

WHEN A MAN'S A MAN



CHAPTER I AFTER THE CELEBRATION

THERE 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 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 has 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

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 a 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 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 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 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 by the gravel 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 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 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 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 will 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 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 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—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.