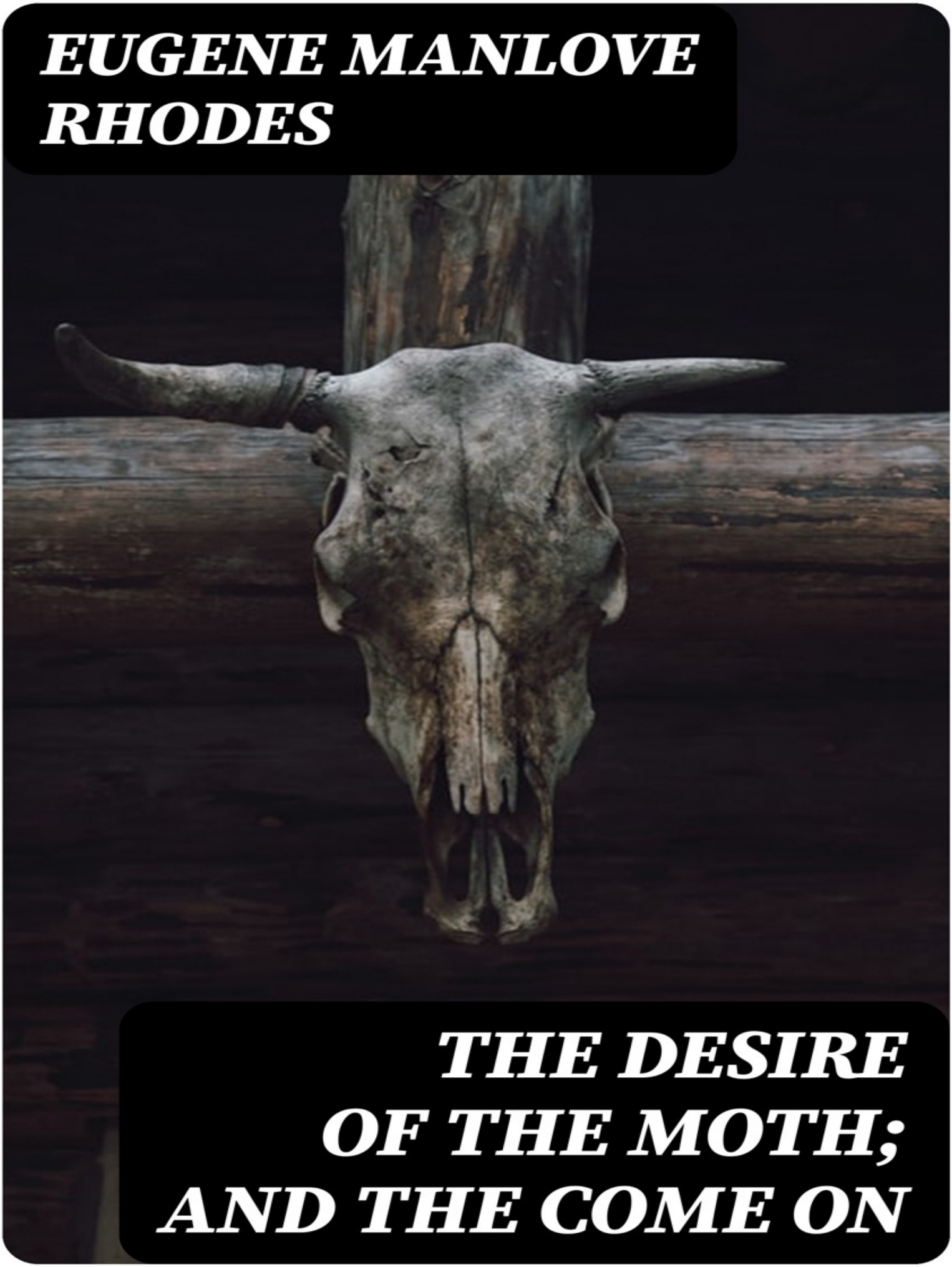
EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES
THE DESIRE OF THE MOTH; AND THE COME ON

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Chapter I

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"Little Next Door—her years are few—
Loves me, more than her elders do;
Says, my wrinkles become me so;
Marvels much at the tales I know.
Says, we shall marry when she is grown——"

The little happy song stopped short. John Wesley Pringle, at the mesa's last headland, drew rein to adjust his geography. This was new country to him.

Close behind, Organ Mountain flung up a fantasy of spires, needle-sharp and bare and golden. The long straight range—saw-toothed limestone save for this twenty-mile sheer upheaval of the Organ—stretched away to north and south against the unclouded sky, till distance turned the barren gray to blue-black, to blue, to misty haze; till the sharp, square-angled masses rounded to hillocks—to a blur—a wavy line—nothing.

More than a hundred miles to the north-west, two midget mountains wavered in the sky. John Wesley nodded at their unforgotten shapes and pieced this vast landscape to the patchwork map in his head. Those toy hills were San Mateo and Magdalena. Pringle had passed that way on a bygone year, headed east. He was going west, now.

"I'm too prosperous here," he had explained to Beebe and Ballinger, his partners on Rainbow. "I'm tedious to myself. Guess I'll take a *pasear* back to Prescott. Railroad? Who, me? Why, son, I like to travel when I go anywheres. Just starting and arriving don't delight me any. Besides, I don't know that strip along the border. I'll ride."

It was a tidy step to Prescott—say, as far as from Philadelphia to Savannah, or from Richmond to Augusta; but John Wesley had made many such rides in the Odyssey of his wonder years. Some of them had been made in haste. But there was no haste now. Sam Bass, his corn-fed sorrel, was hardly less sleek and sturdy than at the start, though a third of the way was behind him. Pringle rode by easy stages, and where he found himself pleased, there he tarried for a space.

With another friendly nod to the northward hills that marked a day of his past, Pringle turned his eyes to the westlands, outspread and vast before him. To his right the desert stretched away, a mighty plain dotted with low hills, rimmed with a curving, jagged range. Beyond that range was a nothingness, a hiatus that marked the sunken valley of the Rio Grande; beyond that, a headlong infinity of unknown ranges, tier on tier, yellow or brown or blue; broken, tumbled, huddled, scattered, with gulfs between to tell of unseen plains and hidden happy valleys—altogether giving an impression of rushing toward him, resistless, like the waves of a stormy sea.

At his feet the plain broke away sharply, in a series of steplike sandy benches, to where the Rio Grande bore quartering across the desert, turning to the Mexican sea;

the Mesilla Valley here, a slender ribbon of mossy green, broidered with loops of flashing river—a ribbon six miles by forty, orchard, woodland, and green field, greener for the desolate gray desert beyond and the yellow hills of sand edging the valley floor. Below him Las Uvas, chief town of the valley, lay basking in the sun, tiny square and street bordered with greenery: its domino houses white-walled in the sun, with larger splashes of red from courthouse or church or school.

Far on the westering desert, beyond the valley, Pringle saw a white feather of smoke from a toiling train; beyond that a twisting gap in the blue of the westmost range.

"That's our road." He lifted his bridle rein. "Amble along, Sam!"

To that amble he crooned to himself, pleasantly, half-dreamily—as if he voiced indirectly some inner thought—quaint snatches of old song:

"She came to the gate and she peeped in—
Grass and the weeds up to her chin;
Said, 'A rake and a hoe and a fantail plow
Would suit you better than a wife just now.'"

And again:

"Schooldays are over now,
Lost all our bliss;
But love remembers yet
Quarrel and kiss.
Still, as in days of yore——"

Then, after a long silence, with a thoughtful earnestness that Rainbow would scarce have credited, he quoted a verse from what he was wont to call Billy Beebe's Bible:

"One Moment in Annihilation's waste,
One Moment of the Well of Life to taste—
The Stars are setting, and the Caravan
Starts for the Dawn of——Nothing. Oh, make haste!"

After late dinner at the Gadsden Purchase, Pringle had tidings of the Motion Picture Palace; and thither he bent his steps. He was late and the palace was a very small palace indeed; it was with difficulty that he spied in the semidarkness an empty seat in a side section. A fat lady and a fatter man, in the seats nearest the aisle, obligingly moved over rather than risk any attempt to squeeze by.

Beyond them, as he took the end seat, Pringle was dimly aware of a girl who looked at him rather attentively.

He turned his mind to the screen, where a natty and noble young man, with a chin, bit off his words distinctly and smote his extended palm with folded gloves to emphasize the remarks he was making to a far less natty man with black mustaches. John Wesley rightly concluded that this second man, who gnashed his teeth so convincingly, and at whom an incredibly beautiful young lady looked with haughty disdain, was the villain, and foiled.

The blond and shaven hero, with a magnificent gesture, motioned the villain to begone! That baffled person, after waiting long enough to register despair, spread his fingers across his brow and be-went; the hero turned, held out his arms; the scornful young beauty crept into them. Click! On the screen appeared a scroll:

Keep Your Seats. Two Minutes to Change
Reels.

The lights were turned on. Pringle looked at the crowd—girls, grandmas, mothers with their families, many boys, and few men; Americans, Mexicans, well-dressed folk and roughly dressed, all together. Many were leaving; among them Pringle's fat and obliging neighbors rose with a pleasant: "Excuse me, please!"

A stream of newcomers trickled in through the door. As Pringle sat down the lights were dimmed again. Simultaneously the girl he had noticed beyond the fat couple moved over to the seat next to his own. Pringle did not look at her; and a little later he felt a hand on his sleeve.

"Tut, tut!" said Pringle in a tolerant undertone. "Why, chicken, you're not trying to get gay with your old Uncle Dudley, are you?"

"John Wesley Pringle!" came the answer in a furious whisper, each indignant word a missile. "How dare you! How dare you speak to me like that?"

"What!" said Pringle, peering. "What! Stella Vorhis! I can hardly believe it!"

"But it's oh-so-true!" said Stella, rising. "Let's go—we can't talk here."

"That was one awful break I made. I most sincerely and humbly beg your pardon," Pringle said on the sidewalk.

Stella laughed.

"That's all right—I understand—forget it! You hadn't looked at me. But I knew you when you first came in—only I wasn't sure till the lights were turned on. Of course it would be great fun to tease you—pretend to be shocked and dreadfully angry, and all that—but I haven't got time. And oh, John Wesley, I'm so delighted to see you again! Let's go

over to the park. Not but what I was dreadfully angry, sure enough, until I had a second to think. Why don't you say you're glad to see me—after five years?"

"Stella! You know I am. Six years, please. But I thought you were still in Prescott?"

"We came here three years ago. Here's a bench. Now tell it to me!"

But Pringle stood beside and looked down at her without speech, with a smile unexpected from a face so lean, so brown, so year-bitten and iron-hard—a smile which happily changed that face, and softened it.

The girl's eyes danced at him.

"I'm so glad you've come, John Wesley! Good old Wes!"

"So I am—both those little things. Six years!" he said slowly. "Dear me—dear both of us! That will make you twenty-five. You don't look a day over twenty-four! But you're still Stella Vorhis?"

She met his gaze gravely; then her lids drooped and a wave of red flushed her face.

"I am Stella Vorhis—yet."

"Meaning—for a little while yet?"

"Meaning, for a little while yet. That will come later, John Wesley. Oh, I'll tell you, but not just now. You tell about John Wesley, first—and remember, anything you say may be used against you. Where have you been? Were you dead? Why didn't you write? Has the world used you well? Sit down, Mr. John Wesley Also-Ran Pringle, and give an account of yourself!"

He sat beside her: she laid her hand across his gnarled brown fingers with an unconscious caress.

"It's good to see you, old-timer! Begin now—I, John Wesley Pringle, am come from going to and fro upon the earth and from walking up and down in it. But I didn't ask you where you were living. Perhaps you have a—home of your own now."

John Wesley firmly lifted her slim fingers from his hand and as firmly deposited them in her lap.

"Kindly keep your hands to yourself, young woman," he said with stately dignity.

"Here is an exact account of all my time since I saw you: I have been hungry, thirsty, sleepy, tired. To remedy these evils, upon expert advice I have eaten, drunk, slept, and rested. I have worked and played, been dull and gay, busy and idle, foolish and unwise. That's all. Oh, yes—I'm living in Rainbow Mountain; cattle. Two pardners—nice boys but educated. Had another one; he's married now, poor dear—and just as happy as if he had some sense."

"You're not?"

"Not what—happy or married?"

"Married, silly!"

"And I'm not. Now it's your turn. Where do you live? Here in town?"

"Oh, no. Dad's got a farm twenty miles up the river and a ranch out on the flat. I just came down on the morning train to do a little shopping and go back on the four-forty-eight—and I'll have to be starting soon. You'll walk down to the station with me?"

"But the sad story of your life?" objected Pringle.

"Oh, I'll tell you that by installments. You're to make us a long, long visit, you know—just as long as you can stay.

You're horseback, of course? Well, then, ride up to-night. Ask for Aden Station. We live just beyond there."

"But the Major was a very hostile major when I saw him last."

"Oh, father's got all over that. He hadn't heard your side of it then.
He often speaks of you now and he'll be glad to see you."

"To-morrow, then. My horse is tired—I'll stay here to-night."

"You'll find dad changed," said the girl. "This is the first time in his life he has ever been at ease about money matters. He's really quite well-to-do."

"That's good. I'm doing well in that line too. I forgot to tell you." There was no elation in his voice; he looked back with a pang to the bold and splendid years of their poverty. "Then the Major will quit wandering round like a lost cat, won't he?"

"I think he likes it here—only for the crazy-mad political feeling; and I think he's settled down for good."

"High time, I think, at his age."

"You needn't talk! Dad's only ten years older than you are." She leaned her cheek on her hand, she brushed back a little stray tendril of midnight hair from her dark eyes, and considered him thoughtfully. "Why, John Wesley, I've known you nearly all my life and you don't look much older now than when I first saw you."

"That was in Virginia City. You were just six years old and your pony ran away with you. We were great old chums for a month or so. The next time I saw you was—"

"At Bakersfield—at mother's funeral," said the girl softly. "Then you came to Prescott, and you had lost your thumb in the meantime; and I was Little Next Door to you—"

"And Prescott and me, we agreed it was best for both of us that I should go away."

"Yes; and when you came back you were going to stay. Why didn't you stay, John Wesley?"

"I think," said Pringle reflectively, "that I have forgotten that."

"Do you know, John Wesley, I have never been back to any place we have left once? And of all the people I have ever known, you are the only one I have ever lost track of and found again. And you're always just the same old John Wesley; always gay and cheerful; nearly always in trouble; always strong and resourceful—"

"How true!" said Pringle. "Yes, yes; go on!"

"Well, you are! And you're so—so reliable; like Faithful John in the fairy story. You're different from anyone else I know. You're a good boy; when you are grown up you shall have a yoke of oxen, over and above your wages."

"This is very gratifying indeed," observed Pringle. "But—a sweetly solemn thought comes to me. You were going to tell me about another boy—the onliest little boy?"

"He's not a boy," said Stella, flushing hotly. "He's a man—a man's man. You'll like him, John Wesley—he's just your kind. I'm not going to tell you. You'll see him at our house, with the others. And he'll be the very one you'd pick out for me yourself. Of course you'll want to tease me by pretending to guess someone else; but you'll know which one he is, without me telling you. He stands out apart from

all other men in every way. Come on, John Wesley—it's time to go down to the station."

Pringle caught step with her.

"And how long—if a reliable old faithful John may ask—before you become Stella Some-One-Else?"

"At Christmas. And I am a very lucky girl, John. What an absurd convention it is that people are never supposed to congratulate the girl—as if no man was ever worth having! Silly, isn't it?"

"Very silly. But then, it's a silly world."

"A delightful world," said Stella, her eyes sparkling. "You don't know how happy I am. Or perhaps you do know. Tell me honestly, did you ever l—like anyone, this way?"

"I refuse to answer, by advice of counsel," said John Wesley. "I'll say this much, though. X marks no spot where any Annie Laurie gave me her promise true."

When the train had gone John Wesley wandered disconsolately back to his hotel and rested his elbows on the bar. The white-aproned attendant hastened to serve him.

"What will it be, sir?"

"Give me a gin pitfall," said John Wesley.

Chapter II

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"Cold feet?"

"Horrible!" said Anastacio.

Matthew Lisner, sheriff of Dona Ana, bent a hard eye on his subordinate.

"It's got to be done," he urged. "To elect our ticket we must have all the respectable and responsible people of the valley. If we can provoke Foy into an outbreak——"

"Not we—you," corrected Anastacio. "Myself, I do not feel provoking."

"Are you going to lay down on me?"

"If you care to put it that way—yes. Kit Foy is just the man to leave alone."

"Now, listen!" said the sheriff impatiently. "Half the valley is owned by newcomers, men of substance, who, with the votes they influence or control, will decide the election. Foy is half a hero with them, because of these vague old stories. But let him be stirred up to violence now and you'll see! They won't see any romance in it—just an open outrage; they will flock to us to the last man. Ours is the party of law and order—"

"Law *to* order, some say."

The veins swelled in the sheriff's heavy face and thick neck; he regarded his deputy darkly.

"That comes well from you, Barela! Don't you see, with the law on our side all these men of substance will be with us unconditionally? I tell you, Christopher Foy is the brains of his party. Once he is discredited—"

"And I tell you that I am the brains of your party and I'll have nothing to do with your fine plan. 'Tis an old stratagem to call oppression, law, and resistance to oppression, lawlessness. You tried just that in ninety-six, didn't you? And I never could hear that our side had any the best of it or that the good name of Dona Ana was in any way bettered by our wars. Come, Mr. Lisner—the Kingdom of Lady Ann has been quiet now for nearly eight years. Let us leave it so. For myself, the last row brought me reputation and place, made me chief deputy under two sheriffs—so I need have the less hesitation in setting forth my passionate preference for peace."

"You have as much to gain as I have," growled the sheriff. "Besides your own cinch, you have one of your *gente* for deputy in every precinct in the county."

"Exactly! And if we have wars again, who but the Barelas would bear the brunt? No, no, Mr. Matt Lisner; while I may be a merely ornamental chief deputy, it will never be denied that I am a very careful chief to my *gente*. Be sure that I shall think more than once or twice before I set a man of my men at a useless hazard to pleasure you—or to reëlect you."

"You speak plainly."

"I intend to. I speak for three hundred—and we vote solid. Make no mistake, Mr. Lisner. You need me in your