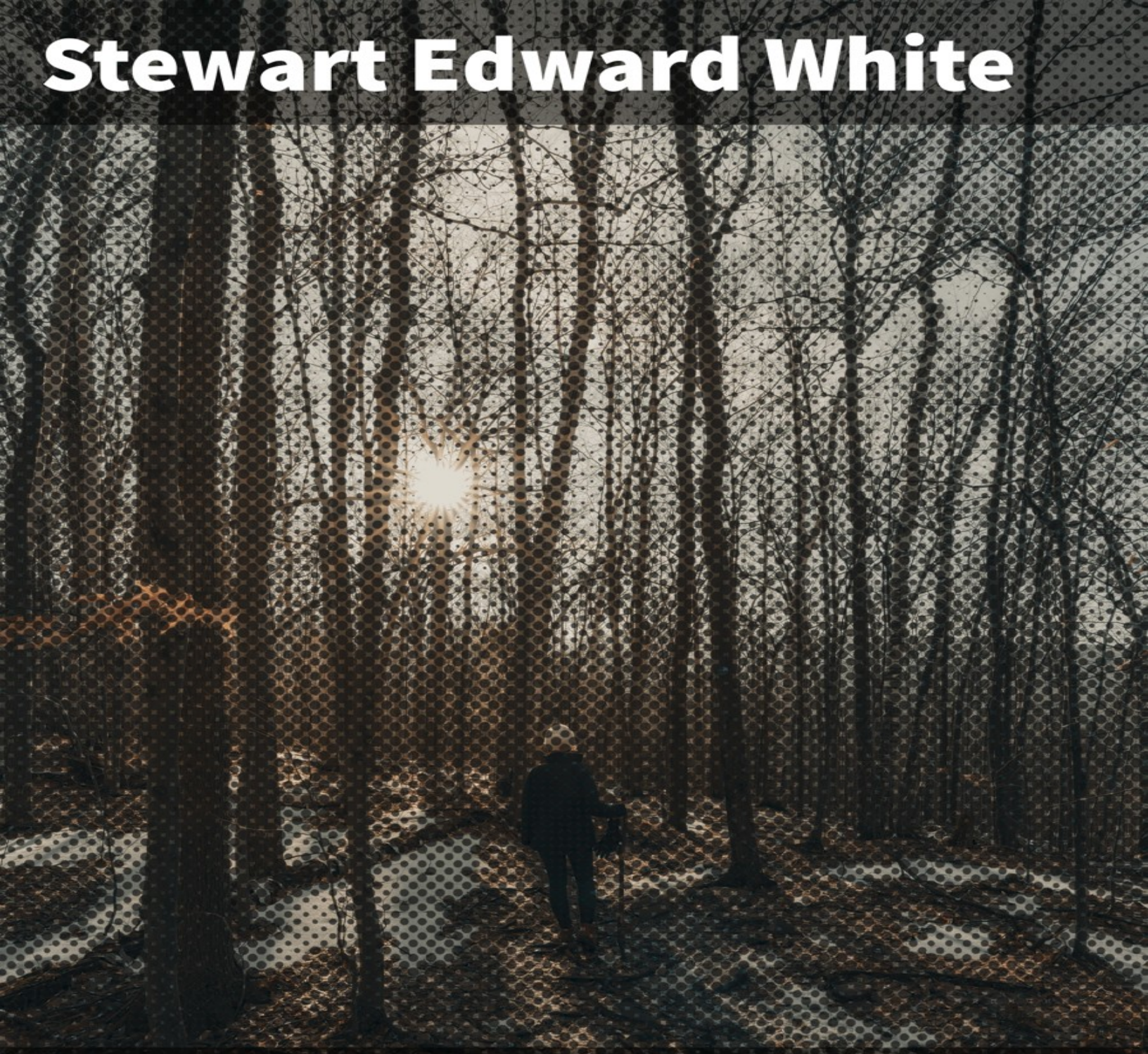
Stewart Edward White



Wild Geese Calling

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CHAPTER I

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BOY AND GIRL

IN THE remote hills of northern Scotland dwelt the clan of Murdock. Of it, one man, John, the generations bred to attunement, so that he, alone of all his people, felt and must respond to the first faint lift of the wave. Therefore, he took ship and sailed west, to better his condition, he thought and said, though his condition was well enough. He landed on the New England coast. There he hewed him a farm from the forest and married and prospered and in due time raised a family. He became a selectman, and afterwards an assemblyman in the legislature. He lived to a good old age, content with his establishment. This was in 1731.

To his numerous children he left a prosperous estate, but to one, Luke, he bequeathed, unknown to himself, also certain hormones, so that when, in the ’70s, the rhythm again surged westward Luke was borne on it over the Alleghanies with Boone into the Dark and Bloody Ground, to better his condition, he said, though his condition, too, was well enough to satisfy his brothers.

From his broad acres and the mansion he had built in the foundation of what was to be an ancestral home, set out another Luke, his son, with his bride, in a covered wagon following Marcus Whitman toward Oregon; and to them, on the journey, and in the covered wagon, a son was born who was named Marcus in the leader’s honor. Luke did not follow Whitman all the way, however. In his case the wave spent

itself near the Dalles, on the Columbia River; and there he took up land and raised a family. His wife died in the birth of the third boy John. When the latter had reached the age of twelve Luke was killed by a horse. He had bettered his condition precisely to the extent of three sod-and-wattle shacks, a well and windmill, a corral of greasewood, twenty horses and about six hundred cattle.

His personal accomplishment might have seemed small, but it was a far cry from the Highlands to the Dalles. And there was John.

John stayed with his two brothers on the ranch near the Dalles for three years after their father's death. Then he tied the roll of his slicker behind his cantle and rode away. He told the brothers he could not stand them any longer, bossing him around; but the impulse of his forthfaring was a deeper compulsion. Possibly the three felt this to be so, for at the last the parting was amicable. It was understood John's share in the patrimony would be intact for his return and claiming.

So he rode forth on his pinto, driving his remuda of four. His saddle, a rifle under his leg, a pair of slick-leather chaps, a pair of silver-inlaid spurs, a tall slender figure hard as steel wire, a contagious grin and a reckless flick of the eye were all his valuables. He had in addition a few perishables, such as his age of fifteen and the worn and bleached blue jeans he rode in and the modest blanket roll lashed athwart one of the spare horses.

He entertained no definite ideas, so he headed to the southeast, the ranch country of eastern Oregon. He got a job promptly enough, for he was well grown and strong, and

men were scarce. He rode boundary and chopped wood and peeled potatoes occasionally, when Wong the cook was pressed, and shod horses and pitched alfalfa hay and strung wire fence and drove chuck wagon. To all these things he was accustomed. He made good at them and at the scores of other jobs that would naturally be shunted toward a willing and handy boy of fifteen. Jim Carston wanted to keep him and offered him man's wages to stay. But something stronger than his liking for Jim Carston was lifting within him. He tied the roll of his slicker behind his cantle, waved his old Stetson, flashed his gay smile and rode away. He was richer by six months, by some added knowledge of how to do things, some friendly good wishes and a rather ancient forty-five-caliber frontier-model Colt revolver, astoundingly thrust upon him by Wong at the moment of departure. There was also the matter of a few dollars of wages.

For the next ten years John ranged the great basin between the Rockies and the Cascades, seeking, he told himself, to better his condition. He punched cattle as a cowboy; he peeled cayuses as a bronco buster; he acted as sportsmen's guide in the game country; he prospected with the desert rats, but half-heartedly, for this type of mania quickly wore thin for him; he took a look at the southern mines and shot deer for their commissary, which was well enough, for he liked hunting; he rode as express messenger atop a Concord coach with a sawed-off shotgun across his knees. He was good at all these things. But always, just as his condition looked well toward settled betterment, he rode on. Curiously enough the job that held him longest would seem to have the least adventurous appeal of the lot. In

western Washington he stayed for almost a year on a wheat farm. Here was something new to him—and to the country, for that matter. Its owner had progressive ideas and a little capital, and he had brought in the first harvesting machinery. John discovered an enormous aptitude for machinery. It fascinated him. He loved to run it and figure it out and repair it, make it obey. But it could not hold him.

“Reckon I’m just a bum, a rolling stone,” he laughed and rode away. Sometimes, on rare occasions, when he took more serious stock of himself, his conscience reproached him. Perhaps he was a bum, just a natural hobo. He would settle down. But deep within him he knew he would not settle down. He had to find something first.

In the spring of 1895 he imagined he had found it, or rather them, for the objects of his search must, it seemed, be two—a woman and a place in work that suited his whole desire. He had no ideals as to the one, or definite ideas as to the other, but he was certain he would know them when he saw them.

This proved to be the case. Riding early one morning into Siler’s Bend, near the Deschutes, he came upon the woman, seated under a cottonwood tree outside the little settlement. This was Sarah Slocum, spinster and orphan: age twenty, schoolteacher, native of Borland, which is west of the Cascades, reduced to penury by the decease of her father after a disastrous law suit, lineal descendant of Joshua Slocum, trader, immigrant of ’51, and therefore also possibly harboring in her life essence the genes and hormones of attunement to the racial urge of which we write. Of these statistics John Murdock remained ignorant

until much later. More pressing matters claimed his enterprise; and so masterfully did he press them, and perhaps so predestined were they to fulfillment, that he and the schoolteacher rode out from Siler's Bend that very afternoon as man and wife.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

He waved his hand toward the west.

"A place I been saving. I always meant to camp there, but I never got around to it. Now I know why." The copper bronze of his face deepened. He stared straight ahead. "There's a river," he chose his words at first a little awkwardly, "it comes out from underground full growed. Worth seeing. There's a lot of big ferns and those wide-leaf things that sort of hide the hole it comes out from, and all of a sudden there she is, wide and cold and full growed, a regular river, just like that! It's in a pine park, pretty high up in the foothills, so it's cool. And there's a lot of green feed and flowers and those birds that sing sort of solemn and slow, like bells. Hi you, Sukey! Git back there!" He slapped his quirt against heavy leather in admonition of the single pack horse. "There's trout there, too," he added.

They came to the park late in the afternoon. The tall pines stood about it, consulting in whispers. Azaleas and rhododendrons bordered the meadow. The stream was wide and shallow, with small deep pools behind boulders and rims of bracken and saxifrage and tufts of them here and there in the current, like little islands. The horses must be unpacked and off-saddled and belled and hobbled. John did this and set the saddles in a row along a brown log, as though it were a horse's back, and threw across them the

cinches and stirrups and then spread on top the coronas and the saddle blankets, after the cowboy’s neat fashion; after which he took the ax and departed. He made no comments on these activities; nor did he offer any suggestions to Sarah; but this omission was only, the latter sensed, because he assumed she must know what to do. Except in theory this was not the case. She emptied the kyacks of their contents and surveyed the provisions and utensils. Then she gathered some dry sticks and fallen rubbish for a fire and began to arrange them at the base of a boulder. She looked up at the sound of John Murdock’s laugh.

His back and shoulders were piled high with fir-balsam fronds. He looked like a walking green haystack.

“Aiming to smoke out a ground hog?” said John. He caught the expression in her eyes. “Reckon this is all new to you.” Mysteriously the green haystack swung from his shoulders to the ground and stood upright. John stretched his arms. “This party is on me,” said he. “You just sit and watch.”

“I’m so useless,” she lamented.

“Think so?” said John. That was all he said; but something in his manner of saying comforted her. She was content.

She arose to her feet.

“How in the world ... ?” She was curious about the fir-balsam fronds and their inexplicable cohesion and uprightness. Then she saw just the tip of the ax handle protruding from the center of the mass.

“Just lay them crisscross across the blade and keep on piling them up,” said John.

“But what holds them together? Why don’t they fall off?” she marveled.

“They just hold themselves. They don’t fall off.” He was tickled at her amazement over this simple commonplace. “That’s our bed. Where’d you wish it?”

“I—I don’t know.” Curiously the little park seemed to fall very still. The faint sweet tinkle of the horse bell and the sigh of wind high in the trees were only an embroidery on the texture of waiting silence. She turned her head slowly and looked wide eyed into his face, as though she were seeing it for the first time.

“There’s blankets enough for us both, if you want it that way.” His voice was gentle.

“No,” said she steadily.

He took her in his arms. Strangely, this was their first kiss. Events had, with them, moved too rapidly: the usual demonstrations were but just catching up. She raised her face simply and confidently. Their lips touched. She closed her eyes. And abruptly they were swept away, clinging to one another.

After a time they drew apart. John Murdock was bewildered and, at that moment, ashamed of himself. In John’s world girls were either “nice” or “easy.” This was not the way a man felt toward a “nice” girl. He had had his women here and there in the natural course of adventure; and he had learned to spot the “easy” ones; and the minute you found out they were “easy” the game was wide open, and you treated them in any way they would let you treat them. Some went farther than others, but the idea was the same, and they all played back. His desire had caught him

unaware: he had yielded blindly to its impulsion. And this girl he had brought with him from Siler's Bend to the park under the Cascades had played back. A little belatedly, perhaps, but ardently. Her lips had widened to the passion in his kiss, her body had met eagerly the pressure of his. What had he done! He stared at her appalled.

But she did not perceive his panic; nor would she have understood it.

"I did not know it was so beautiful to love," she breathed.

Her eyes were starry: and John again was ashamed—ashamed of that in him which had caused his first shame. And he felt suddenly very humble, and a little reverent, which was quite a new feeling for John Murdock.

They camped together for two magic, ecstatic weeks. Their life was simple enough. Sarah Murdock's trousseau consisted of just what she had, which had not overburdened Sukey when they left Siler's Bend. The groom's presents to the bride were two: a pair of soft-leather, high-heeled short boots, stitched in a bright pattern; and a light stock saddle, a Visalia tree with silver conchas, the most expensive in town.

They rarely stirred outside the tiny park. The enclosure of its great trees contained an all-sufficing world. There is much to be said for after-marriage courtship. John could not get used to the idea. His eyes followed her as she moved about.

"Dog *gone*!" he marveled, "it's always seemed kind of wonderful to me to own a live thing like a horse, but to own a *woman*—all by myself ..."

They caught their trout from behind the boulders, but the pool deepest and farthest downstream they kept for bathing. John had learned to swim in the Columbia, but Sally—she could not long remain Sarah—could only splash.

“Where would I learn to swim at Borland!” she cried indignantly. “You must teach me.”

She was from the first serenely unself-conscious. John secretly marveled and puzzled over the mystery of women, whose modesty seems to be an affair of the moment’s fashion, and whose giving carries wholeheartedly with it all the minor implications. In face of her matter-of-fact acceptance John actually felt an uneasy guilt that he could not so carelessly let fall tradition.

The afternoons passed quickly, for the ranges towered high to the west, and the sun must early touch their rims. From beneath the trees the shadows lengthened slowly, inch by inch. The shadows had chill fingers. They must dress, set about the necessary affairs of subsistence, postponed in deference to the day. It was the still time. The breeze had fallen. The pines held themselves straight and without movement in a compactness of silence. The birds drowsed. Even the heedless patter of the river seemed to have fallen in tone to a smooth, low muttering. And soon it was night.

One morning Sally was awakened by a touch on her shoulder. She opened her eyes sleepily and sat up in surprise and a little alarm. John was dressed and afoot. The hour was gray, the air chill, the tips of the pines as yet untouched by dawn.

“Time’s up,” said John briefly.

Sally had difficulty understanding. Yesterday had been like all the other yesterdays of this golden time. Now, it seemed, they had ended, suddenly, like that!

“We’ve got just about six days’ grub left,” John was telling her. “Way I figure it, that ought to get us quite a ways. Then I can rustle a job. Gosh,” he answered Sally, “got to go sometime. Can’t stay here forever!”

He grinned at her boyishly when she pleaded for another week, another day—it wouldn’t take long to ride down to Siler’s for more groceries——“Broke,” he interrupted. “No dinero.” His eyes wrinkled humorously as he caught her dismay. “Don’t worry, old lady,” said he, “we’ll eat.”

“I’m not worrying!” she retorted indignantly.

John had, it seemed, thought it all out. They were going north, into Washington State. Why there? Dunno: hunch: never been there. Anyway John was sick of twisting cows and wrangling tenderfeet and pounding alkali. And anyway that’s no life for a woman, and——

“Well, what is there different up in Washington State?” she wanted to know.

“It’s green,” said John. “I reckon this place has got me soft.”

Small indignations were belatedly stirring in Sally. John had no right—he hadn’t—he’d thought this all out and never said a word! And he was laughing at her! Her sense of bafflement focused on an irrelevancy.

“And you paid ninety-five dollars for *that*!” she cried.

He surveyed the beautiful silver-mounted saddle with complacency.

“Sure! That’s why we’re broke,” said he easily.

Then Sally noticed that the fire blazed, the breakfast was cooked; that the horses were up and tied to small trees: that, save for the saddling and packing, all was ready for departure.

“Come on!” cried John. “Rise and shine! We’re hitting the trail!”

He was vibrating, exultant. He had no backward glances for what was ended. He lifted to the future, the unknown.

Sally threw aside the blankets. She was bewildered, hurt, a little sullen. He might have consulted her. He might at least have talked it over! To spring it like this! And he seemed so wholly oblivious. She had been treated as a child! It was not fair! Sally really knew nothing of men.

The grub supply saw them well up along the mountains toward Seattle. They might have gone farther had John any money with which to buy horse feed. As it was, he must graze them. He rejected Sally’s suggestion that a trade-in of some of their superfluously fancy equipment—like the Visalia saddle—would put them in funds. He refused likewise to break the journey for any small-change jobs.

“Just delay us getting there,” said he.

“Getting where?” asked Sally.

“Where we’re going.”

“Where’s that?”

“I don’t know.” John laughed. He sobered a little at her expression. “No, I’m not fooling, honey. It’s a hunch. A real hunch has never failed me yet. I always play ’em.”

“That’s just superstition.”

“Oh, sure! Sure!”

A futile exasperation leaped within Sally at the facility of this concession. John invariably yielded to her opinions and rarely acted in accordance. As though opinion was not worth bothering about. He turned in his saddle to grin at her, and something leaped between them, something alive and warm and tender, as palpably real a substance as—as a hunch, flashed Sally humorously to herself and felt better.

On the sixth day they struck a wagon road that led up the mountain and followed it and so came at sundown to a sawmill and a dozen or so buildings of various sizes fashioned crudely from rough, unpainted lumber. The tall forest trees crowded close. Through them was a slant of sun. A pungency of dry pine needles and fresh lumber and old sawdust and hot tarweed hung in the air. No one was in sight. They might have thought the place deserted were it not for a clatter of dishes from one of the larger buildings.

John pulled up, hooked his leg over the pommel. Sally moved alongside him. She looked curiously about her, then up into John’s face. His eyes were veiled. He was not seeing. He seemed to Sally curiously withdrawn. Only his nostrils dilated, quivering delicately as a wild beast tests the breeze for subtleties of danger or peace. Illogically Sally’s paltry complacencies of education felt small. Here was a mysterious John to which humbly she must aspire. She did not know John. There were so many of him!

“Well, this is it!” John was saying. In his voice was an undertone of fulfillment.

CHAPTER II

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THE SHANTY

HERE, it would seem, John Murdock had found the second element of completion. He had now the woman and the sufficing outlet for his abilities and energies. He had arrived at the place where, like his forebears, he could give over following the restlessness in his blood, could settle down and in real fact better his condition.

For accomplishing the latter was here real opportunity. John's nature inclined toward the stretch of his muscles in the vigorous out of doors, toward a varied practical application of his excellent brains, and toward the intricacies of mechanics. Here was wide outlet for all three. To be sure, the outfit was small, but it did things in the then modern manner. Bull Kirby drove hard and took no nonsense, nor fraternized with anybody; but he was skilled at placing men where they belonged. He started John as wood monkey for the donkey engine and apparently paid him no more attention. But within a week he transferred him to the mill.

"How much do you know about machinery, anyway?" he asked.

"Not much. Just what I picked up here and there," said John. "I like it," he added.

Bull Kirby grunted. "Well, you let it alone until you do."

John flushed. So Bull had caught him running the donkey! A wood monkey has no business fooling with the donkey. But Bull had not called him down: he had put him in the mill.

The outfit was a modest one. It had just one circular saw and a trimmer. Old Paddock, with the assistance of a gangling moron of sixteen, ran the engine room. John and the others constituted the floor crew. Charley Matson was sawyer, in the upper dimness, silent, detached, remote, in the calm weary patience of a god, high on his carriage, his hands resting on the levers, until John and the others had rolled the log in place. It was dim and wide and cool in the mill. The great saw, revolving so rapidly that it seemed to be standing still, hummed in expectancy. Strange black-hooked hands shot up from the floor, hovered hesitantly above the prostrate log, gripped it in savage decision, half turned it one way, quarter turned it the other, altered its position yet a few inches more. They loosed their grasp, hovered for a moment as though to be sure of their satisfaction, then swiftly, silently vanished down into the limbo whence they had been evoked. Of these strange and formidable creatures Charley was the overlord through the little levers beneath his hand.

And then abruptly it seemed that half of the floor leaped without warning into full swift motion, carrying the log and, with it, Charley on his elevated platform. And the humming peace of the dimness was shattered by the saw’s wild shriek of exultance, and above the patient brown back of the log curved high a sawdust plume of triumph. As abruptly these things ceased. With a faint plop the detached slab fell on the moving rollers and was carried away. Like a ghost in silence the carriage shot back to position.

Next to Bull Kirby, Charley Matson was the most important man on the hill. His judgment, and his command

of the strange familiars that his touch summoned, determined how much and how little could be made of each individual cut; whether he should “set” for a two-inch clear or a two-by-four or a six-by-six or just the one-inch mill run. Each run of the carriage on which he stood meant a new calculation, a new decision. A single uncertainty of touch or judgment could spoil the work of many men. He only was responsible.

Ordinarily Charley would have had no other duties. But here, largely of his own choice, and after the day’s mill run was over, he saw to the comfort and well-being of his faithful djinns and daemons. He inspected and lubricated and tested the complicated mechanics that activated them; he filed and set the saws. Thus John was able to come into contact with him. And that is why, a month or so later, Charley Matson did a most unusual thing in expostulating to Bull Kirby when the latter ordered John out of the mill and into the woods.

“He’ll make a good mill man, give him time. He might even,” Charley went to the length of conceding, “make a sawyer. He’s a born mechanic.”

Bull Kirby grunted. He would not have explained himself to anybody else, but Charley was unique.

“I’ve a notion he may be a born lumberman,” he growled. “Only way to know is to find out.”

So John moved outdoors. It was not much of a mill; but it had seemed so to him. Likewise it was not much of a woods layout. They felled the trees by saw and by kerfs chopped from spring boards. They swamped and crosscut by hand. They yanked the logs out to arterial slideways either with

horses or donkey engines, according to circumstances. The slideways converged on the mill, and the logs were slid along them by a wire cable hauled over a drum and returned, through blocks suspended to poles planted alongside the slideway, to the big he-donkey that furnished the power. At the mill the logs were sawed about as fast as they could be delivered. The fresh lumber was at once freighted down the mountain in wagons drawn by six, eight, ten mules, and the driver sitting asaddle of one of them, dim in the dust. There were no skidways, no drying yards, no flumes, no booming ponds, few of the customary facilities even of that time. But its lacks measured the strength of its challenge.

The men of the various crews slept in a two-story dormitory and ate at three oilcloth-covered tables running the full length of the cookhouse. Bull Kirby had a dog kennel of his own containing a bunk, a table and two chairs. He washed outside in a tin basin. Charley Matson, the sawyer, Hugh Barkley, the bookkeeper, who also kept the company store, and old man Paddock, the engineer, shared a four-room shanty with a veranda, one of the houses built originally as married quarters. Of these there were half a dozen standing empty; and others, such as the scaler and the stable boss, would have rated separate quarters had they not preferred the vivacity of the bunk house. Indeed only one, other than the Murdocks', was occupied. Bull Kirby did not favor women about camp. Bull's experience with women was that they were pleasant but troublous. He had hired Mel Carter without knowing about Clara and had then kept him because he never went back on his word. Bull had

no excuse of ignorance in the case of Murdock: a woman obviously accompanied him, and a damn good-looking one, too. Caught him after supper when he felt good natured.

John and Sally were given free pick of the empty shanties. These were all exactly alike: narrow veranda, three rooms in an L so a rectangular roof would cover the whole, rough lumber throughout except for the floors, which were dressed smooth; large room backing the veranda, two smaller rooms filling the L, one with a stove-pipe hole as kitchen, one with a wide slatted bunk, built in, as sleeping quarters; off the kitchen an open lean-to with a rack at one end for the wood pile and a low wide shelf at the other for water pail, wash basin, laundry. Of furnishing there was little, and that home made.

To John there was not much choice, but Sally showed no hesitation. Her selection stood the last in the row, and an outcropping rock ledge had forced it just around the curve of the meadow so that it was to some degree separate. John was a little doubtful.

“Won’t be so funny when the rain sets in,” he pointed out. “Long way to the cookhouse, and the mud’ll be up to your neck.”

“You don’t think for a minute we’re going to eat at the cookhouse!” cried Sally.

“Why—everybody else does.”

“If,” stated Sally with decision, “we’re going to have a house of our own it’s going to be home, and we’re going to *live* in it.”

“This lumber jackin’ is hard work,” he objected. “I got to have good cooking to keep up my strength.”

“Well—of all the——” She caught on John’s face the wooden expression she had begun to suspect. She made a rush at him which he dodged.

“Be good girl,” he warned. “Papa spank!”

They came to this new home of theirs from opposite directions but with equal zest. To John it looked good and almost adequate just as it was. In the course of his wandering life John had learned to make himself comfortable, even luxurious, as he saw it, in many an old sod hut or line shack a heap smaller and dirtier and more scantily equipped than this. Needed a drastic cleaning, of course, it hadn’t been occupied for a long time. The rusty old iron stove in the kitchen looked all right. He’d swipe a stove pipe from one of the other empty houses, and maybe a few more chairs and things; if not, he could knock them together out of hours. The camping outfit had most necessities for cooking and such. Might be a few doo-dads to get. A coal-oil lamp would be nice. Nice to get a mattress for the bunk, if they had any at the store. If not, John could get a donkey’s breakfast from the stable boss and fix things up. At this point John’s imagination ran off the deep end. They were all comfortably settled.

“Anything you need you can get at the company store,” he told Sally, “or they’ll order it for you. They’ll charge it against wages.” His mind ran beyond these immediate considerations to concern itself with Sally. Suddenly he was troubled about Sally.

“Going to be kind of tough here for you, I’m afraid,” said he. “I don’t know what you’ll find to do. I could keep Pronto up. You might ride. How do you like Mis’ Carter? Looks like a

sort of nice little thing. Hope you and her—I have my job, of course, but you——”

He stopped. Sally stood squarely before him, her clenched hands on her hips.

“What’s the matter?” he interrupted himself.

“Of all the stupid, conceited speeches I ever listened to!” she cried. “You and your job! Just because you’ve camped out like a Siwash all your life! Look at this!” She reached up to seize his shoulders and slowly revolved him in a complete circle. “Well? Do you think I am going to live in *this*? Do you think I am going to let us live in this? Don’t you think we’re going to have a *home*, a real home? And don’t you think it’s a job, a real full-time job, to make this into a home? No, you don’t. You don’t even know what a home is. It’s *us*; us and something else. And that something else is my job. Dull! Why, I don’t believe I’m going to have enough time!” She gave his shoulders a little shake and dropped her hands. “You poor goop!” she laughed in his face. She stood on tiptoe to bestow a butterfly kiss. “You *do* need gentling! And that’s another full-time job!” she added.

Sally bought sparingly and improvised lavishly, measuring carefully her purchases against John’s wages. Hugh Barkley, the bookkeeper and storekeeper, proved a real help. He had suggestions to make out of his knowledge of stocks and prices, and he sent to the city for things he did not keep, to be brought up by the lumber wagons returning empty, and he charged against Sally at the wholesale-cost price. Barkley examined her sternly over the tops of his glasses when she expressed doubt of this arrangement.

“We don’t keep it in stock, so there’s no reason we should charge a profit on it,” said he.

The logic of this was obscure, but Sally accepted it with a thankful murmur. Her conscience was easily quieted on sixty dollars a month.

But slowly the bare shack was taking on character. The stained deal table had a top of blue-squared oilcloth. Sally’s half-dozen books she had packed from Siler’s Bend made as brave a show as they could on a shelf above the table. The shelf was Sally’s most heroic effort, for which she had appropriated the piece of dressed lumber and borrowed the tools. John laughed at it and made it over again. Spurred by derision, Sally next day put up another shelf, a long shelf high up, taking enormous pains and pounding cruelly her thumb. She held the thumb behind her while John that evening, his head appraisingly on one side, made his opinion.

“That’s a good job, Sally,” he had paid the compliment of a real inspection. “Plumb and true. Only thing you might do yet is to countersink the nails.”

“How do you do that?” asked Sally. She glowed within. She could not have stood it if John had tried to be funny.

“Where’s your hammer, and a big nail—a good big one.”

He showed her, holding the square end of the old-fashioned cut spike against the head of the nail and tapping the spike until the nail was well countersunk below the surface of the wood. “Now with a little putty and a piece of sandpaper and maybe some wood stain …” John was getting interested. “Here, you try it.” So he noticed the bruised thumb. “You got enough things to do without bunging

yourself all up!” he cried indignantly. “If you got any more things to make, you leave ’em for me.”

“But you’ve been working so hard all day,” objected Sally.

“Shucks,” John was scornful, “this ain’t work, it’s fun. What else you want done?”

Sally might do with another shelf or so in the kitchen. She showed John the place.

“What you want there is a cupboard,” decided John. “If I had a T-square and chisel and plane—say, where’d you dig up these tools, anyway?”

“Mr Barkley loaned them to me.”

“Well, you see if you can get him to let you have some more. I’ll pick up some good scrap iron at the mill.”

They returned to the main room, where John again admired the shelf. He reached up to run his hand over it, testing the surface dressing.

“Say,” he seemed surprised, “what you tack on this edging for? Expecting an earthquake?”

Sally hesitated.

“Well, I was going to have them all up, for a surprise. What do you mean, coming home so early? But come here.”

She led the way to the bedroom and threw back the old camp tarpaulin from a corner. It had concealed a set of blue and white china, a wonderful set. There were plates of three sizes and cups and saucers and four platters, and all were quaintly patterned alike with a willow tree and an arched bridge across a pond and a Chinaman about to cross the bridge and two great birds, one in the sky and one on the ground. She watched John with the pride of shining eyes.

John whistled. He was gratifyingly impressed. “Where in blazes did them come from?”

“The store. See!” Sally breathlessly scooped up a half dozen of the largest plates and flitted back to the large room. John, following, stopped in the doorway. Sally was standing tiptoe to reach the shelf, placing the plates one by one on edge, side by side, behind its shallow rails of edging. She could just make it, precariously. Sally looked mighty pretty that way, reaching up, thought John, and her dress straining against her that-away and her sleeves falling back. She had nice round arms. And when she looked over her shoulder at him, her cheeks all pink from reaching up ...

“You come here!” ordered John peremptorily.

She dropped to her heels and turned, a little startled by his tone.

“Come here!” he repeated. “Now turn round. Just as I thought,” said he; “funny I never noticed it before!”

She struggled to face him, but he held her tight.

“What *are* you talking about, you idiot!”

“Why,” said he, “standin’ straight and easy my chin is just an easy fit for the top of your head.” He leisurely disengaged one arm and tilted her chin. “I bet that’s so as to make it handy to kiss upside down. Say,” said he after the success of this experiment, “did anybody ever tell you that you’re mighty cute?”

Laughing, she twisted to free herself. “Did anybody ever tell you that you’re crazy? Let me go!”

“Nice crazy?” He squeezed her tighter. “Nice crazy?” he insisted. After a moment she nodded. “All right.” He opened his arms.

“You’re terrible,” she said without conviction. “There, don’t you think that looks nice? Help me put up the rest of them.”

“They look fine,” John agreed. They stepped back together when the row was completed.

“As soon as I can get some hooks we’ll hang the cups underneath. See, they just match the oilcloth.”

“Fine,” repeated John. “Do we eat off them, or are they just pictures?”

“Of course we eat off them!”

“Well,” said John placidly, “reckon then I’ll have to build you a stepladder.”

Sally’s eyes flashed, but she made no retort. Evidently what was bothering her had not yet occurred to John. She must justify her conscience.

“I got the whole set for five ninety-eight,” she said in a small voice.

“What!” cried John, aroused.

“I know it’s extravagant, and we need so many things, and there’s all the provisions to get yet, and——” The words poured from her with a rush.

But, it appeared, that was not John’s emotion.

“You mean to say all that for six dollars?” He shook his head. “Somebody’s crazy. Sure you understood right?”

“I know it sounds absurd,” she hurried on breathlessly, “but Mr Barkley said we might just as well have it. It’s no use to them. It was meant to sell to married hands, and then Mr Kirby decided not to have any more married hands, and they can’t use it in the cookhouse, and they’ve had it for

years, and Mr Barkley says he couldn't get much of anything for it if he sent it back——"

"Mr Barkley, Mr Barkley, Mr Barkley," John cut in. "Look here, young woman, I'm a nice easygoing cuss, and I like to live soft and easy and magnificent, but there's one thing I draw the line at." He eyed her severely. "I won't be no kept man."

She stared at him. And suddenly John threw himself into a chair and laughed and laughed and laughed. He tried to recover himself, dashed the tears from his eyes, was again overcome.

"If you could only see your face!" he gasped.

But Sally stood coldly waiting.

"I shall take the china back tomorrow," she told him when he had sobered.

Instantly John was on his feet. He tried to take her in his arms. She was rigid.

"Why, honey!" he cried all contrition, "you didn't think for one minute I meant——Why, honey, that funny little bald-headed coot——Of course I was fooling."

She shook her head obstinately. The plates were going back, the borrowed tools were going back, John could do his own buying at the store hereafter. She failed to see any joke in it. She was wholly unreasonable. She would not listen to John. And finally John began to warm a little into anger. Maybe it was a fool thing to say, he fumed to himself, but doggone it, he hadn't meant anything, and she ought to have sense enough to see it. He wanted to shake her into some sense. Damn the blue china! For one perilous moment

John was tempted to smash the blue china. Luckily that impulse passed. He was bewildered, disillusioned, resentful.

Then his eyes widened, and his mouth dropped. Sally was laughing. She laughed and laughed and laughed.

“You goop!” she choked at last. “‘That funny little bald-headed coot!’” she quoted. “But he’s nice,” she added in justice. She chortled again at John’s open mouth. He closed it, but he still looked crestfallen.

“Keno!” he gave in. Then he rallied. “But you are kind of cute,” said he.

Beside the blue plates Sally indulged also in another luxury. She bought some cheap gay-striped material and made curtains for the windows. Except for these two things, her purchases she kept within the bare necessities—and the sixty dollars a month. This was a matter of close figuring. Sixty dollars is not a great sum. The first month she must run over a little, but Barkley said that would be all right. It turned out there was a small rebate allowance if one did not eat at the cookhouse. That was a welcome help.

By now John had begun to be genuinely interested in the house.

“Well, what’s new?” was his first greeting when he returned from work. He must be shown the day’s accomplishment before he would begin to clean up. He marveled gratifyingly over the simplest things.

“Well now, what do you know! I’d never have thought of that!”

Particularly did he admire the bright curtains, once they were in place. Sally had mentioned curtains. What for curtains, John wanted to know. Keep people from looking in,

for one thing. Nobody, pointed out John, was going to climb way out in the middle of that wet meadow just to look in. He did not urge this as an objection, however, merely as the reasonable point of view. If Sally wanted curtains that was all right. When he saw them, in place, he was vastly pleased and surprised. John had thought of curtains as things that wound up on a spring roller. These were pretty!

But Sally would not permit him to linger too long. The table was set. “I’ve got a good dinner, and I don’t intend to let you spoil it,” said she.

At the cookhouse the triangle had already rung, and the men were filing in. They looked scrubbed and clean. As a matter of fact, each had merely plunged over-ears into the basin so his head was slick and shining. If John had been eating at the cookhouse he would have been already at table.

“I’ve been working hard, honey, I’m hungry,” he expostulated, “and honest, I’m perfectly clean—didn’t even sweat my shirt! See!”

“If you didn’t work hard enough to sweat your shirt you can’t be as hungry as all that,” said Sally with inexorable logic. “Shoo! Your clean shirt is all laid out. And don’t dawdle; we’ve got a pot roast.”

“Doggone schoolma’am!” accused John.

Sally chuckled. “Well, don’t act like a small boy.”

John retired in the direction of the lean-to back of the kitchen. Here was another of Sally’s simple contrivances. Somewhere she had found an old garden watering pot with which one could sprinkle oneself in a kind of shower. John would never have thought of that. His idea of a bath was to