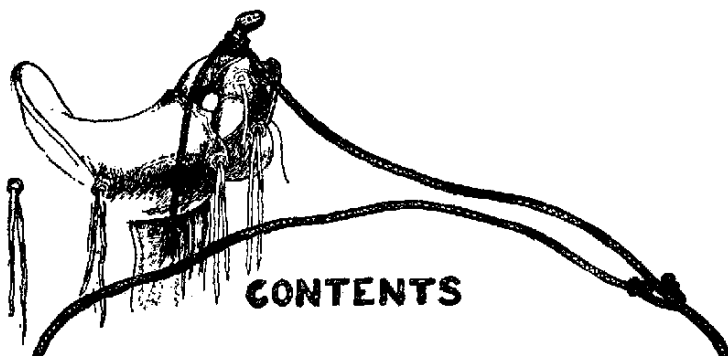
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It is fitting that I should here express my indebtedness to those Williamson Valley friends who in the kindness of their hearts made this story possible.

To Mr. George A. Carter, who so generously introduced me to the scenes described in these pages, and who, on the Pot-Hook-S ranch, gave to my family one of the most

delightful summers we have ever enjoyed; to Mr. J.H. Stephens and his family, who so cordially welcomed me at rodeo time; to Mr. and Mrs. Joe Contreras, for their kindly hospitality; to Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Stewart, who, while this story was first in the making, made me so much at home in the Cross-Triangle home-ranch; to Mr. J.W. Cook, my constant companion, helpful guide, patient teacher and tactful sponsor, who, with his charming wife, made his home mine; to Mr. and Mrs. Herbert N. Cook, and to the many other cattlemen and cowboys, with whom, on the range, in the rodeos, in the wild horse chase about Toohey, after outlaw cattle in Granite Basin, in the corrals and pastures, I rode and worked and lived, my gratitude is more than I can put in words. Truer friends or better companions than these great-hearted, outspoken, hardy riders, no man could have. If my story in any degree wins the approval of these, my comrades of ranch and range. I shall be proud and happy.
H.B.W.

"CAMP HOLE-IN-THE-MOUNTAIN"
NEAR TUCSON, ARIZONA
APRIL 29, 1916



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WHEN A MAN'S A MAN



CHAPTER I. AFTER THE CELEBRATION.



here is a land where a man, to live, must be a man. It is a land of granite and marble and porphyry and gold—and a man's strength must be as the strength of the primeval hills.

It is a land of oaks and cedars and pines—and a man's mental grace must be as the grace of the untamed trees. It is a land of far-arched and unstained skies, where the wind sweeps free and untainted, and the atmosphere is the atmosphere of those places that remain as God made them—and a man's soul must be as the unstained skies, the unburdened wind, and the untainted atmosphere. It is a land of wide mesas, of wild, rolling pastures and broad, untilled, valley meadows—and a man's freedom must be that freedom which is not bounded by the fences of a too weak and timid conventionalism.

In this land every man is—by divine right—his own king; he is his own jury, his own counsel, his own judge, and—if it must be—his own executioner. And in this land where a man, to live, must be a man, a woman, if she be not a woman, must surely perish.



This is the story of a man who regained that which in his youth had been lost to him; and of how, even when he had recovered that which had been taken from him, he still paid the price of his loss. It is the story of a woman who was saved from herself; and of how she was led to hold fast to those things, the loss of which cost the man so great a price.

The story, as I have put it down here, begins at Prescott, Arizona, on the day following the annual Fourth-of-July celebration in one of those far-western years that saw the passing of the Indian and the coming of the automobile.

The man was walking along one of the few roads that lead out from the little city, through the mountain gaps and passes, to the wide, unfenced ranges, and to the lonely scattered ranches on the creeks and flats and valleys of the great open country that lies beyond.

From the fact that he was walking in that land where the distances are such that men most commonly ride, and from the many marks that environment and training leave upon us all, it was evident that the pedestrian was a stranger. He was a man in the prime of young manhood—tall and exceedingly well proportioned—and as he went forward along the dusty road he bore himself with the unconscious air of one more accustomed to crowded streets than to that rude and unpaved highway. His clothing bore the unmistakable stamp of a tailor of rank. His person was groomed with that nicety of detail that is permitted only to those who possess both means and leisure, as well as taste. It was evident, too, from his movement and bearing, that he had not sought the mile-high atmosphere of Prescott with the hope that it holds out to those in need of health. But, still, there was something about him that suggested a lack of the manly vigor and strength that should have been his.

A student of men would have said that Nature made this man to be in physical strength and spiritual prowess, a comrade and leader of men—a man's man—a man among men. The same student, looking more closely, might have added that in some way—through some cruel trick of fortune—this man had been cheated of his birthright.

The day was still young when the stranger gained the top of the first hill where the road turns to make its steep and

winding way down through scattered pines and scrub oak to the Burnt Ranch.

Behind him the little city—so picturesque in its mountain basin, with the wild, unfenced land coming down to its very dooryards—was slowly awakening after the last mad night of its celebration. The tents of the tawdry shows that had tempted the crowds with vulgar indecencies, and the booths that had sheltered the petty games of chance where loud-voiced criers had persuaded the multitude with the hope of winning a worthless bauble or a tinsel toy, were being cleared away from the borders of the plaza, the beauty of which their presence had marred. In the plaza itself—which is the heart of the town, and is usually kept with much pride and care—the bronze statue of the vigorous Rough Rider Bucky O'Neil and his spirited charger seemed pathetically out of place among the litter of colored confetti and exploded fireworks, and the refuse from various "treats" and lunches left by the celebrating citizens and their guests. The flags and bunting that from window and roof and pole and doorway had given the day its gay note of color hung faded and listless, as though, spent with their gaiety, and mutely conscious that the spirit and purpose of their gladness was past, they waited the hand that would remove them to the ash barrel and the rubbish heap.

Pausing, the man turned to look back.

For some minutes he stood as one who, while determined upon a certain course, yet hesitates—reluctant and regretful—at the beginning of his venture. Then he went on; walking with a certain reckless swing, as though, in ignorance of that land toward which he had set his face, he still resolutely

turned his back upon that which lay behind. It was as though, for this man, too, the gala day, with its tinsel bravery and its confetti spirit, was of the past.

A short way down the hill the man stopped again. This time to stand half turned, with his head in a listening attitude. The sound of a vehicle approaching from the way whence he had come had reached his ear.

As the noise of wheels and hoofs grew louder a strange expression of mingled uncertainty, determination, and something very like fear came over his face. He started forward, hesitated, looked back, then turned doubtfully toward the thinly wooded mountain side. Then, with tardy decision he left the road and disappeared behind a clump of oak bushes, an instant before a team and buckboard rounded the turn and appeared in full view.

An unmistakable cattleman—grizzly-haired, square-shouldered and substantial—was driving the wild looking team. Beside him sat a motherly woman and a little boy.

As they passed the clump of bushes the near horse of the half-broken pair gave a catlike bound to the right against his tracemate. A second jump followed the first with flash-like quickness; and this time the frightened animal was accompanied by his companion, who, not knowing what it was all about, jumped on general principles. But, quick as they were, the strength of the driver's skillful arms met their weight on the reins and forced them to keep the road.

"You blamed fools"—the driver chided good-naturedly, as they plunged ahead—"been raised on a cow ranch to get scared at a calf in the brush!"

Very slowly the stranger came from behind the bushes. Cautiously he returned to the road. His fine lips curled in a curious mocking smile. But it was himself that he mocked, for there was a look in his dark eyes that gave to his naturally strong face an almost pathetic expression of self-depreciation and shame.

As the pedestrian crossed the creek at the Burnt Ranch, Joe Conley, leading a horse by a riata which was looped as it had fallen about the animal's neck, came through the big corral gate across the road from the house. At the barn Joe disappeared through the small door of the saddle room, the coil of the riata still in his hand, thus compelling his mount to await his return.

At sight of the cowboy the stranger again paused and stood hesitating in indecision. But as Joe reappeared from the barn with bridle, saddle blanket and saddle in hand, the man went reluctantly forward as though prompted by some necessity.

"Good morning!" said the stranger, courteously, and his voice was the voice that fitted his dress and bearing, while his face was now the carefully schooled countenance of a man world-trained and well-poised.

With a quick estimating glance Joe returned the stranger's greeting and, dropping the saddle and blanket on the ground, approached his horse's head. Instantly the animal sprang back, with head high and eyes defiant; but there was no escape, for the rawhide riata was still securely held by his master. There was a short, sharp scuffle that sent the gravel by the roadside flying—the controlling bit was between the reluctant teeth—and the cowboy, who had

silently taken the horse's objection as a matter of course, adjusted the blanket, and with the easy skill of long practice swung the heavy saddle to its place.

As the cowboy caught the dangling cinch, and with a deft hand tucked the latigo strap through the ring and drew it tight, there was a look of almost pathetic wistfulness on the watching stranger's face—a look of wistfulness and admiration and envy.

Dropping the stirrup, Joe again faced the stranger, this time inquiringly, with that bold, straightforward look so characteristic of his kind.

And now, when the man spoke, his voice had a curious note, as if the speaker had lost a little of his poise. It was almost a note of apology, and again in his eyes there was that pitiful look of self-depreciation and shame.

"Pardon me," he said, "but will you tell me, please, am I right that this is the road to the Williamson Valley?"

The stranger's manner and voice were in such contrast to his general appearance that the cowboy frankly looked his wonder as he answered courteously, "Yes, sir."

"And it will take me direct to the Cross-Triangle Ranch?"

"If you keep straight ahead across the valley, it will. If you take the right-hand fork on the ridge above the goat ranch, it will take you to Simmons. There's a road from Simmons to the Cross-Triangle on the far side of the valley, though. You can see the valley and the Cross-Triangle home ranch from the top of the Divide."

"Thank you."

The stranger was turning to go when the man in the blue jumper and fringed leather chaps spoke again, curiously.

"The Dean with Stella and Little Billy passed in the buckboard less than an hour ago, on their way home from the celebration. Funny they didn't pick you up, if you're goin' there!"

The other paused questioningly. "The Dean?"

The cowboy smiled. "Mr. Baldwin, the owner of the Cross-Triangle, you know."

"Oh!" The stranger was clearly embarrassed. Perhaps he was thinking of that clump of bushes on the mountain side.

Joe, loosing his riata from the horse's neck, and coiling it carefully, considered a moment. Then: "You ain't goin' to walk to the Cross-Triangle, be you?"

That self-mocking smile touched the man's lips; but there was a hint of decisive purpose in his voice as he answered, "Oh, yes."

Again the cowboy frankly measured the stranger. Then he moved toward the corral gate, the coiled riata in one hand, the bridle rein in the other. "I'll catch up a horse for you," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, as if reaching a decision.

The other spoke hastily. "No, no, please don't trouble."

Joe paused curiously. "Any friend of Mr. Baldwin's is welcome to anything on the Burnt Ranch, Stranger."

"But I—ah—I—have never met Mr. Baldwin," explained the other lamely.

"Oh, that's all right," returned the cowboy heartily. "You're a-goin' to, an' that's the same thing." Again he started toward the gate.

"But I—pardon me—you are very kind—but I—I prefer to walk."

Once more Joe halted, a puzzled expression on his tanned and weather-beaten face. "I suppose you know it's some walk," he suggested doubtfully, as if the man's ignorance were the only possible solution of his unheard-of assertion.

"So I understand. But it will be good for me. Really, I prefer to walk."

Without a word the cowboy turned back to his horse, and proceeded methodically to tie the coiled riata in its place on the saddle. Then, without a glance toward the stranger who stood watching him in embarrassed silence, he threw the bridle reins over his horse's head, gripped the saddle horn and swung to his seat, reining his horse away from the man beside the road.

The stranger, thus abruptly dismissed, moved hurriedly away.

Half way to the creek the cowboy checked his horse and looked back at the pedestrian as the latter was making his way under the pines and up the hill. When the man had disappeared over the crest of the hill, the cowboy muttered a bewildered something, and, touching his horse with the spurs, loped away, as if dismissing a problem too complex for his simple mind.

All that day the stranger followed the dusty, unfenced road. Over his head the wide, bright sky was without a cloud to break its vast expanse. On the great, open range of mountain, flat and valley the cattle lay quietly in the shade of oak or walnut or cedar, or, with slow, listless movement, sought the watering places to slake their thirst. The wild things retreated to their secret hiding places in rocky den

and leafy thicket to await the cool of the evening hunting hour. The very air was motionless, as if the never-tired wind itself drowsed indolently.

And alone in the hushed bigness of that land the man walked with his thoughts—brooding, perhaps, over whatever it was that had so strangely placed him there—dreaming, it may be, over that which might have been, or that which yet might be—viewing with questioning, wondering, half-fearful eyes the mighty, untamed scenes that met his eye on every hand. Nor did anyone see him, for at every sound of approaching horse or vehicle he went aside from the highway to hide in the bushes or behind convenient rocks. And always when he came from his hiding place to resume his journey that odd smile of self-mockery was on his face.

At noon he rested for a little beside the road while he ate a meager sandwich that he took from the pocket of his coat. Then he pushed on again, with grim determination, deeper and deeper into the heart and life of that world which was, to him, so evidently new and strange. The afternoon was well spent when he made his way—wearily now, with drooping shoulders and dragging step—up the long slope of the Divide that marks the eastern boundary of the range about Williamson Valley.

At the summit, where the road turns sharply around a shoulder of the mountain and begins the steep descent on the other side of the ridge, he stopped. His tired form straightened. His face lighted with a look of wondering awe, and an involuntary exclamation came from his lips as his unaccustomed eyes swept the wide view that lay from his feet unrolled before him.

Under that sky, so unmatched in its clearness and depth of color, the land lay in all its variety of valley and forest and mesa and mountain—a scene unrivaled in the magnificence and grandeur of its beauty. Miles upon miles in the distance, across those primeval reaches, the faint blue peaks and domes and ridges of the mountains ranked—an uncounted sentinel host. The darker masses of the timbered hillsides, with the varying shades of pine and cedar, the lighter tints of oak brush and chaparral, the dun tones of the open grass lands, and the brighter note of the valley meadows' green were defined, blended and harmonized by the overlying haze with a delicacy exquisite beyond all human power to picture. And in the nearer distances, chief of that army of mountain peaks, and master of the many miles that lie within their circle, Granite Mountain, gray and grim, reared its mighty bulk of cliff and crag as if in supreme defiance of the changing years or the hand of humankind.

In the heart of that beautiful land upon which, from the summit of the Divide, the stranger looked with such rapt appreciation, lies Williamson Valley, a natural meadow of lush, dark green, native grass. And, had the man's eyes been trained to such distances, he might have distinguished in the blue haze the red roofs of the buildings of the Cross-Triangle Ranch.

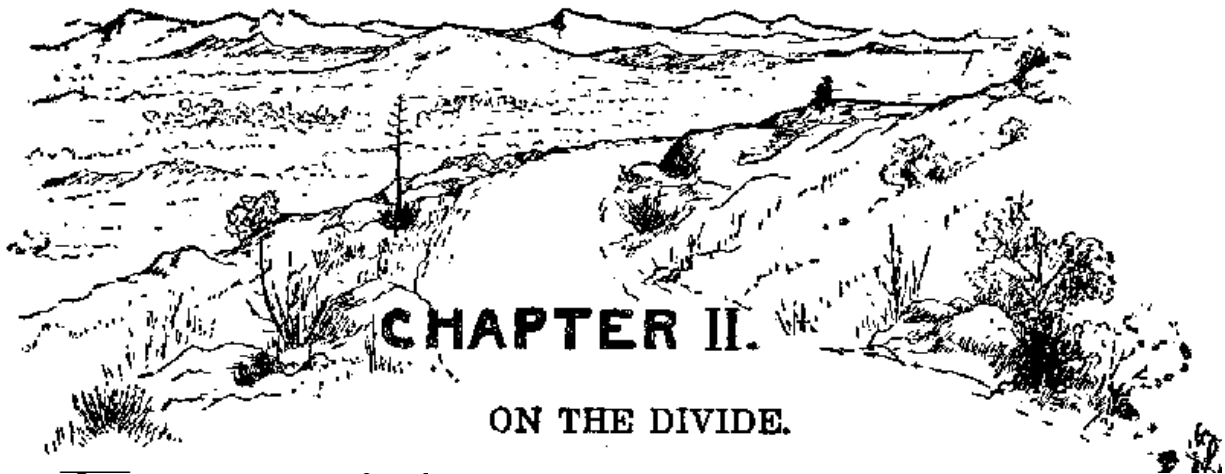
For some time the man stood there, a lonely figure against the sky, peculiarly out of place in his careful garb of the cities. The schooled indifference of his face was broken. His self-depreciation and mockery were forgotten. His dark eyes glowed with the fire of excited anticipation—with hope and determined purpose. Then, with a quick movement, as

though some ghost of the past had touched him on the shoulder, he looked back on the way he had come. And the light in his eyes went out in the gloom of painful memories. His countenance, unguarded because of his day of loneliness, grew dark with sadness and shame. It was as though he looked beyond the town he had left that morning, with its litter and refuse of yesterday's pleasure, to a life and a world of tawdry shams, wherein men give themselves to win by means fair or foul the tinsel baubles that are offered in the world's petty games of chance.

And yet, even as he looked back, there was in the man's face as much of longing as of regret. He seemed as one who, realizing that he had reached a point in his life journey—a divide, as it were—from which he could see two ways, was resolved to turn from the path he longed to follow and to take the road that appealed to him the least. As one enlisting to fight in a just and worthy cause might pause a moment, before taking the oath of service, to regret the ease and freedom he was about to surrender, so this man paused on the summit of the Divide.

Slowly, at last, in weariness of body and spirit, he stumbled a few feet aside from the road, and, sinking down upon a convenient rock, gave himself again to the contemplation of that scene which lay before him. And there was that in his movement now that seemed to tell of one who, in the grip of some bitter and disappointing experience, was yet being forced by something deep in his being to reach out in the strength of his manhood to take that which he had been denied.

Again the man's untrained eyes had failed to note that which would have first attracted the attention of one schooled in the land that lay about him. He had not seen a tiny moving speck on the road over which he had passed. A horseman was riding toward him.



Had the man on the Divide noticed the approaching horseman it would have been evident, even to one so unacquainted with the country as the stranger, that the rider belonged to that land of riders. While still at a distance too great for the eye to distinguish the details of fringed leather chaps, soft shirt, short jumper, sombrero, spurs and

riata, no one could have mistaken the ease and grace of the cowboy who seemed so literally a part of his horse. His seat in the saddle was so secure, so easy, and his bearing so unaffected and natural, that every movement of the powerful animal he rode expressed itself rhythmically in his own lithe and sinewy body.

While the stranger sat wrapped in meditative thought, unheeding the approach of the rider, the horseman, coming on with a long, swinging lope, watched the motionless figure on the summit of the Divide with careful interest. As he drew nearer the cowboy pulled his horse down to a walk, and from under his broad hat brim regarded the stranger intently. He was within a few yards of the point where the man sat when the latter caught the sound of the horse's feet, and, with a quick, startled look over his shoulder, sprang up and started as if to escape. But it was too late, and, as though on second thought, he whirled about with a half defiant air to face the intruder.

The horseman stopped. He had not missed the significance of that hurried movement, and his right hand rested carelessly on his leather clad thigh, while his grey eyes were fixed boldly, inquiringly, almost challengingly, on the man he had so unintentionally surprised.

As he sat there on his horse, so alert, so ready, in his cowboy garb and trappings, against the background of Granite Mountain, with all its rugged, primeval strength, the rider made a striking picture of virile manhood. Of some years less than thirty, he was, perhaps, neither as tall nor as heavy as the stranger; but in spite of a certain boyish look on his smooth-shaven, deeply-bronzed face, he bore himself

with the unmistakable air of a matured and self-reliant man. Every nerve and fiber of him seemed alive with that vital energy which is the true beauty and the glory of life.

The two men presented a striking contrast. Without question one was the proud and finished product of our most advanced civilization. It was as evident that the splendid manhood of the other had never been dwarfed by the weakening atmosphere of an over-cultured, too conventional and too complex environment. The stranger with his carefully tailored clothing and his man-of-the-world face and bearing was as unlike this rider of the unfenced lands as a daintily groomed thoroughbred from the sheltered and guarded stables of fashion is unlike a wild, untamed stallion from the hills and ranges about Granite Mountain. Yet, unlike as they were, there was a something that marked them as kin. The man of the ranges and the man of the cities were, deep beneath the surface of their beings, as like as the spirited thoroughbred and the unbroken wild horse. The cowboy was all that the stranger might have been. The stranger was all that the cowboy, under like conditions, would have been.

As they silently faced each other it seemed for a moment that each instinctively recognized this kinship. Then into the dark eyes of the stranger—as when he had watched the cowboy at the Burnt Ranch—there came that look of wistful admiration and envy.

And at this, as if the man had somehow made himself known, the horseman relaxed his attitude of tense readiness. The hand that had held the bridle rein to command instant action of his horse, and the hand that had

rested so near the rider's hip, came together on the saddle horn in careless ease, while a boyish smile of amusement broke over the young man's face.

That smile brought a flash of resentment into the eyes of the other and a flush of red darkened his untanned cheeks. A moment he stood; then with an air of haughty rebuke he deliberately turned his back, and, seating himself again, looked away over the landscape.

But the smiling cowboy did not move. For a moment as he regarded the stranger his shoulders shook with silent, contemptuous laughter; then his face became grave, and he looked a little ashamed. The minutes passed, and still he sat there, quietly waiting.

Presently, as if yielding to the persistent, silent presence of the horseman, and submitting reluctantly to the intrusion, the other turned, and again the two who were so like and yet so unlike faced each other.

It was the stranger now who smiled. But it was a smile that caused the cowboy to become on the instant kindly considerate. Perhaps he remembered one of the Dean's favorite sayings: "Keep your eye on the man who laughs when he's hurt."

"Good evening!" said the stranger doubtfully, but with a hint of conscious superiority in his manner.

"Howdy!" returned the cowboy heartily, and in his deep voice was the kindness that made him so loved by all who knew him. "Been having some trouble?"

"If I have, it is my own, sir," retorted the other coldly.

"Sure," returned the horseman gently, "and you're welcome to it. Every man has all he needs of his own, I

reckon. But I didn't mean it that way; I meant your horse."

The stranger looked at him questioningly. "Beg pardon?" he said.

"What?"

"I do not understand."

"Your horse—where is your horse?"

"Oh, yes! Certainly—of course—my horse—how stupid of me!" The tone of the man's answer was one of half apology, and he was smiling whimsically now as if at his own predicament, as he continued. "I have no horse. Really, you know, I wouldn't know what to do with one if I had it."

"You don't mean to say that you drifted all the way out here from Prescott on foot!" exclaimed the astonished cowboy.

The man on the ground looked up at the horseman, and in a droll tone that made the rider his friend, said, while he stretched his long legs painfully: "I like to walk. You see I—ah—fancied it would be good for me, don't you know."

The cowboy laughingly considered—trying, as he said afterward, to figure it out. It was clear that this tall stranger was not in search of health, nor did he show any of the distinguishing marks of the tourist. He certainly appeared to be a man of means. He could not be looking for work. He did not seem a suspicious character—quite the contrary—and yet—there was that significant hurried movement as if to escape when the horseman had surprised him. The etiquette of the country forbade a direct question, but—

"Yes," he agreed thoughtfully, "walking comes in handy sometimes. I don't take to it much myself, though." Then he added shrewdly, "You were at the celebration, I reckon."

The stranger's voice betrayed quick enthusiasm, but that odd wistfulness crept into his eyes again and he seemed to lose a little of his poise.

"Indeed I was," he said. "I never saw anything to compare with it. I've seen all kinds of athletic sports and contests and exhibitions, with circus performances and riding, and that sort of thing, you know, and I've read about such things, of course, but"—and his voice grew thoughtful—"that men ever actually did them—and all in the day's work, as you may say—I—I never dreamed that there *were* men like that in these days."

The cowboy shifted his weight uneasily in the saddle, while he regarded the man on the ground curiously. "She was sure a humdinger of a celebration," he admitted, "but as for the show part I've seen things happen when nobody was thinking anything about it that would make those stunts at Prescott look funny. The horse racing was pretty good, though," he finished, with suggestive emphasis.

The other did not miss the point of the suggestion. "I didn't bet on anything," he laughed.

"It's funny nobody picked you up on the road out here," the cowboy next offered pointedly. "The folks started home early this morning—and Jim Reid and his family passed me about an hour ago—they were in an automobile. The Simmons stage must have caught up with you somewhere."

The stranger's face flushed, and he seemed trying to find some answer.

The cowboy watched him curiously; then in a musing tone added the suggestion, "Some lonesome up here on foot."

"But there are times, you know," returned the other desperately, "when a man prefers to be alone."

The cowboy straightened in his saddle and lifted his reins. "Thanks," he said dryly, "I reckon I'd better be moving."

But the other spoke quickly. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Acton, I did not mean that for you."

The horseman dropped his hands again to the saddle horn, and resumed his lounging posture, thus tacitly accepting the apology. "You have the advantage of me," he said.

The stranger laughed. "Everyone knows that 'Wild Horse Phil' of the Cross-Triangle Ranch won the bronco-riding championship yesterday. I saw you ride."

Philip Acton's face showed boyish embarrassment.

The other continued, with his strange enthusiasm. "It was great work—wonderful! I never saw anything like it."

There was no mistaking the genuineness of his admiration, nor could he hide that wistful look in his eyes.

"Shucks!" said the cowboy uneasily. "I could pick a dozen of the boys in that outfit who can ride all around me. It was just my luck, that's all—I happened to draw an easy one."

"Easy!" ejaculated the stranger, seeing again in his mind the fighting, plunging, maddened, outlawed brute that this boy-faced man had mastered. "And I suppose catching and throwing those steers was easy, too?"

The cowboy was plainly wondering at the man's peculiar enthusiasm for these most commonplace things. "The roping? Why, that was no more than we're doing all the time."

"I don't mean the roping," returned the other, "I mean when you rode up beside one of those steers that was running at full speed, and caught him by the horns with your bare hands, and jumped from your saddle, and threw the beast over you, and then lay there with his horns pinning you down! You aren't doing that all the time, are you? You don't mean to tell me that such things as that are a part of your everyday work!"

"Oh, the bull doggin'! Why, no," admitted Phil, with an embarrassed laugh, "that was just fun, you know."

The stranger stared at him, speechless. Fun! In the name of all that is most modern in civilization, what manner of men were these who did such things in fun! If this was their recreation, what must their work be!

"Do you mind my asking," he said wistfully, "how you learned to do such things?"

"Why, I don't know—we just do them, I reckon."

"And could anyone learn to ride as you ride, do you think?" The question came with marked eagerness.

"I don't see why not," answered the cowboy honestly.

The stranger shook his head doubtfully and looked away over the wild land where the shadows of the late afternoon were lengthening.

"Where are you going to stop to-night?" Phil Acton asked suddenly.

The stranger did not take his eyes from the view that seemed to hold for him such peculiar interest. "Really," he answered indifferently, "I had not thought of that."

"I should think you'd be thinking of it along about supper time, if you've walked from town since morning."

The stranger looked up with sudden interest; but the cowboy fancied that there was a touch of bitterness under the droll tone of his reply. "Do you know, Mr. Acton, I have never been really hungry in my life. It might be interesting to try it once, don't you think?"

Phil Acton laughed, as he returned, "It might be interesting, all right, but I think I better tell you, just the same, that there's a ranch down yonder in the timber. It's nothing but a goat ranch, but I reckon they would take you in. It's too far to the Cross-Triangle for me to ask you there. You can see the buildings, though, from here."

The stranger sprang up in quick interest. "You can? The Cross-Triangle Ranch?"

"Sure," the cowboy smiled and pointed into the distance. "Those red spots over there are the roofs. Jim Reid's place—the Pot-Hook-S—is just this side of the meadows, and a little to the south. The old Acton homestead—where I was born—is in that bunch of cottonwoods, across the wash from the Cross-Triangle."

But strive as he might the stranger's eyes could discern no sign of human habitation in those vast reaches that lay before him.

"If you are ever over that way, drop in," said Phil cordially. "Mr. Baldwin will be glad to meet you."

"Do you really mean that?" questioned the other doubtfully.

"We don't say such things in this country if we don't mean them, Stranger," was the cool retort.

"Of course, I beg your pardon, Mr. Acton," came the confused reply. "I should like to see the ranch. I may—I will—"

That is, if I—" He stopped as if not knowing how to finish, and with a gesture of hopelessness turned away to stand silently looking back toward the town, while his face was dark with painful memories, and his lips curved in that mirthless, self-mocking smile.

And Philip Acton, seeing, felt suddenly that he had rudely intruded upon the privacy of one who had sought the solitude of that lonely place to hide the hurt of some bitter experience. A certain native gentleness made the man of the ranges understand that this stranger was face to face with some crisis in his life—that he was passing through one of those trials through which a man must pass alone. Had it been possible the cowboy would have apologized. But that would have been an added unkindness. Lifting the reins and sitting erect in the saddle, he said indifferently, "Well, I must be moving. I take a short cut here. So long! Better make it on down to the goat ranch—it's not far."

He touched his horse with the spur and the animal sprang away.

"Good-bye!" called the stranger, and that wistful look was in his eyes as the rider swung his horse aside from the road, plunged down the mountain side, and dashed away through the brush and over the rocks with reckless speed. With a low exclamation of wondering admiration, the man climbed hastily to a higher point, and from there watched until horse and rider, taking a steeper declivity without checking their breakneck course, dropped from sight in a cloud of dust. The faint sound of the sliding rocks and gravel dislodged by the flying feet died away; the cloud of dust dissolved in the thin air. The stranger looked away into the

blue distance in another vain attempt to see the red spots that marked the Cross-Triangle Ranch.

Slowly the man returned to his seat on the rock. The long shadows of Granite Mountain crept out from the base of the cliffs farther and farther over the country below. The blue of the distant hills changed to mauve with deeper masses of purple in the shadows where the canyons are. The lonely figure on the summit of the Divide did not move.

The sun hid itself behind the line of mountains, and the blue of the sky in the west changed slowly to gold against which the peaks and domes and points were silhouetted as if cut by a graver's tool, and the bold cliffs and battlements of old Granite grew coldly gray in the gloom. As the night came on and the details of its structure were lost, the mountain, to the watching man on the Divide, assumed the appearance of a mighty fortress—a fortress, he thought, to which a generation of men might retreat from a civilization that threatened them with destruction; and once more the man faced back the way he had come.

The far-away cities were already in the blaze of their own artificial lights—lights valued not for their power to make men see, but for their power to dazzle, attract and intoxicate—lights that permitted no kindly dusk at eventide wherein a man might rest from his day's work—a quiet hour; lights that revealed squalid shame and tinsel show—lights that hid the stars. The man on the Divide lifted his face to the stars that now in the wide-arched sky were gathering in such unnumbered multitudes to keep their sentinel watch over the world below.