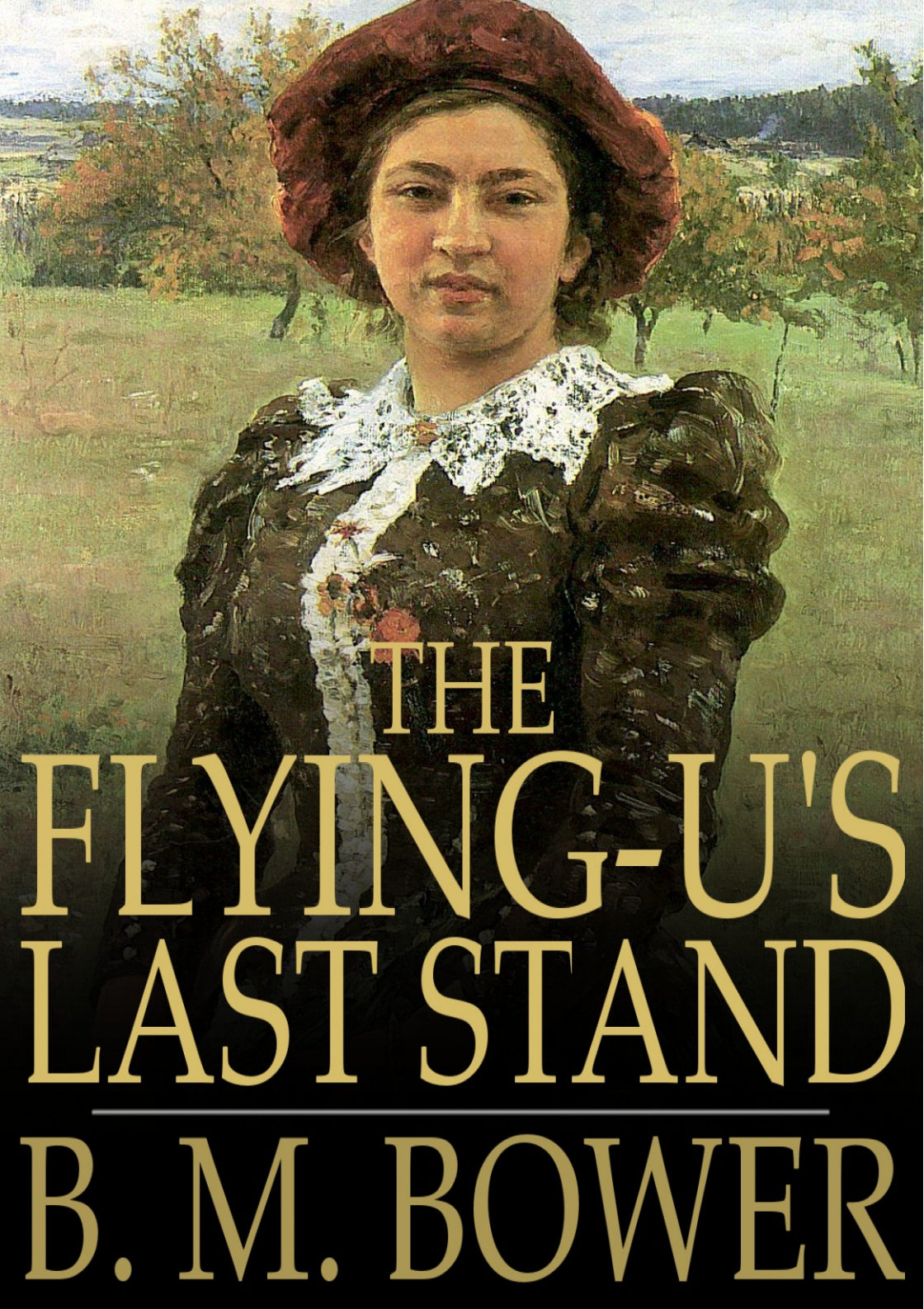




THE
FLYING-U'S
LAST STAND

B. M. BOWER

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THE FLOATING PRESS

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Chapter 1 - Old Ways and New

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Progress is like the insidious change from youth to old age, except that progress does not mean decay. The change that is almost imperceptible and yet inexorable is much the same, however. You will see a community apparently changeless as the years pass by; and yet, when the years have gone and you look back, there has been a change. It is not the same. It never will be the same. It can pass through further change, but it cannot go back. Men look back sick sometimes with longing for the things that were and that can be no more; they live the old days in memory—but try as they will they may not go back. With intelligent, persistent effort they may retard further change considerably, but that is the most that they can hope to do. Civilization and Time will continue the march in spite of all that man may do.

That is the way it was with the Flying U. Old J. G. Whitmore fought doggedly against the changing conditions—and he fought intelligently and well. When he saw the range dwindling and the way to the watering places barred against his cattle with long stretches of barbed wire, he sent his herds deeper into the Badlands to seek what grazing was in the hidden, little valleys and the deep, sequestered canyons. He cut more hay for winter feeding, and he sowed his meadows to alfalfa that he might increase the crops. He shipped old cows and dry cows with his fat steers in the fall, and he bettered the blood of his herds and raised bigger cattle. Therefore, if his cattle grew fewer in number, they improved in quality and prices went higher, so that the result was much the same.

It began to look, then, as though J. G. Whitmore was cunningly besting the situation, and was going to hold out indefinitely against the encroachments of civilization upon the old order of things on the range. And it had begun to look as though he was going to best Time at his own game, and refuse also to grow old; as though he would go on being the same pudgy, grizzled, humorously querulous Old Man beloved of his men, the Happy Family of the Flying U.

Sometimes, however, Time will fill a four-flush with the joker, and then laugh while he rakes in the chips. J. G. Whitmore had been going his way and refusing to grow old for a long time—and then an accident, which is Time's joker, turned the game against him. He stood for just a second too long on a crowded crossing in Chicago, hesitating between going forward or back. And that second gave Time a chance to play an accident. A big seven-passenger touring car mowed him down and left him in a heap for the ambulance from the nearest hospital to gather on its stretcher.

The Old Man did not die; he had lived long on the open range and he was pretty tough and hard to kill. He went back to his beloved Flying U, with a crutch to help him shuffle from bed to easy chair and back again.

The Little Doctor, who was his youngest sister, nursed him tirelessly; but it was long before there came a day when the Old Man gave his crutch to the Kid to use for a stick-horse, and walked through the living room and out upon the porch with the help of a cane and the solicitous arm of the Little Doctor, and with the Kid galloping gleefully before him on the crutch.

Later he discarded the help of somebody's arm, and hobbled down to the corral with the cane, and with the Kid still galloping before him on "Uncle Gee Gee's" crutch. He stood for some time leaning

against the corral watching some of the boys halter-breaking a horse that was later to be sold—when he was "broke gentle"—and then he hobbled back again, thankful for the soft comfort of his big chair.

That was well enough, as far as it went. The Flying U took it for granted that the Old Man was slowly returning to the old order of life, when rheumatism was his only foe and he could run things with his old energy and easy good management. But there never came a day when the Old Man gave his cane to the kid to play with. There never came a day when he was not thankful for the soft comfort of his chair. There never came a day when he was the same Old Man who joshed the boys and scolded them and threatened them. The day was always coming—of course!—when his back would quit aching if he walked to the stable and back without a long rest between, but it never actually arrived.

So, imperceptibly but surely, the Old Man began to grow old. The thin spot on top of his head grew shiny, so that the Kid noticed it and made blunt comments upon the subject. His rheumatism was not his worst foe, now. He had to pet his digestive apparatus and cut out strong coffee with three heaping teaspoons of sugar in each cup, because the Little Doctor told him his liver was torpid. He had to stop giving the Kid jolty rides on his knees,—but that was because the Kid was getting too big for baby play, the Old Man declared. The Kid was big enough to ride real horses, now, and he ought to be ashamed to ride knee-horses any more.

To two things the Old Man clung almost fiercely; the old regime of ranging his cattle at large and starting out the wagons in the spring just the same as if twenty-five men instead of twelve went with them; and the retention of the Happy Family on his payroll, just as if they were actually needed. If one of the boys left to try other

things and other fields, the Old Man considered him gone on a vacation and expected him back when spring roundup approached.

True, he was seldom disappointed in that. For the Happy Family looked upon the Flying U as home, and six months was about the limit for straying afar. Cowpunchers to the bone though they were, they bent backs over irrigating ditches and sweated in the hay fields just for the sake of staying together on the ranch. I cannot say that they did it uncomplainingly—for the bunk-house was saturated to the ridge-pole with their maledictions while they compared blistered hands and pitchfork callouses, and mourned the days that were gone; the days when they rode far and free and scorned any work that could not be done from the saddle. But they stayed, and they did the ranch work as well as the range work, which is the main point.

They became engaged to certain girls who filled their dreams and all their waking thoughts—but they never quite came to the point of marrying and going their way. Except Pink, who did marry impulsively and unwisely, and who suffered himself to be bullied and called Percy for seven months or so, and who balked at leaving the Flying U for the city and a vicarious existence in theaterdom, and so found himself free quite as suddenly as he had been tied.

They intended to marry and settle down—sometime. But there was always something in the way of carrying those intentions to fulfillment, so that eventually the majority of the Happy Family found themselves not even engaged, but drifting along toward permanent bachelorhood. Being of the optimistic type, however, they did not worry; Pink having set before them a fine example of the failure of marriage and having returned with manifest relief to the freedom of the bunk-house.

Chapter 2 - Andy Green's New Acquaintance

*

Andy Green, chief prevaricator of the Happy Family of the Flying U—and not ashamed of either title or connection—pushed his new Stetson back off his untanned forehead, attempted to negotiate the narrow passage into a Pullman sleeper with his suitcase swinging from his right hand, and butted into a woman who was just emerging from the dressing-room. He butted into her so emphatically that he was compelled to swing his left arm out very quickly, or see her go headlong into the window opposite; for a full-sized suitcase propelled forward by a muscular young man may prove a very efficient instrument of disaster, especially if it catches one just in the hollow back of the knee. The woman tottered and grasped Andy convulsively to save herself a fall, and so they stood blocking the passage until the porter arrived and took the suitcase from Andy with a tip-inviting deference.

Andy apologized profusely, with a quaint, cowpunchery phrasing that caused the woman to take a second look at him. And, since Andy Green would look good to any woman capable of recognizing—and appreciating—a real man when she saw him, she smiled and said it didn't matter in the least.

That was the beginning of the acquaintance. Andy took her by her plump, chiffon-veiled arm and piloted her to her seat, and he afterward tipped the porter generously and had his own belongings deposited in the section across the aisle. Then, with the guile of

a foreign diplomat, he betook himself to the smoking-room and stayed there for three quarters of an hour. He was not taking any particular risk of losing the opportunity of an unusually pleasant journey, for the dollar he had invested in the goodwill of the porter had yielded the information that the lady was going through to Great Falls. Since Andy had boarded the train at Harlem there was plenty of time to kill between there and Dry Lake, which was his destination.

The lady smiled at him rememberingly when finally he seated himself across the aisle from her, and without any serious motive Andy smiled back. So presently they were exchanging remarks about the journey. Later on, Andy went over and sat beside her and conversation began in earnest. Her name, it transpired, was Florence Grace Hallman. Andy read it engraved upon a card which added the information that she was engaged in the real estate business—or so the three or four words implied. "Homemakers' Syndicate, Minneapolis and St. Paul," said the card. Andy was visibly impressed thereby. He looked at her with swift appraisement and decided that she was "all to the good."

Florence Grace Hallman was tall and daintily muscular as to figure. Her hair was a light yellow—not quite the shade which peroxide gives, and therefore probably natural. Her eyes were brown, a shade too close together but cool and calm and calculating in their gaze, and her eyebrows slanted upward a bit at the outer ends and were as heavy as beauty permitted. Her lips were very red, and her chin was very firm. She looked the successful business woman to her fingertips, and she was eminently attractive for a woman of that self-assured type.

Andy was attractive also, in a purely Western way. His gray eyes were deceptively candid and his voice was pleasant with a little, humorous drawl that matched well the quirk of his lips when he

talked. He was headed for home—which was the Flying U—sober and sunny and with enough money to see him through. He told Florence Hallman his name, and said that he lived "up the road a ways" without being too definite. Florence Hallman lived in Minneapolis, she said; though she traveled most of the time, in the interests of her firm.

Yes, she liked the real estate business. One had a chance to see the world, and keep in touch with people and things. She liked the West especially well. Since her firm had taken up the homeseekers' line she spent most of her time in the West.

They had supper—she called it dinner, Andy observed—together, and Andy Green paid the check, which was not so small. It was after that, when they became more confidential, that Florence Hallman, with the egotism of the successful person who believes herself or himself to be of keen interest to the listener spoke in greater detail of her present mission.

Her firm's policy was, she said, to locate a large tract of government land somewhere, and then organize a homeseekers' colony, and settle the land-hungry upon the tract—at so much per hunger. She thought it a great scheme for both sides of the transaction. The men who wanted claims got them. The firm got the fee for showing them the land—and certain other perquisites at which she merely hinted.

She thought that Andy himself would be a success at the business. She was quick to form her opinions of people whom she met, and she knew that Andy was just the man for such work. Andy, listening with his candid, gray eyes straying often to her face and dwelling there, modestly failed to agree with her. He did not know the first thing about the real estate business, he confessed, nor very

much about ranching. Oh, yes—he lived in this country, and he knew THAT pretty well, but—

"The point is right here," said Florence Grace Hallman, laying her pink fingertips upon his arm and glancing behind her to make sure that they were practically alone—their immediate neighbors being still in the diner. "I'm speaking merely upon impulse—which isn't a wise thing to do, ordinarily. But—well, your eyes vouch for you, Mr. Green, and we women are bound to act impulsively sometimes—or we wouldn't be women, would we?" She laughed—rather, she gave a little, infectious giggle, and took away her fingers, to the regret of Andy who liked the feel of them on his forearm.

"The point is here. I've recognized the fact, all along, that we need a man stationed right here, living in the country, who will meet prospective homesteaders and talk farming; keep up their enthusiasm; whip the doubters into line; talk climate and soil and the future of the country; look the part, you understand."

"So I look like a rube, do I?" Andy's lips quirked a half smile at her.

"No, of course you don't!" She laid her fingers on his sleeve again, which was what Andy wanted—what he had intended to bait her into doing; thereby proving that, in some respects at least, he amply justified Hiss Hallman in her snap judgment of him.

"Of course you don't look like a rube! I don't want you to. But you do look Western—because you are Western to the bone Besides, you look perfectly dependable. Nobody could look into your eyes and even think of doubting the truth of any statement you made to them." Andy snickered mentally at that though his eyes never lost their clear candor. "And," she concluded, "being a bona fide

resident of the country, your word would carry more weight than mine if I were to talk myself black in the face!"

"That's where you're dead wrong," Andy hastened to correct her.

"Well, you must let me have my own opinion, Mr. Green. You would be convincing enough, at any rate. You see, there is a certain per cent of—let us call it waste effort—in this colonization business. We have to reckon on a certain number of nibblers who won't bite"—Andy's honest, gray eyes widened a hair's breadth at the frankness of her language—"when they get out here. They swallow the folders we send out, but when they get out here and see the country, they can't see it as a rich farming district, and they won't invest. They go back home and knock, if they do anything.

"My idea is to stop that waste; to land every homeseeker that boards our excursion trains. And I believe the way to do that is to have the right kind of a man out here, steer the doubtfuls against him—and let his personality and his experience do the rest. They're hungry enough to come, you see; the thing is to keep them here. A man that lives right here, that has all the earmarks of the West, and is not known to be affiliated with our Syndicate (you could have rigs to hire, and drive the doubtfuls to the tract)—don't you see what an enormous advantage he'd have? The class I speak of are the suspicious ones—those who are from Missouri. They're inclined to want salt with what we say about the resources of the country. Even our chemical analysis of the soil, and weather bureau dope, don't go very far with those hicks. They want to talk with someone who has tried it, you see."

"I—see," said Andy thoughtfully, and his eyes narrowed a trifle. "On the square, Miss Hallman, what are the natural advantages out here—for farming? What line of talk do you give those come-ons?"

Miss Hallman laughed and made a very pretty gesture with her two ringed hands. "Whatever sounds the best to them," she said. "If they write and ask about spuds we come back with illustrated folders of potato crops and statistics of average yields and prices and all that. If it's dairy, we have dairy folders. And so on. It isn't any fraud—there ARE sections of the country that produce almost anything, from alfalfa to strawberries. You know that," she challenged.

"Sure. But I didn't know there was much tillable land left lying around loose," he ventured to say.

Again Miss Hallman made the pretty gesture, which might mean much or nothing. "There's plenty of land 'lying around loose,' as you call it. How do you know it won't produce, till it has been tried?"

"That's right," Andy assented uneasily. "If there's water to put on it—"

"And since there is the land, our business lies in getting people located on it. The towns and the railroads are back of us. That is, they look with favor upon bringing settlers into the country. It increases the business of the country—the traffic, the freights, the merchants' business, everything."

Andy puckered his eyebrows and looked out of the window upon a great stretch of open, rolling prairie, clothed sparsely in grass that was showing faint green in the hollows, and with no water for miles—as he knew well—except for the rivers that hurried through narrow bottom lands guarded by high bluffs that were for the most part barren. The land was there, all right. But—

"What I can't see," he observed after a minute during which Miss Florence Hallman studied his averted face, "what I can't see is, where do the settlers get off at?"

"At Easy street, if they're lucky enough," she told him lightly. "My business is to locate them on the land. Getting a living off it is THEIR business. And," she added defensively, "people do make a living on ranches out here."

"That's right," he agreed again—he was finding it very pleasant to agree with Florence Grace Hallman. "Mostly off stock, though."

"Yes, and we encourage our clients to bring out all the young stock they possibly can; young cows and horses and—all that sort of thing. There's quantities of open country around here, that even the most optimistic of homeseekers would never think of filing on. They can make out, all right, I guess. We certainly urge them strongly to bring stock with them. It's always been famous as a cattle country—that's one of our highest cards. We tell them—"

"How do you do that? Do you go right to them and TALK to them?"

"Yes, if they show a strong enough interest—and bank account. I follow up the best prospects and visit them in person. I've talked to fifty horny-handed he-men in the past month."

"Then I don't see what you need of anyone to bring up the drag," Andy told her admiringly. "If you talk to 'em, there oughtn't be any drag!"

"Thank you for the implied compliment. But there IS a 'drag,' as you call it. There's going to be a big one, too, I'm afraid—when

they get out and see this tract we're going to work off this spring." She stopped and studied him as a chess player studies the board.

"I'm very much tempted to tell you something I shouldn't tell," she said at length, lowering her voice a little. "Remember, Andy Green was a very good looking man, and his eyes were remarkable for their clear, candid gaze straight into your own eyes. Even as keen a business woman as Florence Grace Hallman must be forgiven for being deceived by them. I'm tempted to tell you where this tract is. You may know it."

"You better not, unless you're willing to take a chance," he told her soberly. "If it looks too good, I'm liable to jump it myself."

Miss Hallman laughed and twisted her red lips at him in what might be construed as a flirtatious manner. She was really quite taken with Andy Green. "I'll take a chance. I don't think you'll jump it. Do you know anything about Dry Lake, up above Havre, toward Great Falls—and the country out east of there, towards the mountains?"

The fingers of Andy Green closed into his palms. His eyes, however, continued to look into hers with his most guileless expression.

"Y-es—that is, I've ridden over it," he acknowledged simply.

"Well—now this is a secret; at least we don't want those mossback ranchers in there to get hold of it too soon, though they couldn't really do anything, since it's all government land and the lease has only just run out. There's a high tract lying between the Bear Paws and—do you know where the Flying U ranch is?"

"About where it is—yes."

"Well, it's right up there on that plateau—bench, you call it out here. There are several thousand acres along in there that we're locating settlers on this spring. We're just waiting for the grass to get nice and green, and the prairie to get all covered with those blue, blue wind flowers, and the meadow larks to get busy with their nests, and then we're going to bring them out and—" She spread her hands again. It seemed a favorite gesture grown into a habit, and it surely was more eloquent than words. "These prairies will be a dream of beauty, in a little while," she said. "I'm to watch for the psychological time to bring out the seekers. And if I could just interest you, Mr. Green, to the extent of being somewhere around Dry Lake, with a good team that you will drive for hire and some samples of oats and dry-land spuds and stuff that you raised on your claim—" She eyed him sharply for one so endearingly feminine. "Would you do it? There'd be a salary, and besides that a commission on each doubter you landed. And I'd just love to have you for one of my assistants."

"It sure sounds good," Andy flirted with the proposition, and let his eyes soften appreciably to meet her last sentence and the tone in which she spoke it. "Do you think I could get by with the right line of talk with the doubters?"

"I think you could," she said, and in her voice there was a cooing note. "Study up a little on the right dope, and I think you could convince—even me."

"Could I?" Andy Green knew that cooing note, himself, and one a shade more provocative. "I wonder!"

A man came down the aisle at that moment, gave Andy a keen glance and went on with a cigar between his fingers. Andy scowled frankly, sighed and straightened his shoulders.

"That's what I call hard luck," he grumbled, "got to see that man before he gets off the train—and the h—worst of it is, I don't know just what station he'll get off at." He sighed again. "I've got a deal on," he told her confidentially, "that's sure going to keep me humping if I pull loose so as to go in with you. How long did you say?"

"Probably two weeks, the way spring is opening out here. I'd want you to get perfectly familiar with our policy and the details of our scheme before they land. I'd want you to be familiar with that tract and be able to show up its best points when you take seekers out there. You'd be so much better than one of our own men, who have the word 'agent' written all over them. You'll come back and—talk it over won't you?" For Andy was showing unmistakable symptoms of leaving her to follow the man.

"You KNOW it," he declared in a tone of "I won't sleep nights till this thing is settled—and settled right." He gave her a smile that rather dazzled the lady, got up with much reluctance and with a glance that had in it a certain element of longing went swaying down the aisle after the man who had preceded him.

Andy's business with the man consisted solely in mixing cigarette smoke with cigar smoke and of helping to stare moodily out of the window. Words there were none, save when Andy was proffered a match and muttered his thanks. The silent session lasted for half an hour. Then the man got up and went out, and the breath of Andy Green paused behind his nostrils until he saw that the man went only to the first section in the car and settled there behind a spread newspaper, invisible to Florence Grace Hallman unless she searched the car and peered over the top of the paper to see who was behind.

After that Andy Green continued to stare out of the window, seeing nothing of the scenery but the flicker of telegraph posts before his eyes that were visioning the future.

The Flying U ranch hemmed in by homesteaders from the East, he saw; homesteaders who were being urged to bring all the stock they could, and turn it loose upon the shrinking range. Homesteaders who would fence the country into squares, and tear up the grass and sow grain that might never bear a harvest. Homesteaders who would inevitably grow poorer upon the land that would suck their strength and all their little savings and turn them loose finally to forage a living where they might. Homesteaders who would ruin the land that ruined them.... It was not a pleasing picture, but it was more pleasing than the picture he saw of the Flying U after these human grass hoppers had settled there.

The range that fed the Flying U stock would feed no more and hide their ribs at shipping time. That he knew too well. Old J. G. Whitmore and Chip would have to sell out. And that was like death; indeed, it IS death of a sort, when one of the old outfits is wiped out of existence. It had happened before—happened too often to make pleasant memories for Andy Green, who could name outfit after outfit that had been forced out of business by the settling of the range land; who could name dozens of cattle brands once seen upon the range, and never glimpsed now from spring roundup until fall.

Must the Flying U brand disappear also? The good old Flying U, for whose existence the Old Man had fought and schemed since first was raised the cry that the old range was passing? The Flying U that had become a part of his life? Andy let his cigarette grow cold; he roused only to swear at the porter who entered with dust cloth and a deprecating grin.

After that, Andy thought of Florence Grace Hallman—and his eyes were not particularly sentimental. There was a hard line about his mouth also; though Florence Grace Hallman was but a pawn in the game, after all, and not personally guilty of half the deliberate crimes Andy laid upon her dimpled shoulders. With her it was pure, cold-blooded business, this luring of the land-hungry to a land whose fertility was at best problematical; who would, for a price, turn loose the victims of her greed to devastate what little grazing ground was left.

The train neared Havre. Andy roused himself, rang for the porter and sent him after his suitcase and coat. Then he sauntered down the aisle, stopped beside Florence Grace Hallman and smiled down at her with a gleam behind the clear candor of his eyes.

"Hard luck, lady," he murmured, leaning toward her. "I'm just simply loaded to the guards with responsibilities, and here's where I get off. But I'm sure glad I met yuh, and I'll certainly think day and night about you and—all you told me about. I'd like to get in on this land deal. Fact is, I'm going to make it my business to get in on it. Maybe my way of working won't suit you—but I'll sure work hard for any boss and do the best I know how."

"I think that will suit me," Miss Hallman assured him, and smiled unsuspectingly up into his eyes, which she thought she could read so easily. "When shall I see you again? Could you come to Great Falls in the next ten days? I shall be stopping at the Park. Or if you will leave me your address—"

"No use. I'll be on the move and a letter wouldn't get me. I'll see yuh later, anyway. I'm bound to. And when I do, we'll get down to cases. Good bye."

He was turning away when Miss Hallman put out a soft, jewelled hand. She thought it was diffidence that made Andy Green hesitate perceptibly before he took it. She thought it was simply a masculine shyness and confusion that made him clasp her fingers loosely and let them go on the instant. She did not see him rub his palm down the leg of his dark gray trousers as he walked down the aisle, and if she had she would not have seen any significance in the movement.

Andy Green did that again before he stepped off the train. For he felt that he had shaken hands with a traitor to himself and his outfit, and it went against the grain. That the traitor was a woman, and a charming woman at that, only intensified his resentment against her. A man can fight a man and keep his self respect; but a man does mortally dread being forced into a position where he must fight a woman.

Chapter 3 - The Kid Learns Some Things About Horses

*

The Kid—Chip's Kid and the Little Doctor's—was six years old and big for his age. Also he was a member in good standing of the Happy Family and he insisted upon being called Buck outside the house; within it the Little Doctor insisted even more strongly that he answer to the many endearing names she had invented for him, and to the more formal one of Claude, which really belonged to Daddy Chip.

Being six years old and big for his age, and being called Buck by his friends, the Happy Family, the Kid decided that he should have a man's-sized horse of his own, to feed and water and ride and proudly call his "string." Having settled that important point, he began to cast about him for a horse worthy his love and ownership, and speedily he decided that matter also.

Therefore, he ran bareheaded up to the blacksmith shop where Daddy Chip was hammering tunefully upon the anvil, and delivered his ultimatum from the door way.

"Silver's going to be my string, Daddy Chip, and I'm going to feed him myself and ride him myself and nobody else can touch him 'thout I say they can."

"Yes?" Chip squinted along a dully-glowing iron bar, laid it back upon the anvil and gave it another whack upon the side that still bulged a little.

"Yes, and I'm going to saddle him myself and everything. And I want you to get me some jingling silver spurs like Mig has got, with chains that hang away down and rattle when you walk." The Kid lifted one small foot and laid a grimy finger in front of his heel by way of illustration.

"Yes?" Chip's eyes twinkled briefly and immediately became intent upon his work.

"Yes, and Doctor Dell has got to let me sleep in the bunk-house with the rest of the fellers. And I ain't going to wear a nightie once more! I don't have to, do I, Daddy Chip? Not with lace on it. Happy Jack says I'm a girl long as I wear lace nighties, and I ain't a girl. Am I, Daddy Chip?"

"I should say not!" Chip testified emphatically, and carried the iron bar to the forge for further heating.

"I'm going on roundup too, tomorrow afternoon." The Kid's conception of time was extremely sketchy and had no connection whatever with the calendar. "I'm going to keep Silver in the little corral and let him sleep in the box stall where his leg got well that time he broke it. I 'member when he had a rag tied on it and teased for sugar. And the Countess has got to quit a kickin' every time I need sugar for my string. Ain't she, Daddy Chip? She's got to let us men alone or there'll be something doing!"

"I'd tell a man," said Chip inattentively, only half hearing the war-like declaration of his offspring—as is the way with busy fathers.

"I'm going to take a ride now on Silver. I guess I'll ride in to Dry Lake and get the mail—and I'm 'pletely outa the makings, too."

"Uh-hunh—a—what's that? You keep off Silver. He'll kick the daylight's out of you, Kid. Where's your hat? Didn't your mother tell you she'd tie a sunbonnet on you if you didn't keep your hat on? You better hike back and get it, young man, before she sees you."

The Kid stared mutinously from the doorway. "You said I could have Silver. What's the use of having a string if a feller can't ride it? And I CAN ride him, and he don't kick at all. I rode him just now, in the little pasture to see if I liked his gait better than the others. I rode Banjo first and I wouldn't own a thing like him, on a bet. Silver'll do me till I can get around to break a real one."

Chip's hand dropped from the bellows while he stared hard at the Kid. "Did you go down in the pasture and—Words failed him just then.

"I'd TELL a man I did!" the Kid retorted, with a perfect imitation of Chip's manner and tone when crossed. "I've been trying out all the darned benchest you've got—and there ain't a one I'd give a punched nickel for but Silver. I'd a rode Shootin' Star, only he wouldn't stand still so I could get onto him. Whoever broke him did a bum job. The horse I break will stand, or I'll know the reason why. Silver'll stand, all right. And I can guide him pretty well by slapping his neck. You did a pretty fair job when you broke Silver," the Kid informed his father patronizingly.

Chip said something which the Kid was not supposed to hear, and sat suddenly down upon the stone rim of the forge. It had never before occurred to Chip that his Kid was no longer a baby, but a most adventurous man-child who had lived all his life among men and whose mental development had more than kept pace with his

growing body. He had laughed with the others at the Kid's quaint precociousness of speech and at his frank worship of range men and range life. He had gone to some trouble to find a tractable Shetland pony the size of a burro, and had taught the Kid to ride, decorously and fully protected from accident.

He and the Little Doctor had been proud of the Kid's masculine traits as they manifested themselves in the management of that small specimen of horse flesh. That the Kid should have outgrown so quickly his content with Stubby seemed much more amazing than it really was. He eyed the Kid doubtfully for a minute, and then grinned.

"All that don't let you out on the hat question," he said, evading the real issue and laying stress upon the small matter of obedience, as is the exasperating habit of parents. "You don't see any of the bunch going around bareheaded. Only women and babies do that."

"The bunch goes bareheaded when they get their hats blowed off in the creek," the Kid pointed out unmoved. "I've seen you lose your hat mor'n once, old timer. That's nothing." He sent Chip a sudden, adorable smile which proclaimed him the child of his mother and which never failed to thrill Chip secretly,—it was so like the Little Doctor. "You lend me your hat for a while, dad," he said. "She never said what hat I had to wear, just so it's a hat. Honest to gran'ma, my hat's in the creek and I couldn't poke it out with a stick or anything. It sailed into the swimmin' hole. I was goin' to go after it," he explained further, "but—a snake was swimmin—and I hated to 'sturb him."

Chip drew a sharp breath and for one panicky moment considered imperative the hiring of a body-guard for his Kid.

"You keep out of the pasture, young man!" His tone was stern to match his perturbation. "And you leave Silver alone—"

The Kid did not wait for more. He lifted up his voice and wept in bitterness of spirit. Wept so that one could hear him a mile. Wept so that J. G. Whitmore reading the Great Falls Tribune on the porch, laid down his paper and asked the world at large what ailed that doggoned kid now.

"Dell, you better go see what's wrong," he called afterwards through the open door to the Little Doctor, who was examining a jar of germ cultures in her "office." "Chances is he's fallen off the stable or something—though he sounds more mad than hurt. If it wasn't for my doggoned back—"

The Little Doctor passed him hurriedly. When her man-child wept, it Needed no suggestion from J. G. or anyone else to send her flying to the rescue. So presently she arrived breathless at the blacksmith shop' and found Chip within, looking in urgent Need of reinforcements, and the Kid yelling ragefully beside the door and kicking the log wall with vicious boot-tees.

"Shut up now or I'll spank you!" Chip was saying desperately when his wife appeared. "I wish you'd take that Kid and tie him up, Dell," he added snappishly. "Here he's been riding all the horses in the little pasture—and taking a chance on breaking his neck! And he ain't satisfied with Stubby—he thinks he's entitled to Silver!"

"Well, why not? There, there, honey—men don't cry when things go wrong—"

"No—because they can take it out in cussing!" wailed the Kid. "I wouldn't cry either, if you'd let me swear all I want to!"