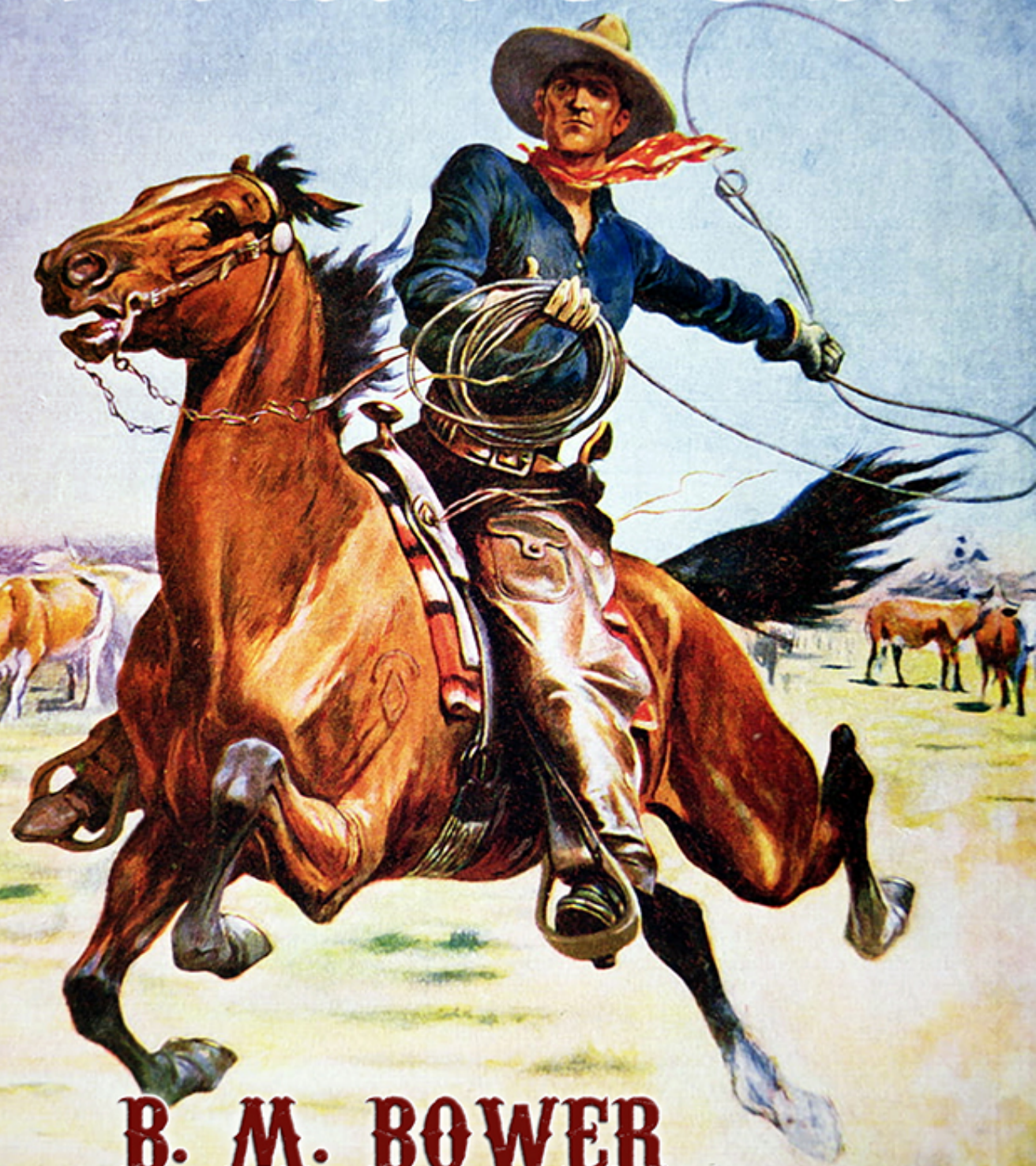


CLASSICS TO GO

SKYRIDER



B. M. BOWER

SKYRIDER

B. M. BOWER

CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER ONE--A POET WITHOUT HONOR</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWO--ONE FIGHT, TWO QUARRELS, AND A RIDDLE</u>	
<u>CHAPTER THREE--JOHNNY GOES GAILY ENOUGH TO SINKHOLE</u>	
<u>CHAPTER FOUR--A THING THAT SETS LIKE A HAWK</u>	
<u>CHAPTER FIVE--DESERT GLIMPSES</u>	
<u>CHAPTER SIX--SALVAGE</u>	
<u>CHAPTER SEVEN--FINDER, KEEPER</u>	
<u>CHAPTER EIGHT--OVER THE TELEPHONE</u>	
<u>CHAPTER NINE--A MIDNIGHT RIDE</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TEN--SIGNS, AND NO ONE TO READ THEM</u>	
<u>CHAPTER ELEVEN--THIEVES RIDE BOLDLY</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWELVE--JOHNNY'S AMAZING RUN OF LUCK STILL HOLDS ITS</u>	
<u>PACE</u>	
<u>CHAPTER THIRTEEN--MARY V CONFRONTS JOHNNY</u>	
<u>CHAPTER FOURTEEN--JOHNNY WOULD SERVE TWO MASTERS</u>	
<u>CHAPTER FIFTEEN--THE FIRE THAT MADE THE SMOKE</u>	
<u>CHAPTER SIXTEEN--LET'S GO</u>	
<u>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN--A RIDER OF THE SKY</u>	
<u>CHAPTER EIGHTEEN--FLYING COMES HIGH</u>	
<u>CHAPTER NINETEEN--"WE FLY SOUTH"</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY--MEN ARE STUPID</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE--MARY V WILL NOT BE BLUFFED</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO--LUCK TURNS TRAITOR</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE--DREAMS AND DARKNESS</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR--JOHNNY'S DILEMMA</u>	
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE--SKYRIDER "HAS FLEW"!</u>	

CHAPTER ONE

A POET WITHOUT HONOR

Before I die, I'll ride the sky;
I'll part the clouds like foam.
I'll brand each star with the Rolling R,
And lead the Great Bear home.

I'll circle Mars to beat the cars,
On Venus I will call.
If she greets me fair as I ride the air,
To meet her I will stall.

I'll circle high—as if passing by—
Then volplane, bank, and land.
Then if she'll smile I'll stop awhile,
And kiss her snow-white hand.

To toast her health and wish her wealth
I'll drink the Dipper dry.
Then say, "Hop in, and we'll take a spin,
For I'm a rider of the sky."

Through the clouds we'll float in my airplane boat—

Mary V flipped the rough paper over with so little tenderness that a corner tore in her fingers, but the next page was blank. She made a sound suspiciously like a snort, and threw the tablet down on the littered table of the bunk house. After all, what did she care where they floated—Venus and Johnny Jewel? Riding the sky with Venus when he knew very well that his place was out in the big corral, riding some of those broom-tail bronks that he was being

paid a salary—a *good* salary—for breaking! Mary V thought that her father ought to be told about the way Johnny was spending all his time—writing silly poetry about Venus. It was the first she had ever known about his being a poet. Though it was pretty punk, in Mary V's opinion. She was glad and thankful that Johnny had refrained from writing any such doggerel about *her*. That would have been perfectly intolerable. That he should write poetry at all was intolerable. The more she thought of it, the more intolerable it became.

Just for punishment, and as a subtle way of letting him know what she thought of him and his idiotic jingle, she picked up the tablet, found the pencil Johnny had used, and did a little poetizing herself. She could have rhymed it much better, of course, if she had condescended to give any thought whatever to the matter, which she did not. Condescension went far enough when she stooped to reprove the idiot by finishing the verse that he had failed to finish, because he had already overtaxed his poor little brain.

Stooping, then, to reprove, and flout, and ridicule, Mary V finished the verse so that it read thus:

"Through the clouds we'll float in my airplane boat—
For Venus I am truly sorry!
All the stars you sight, you witless wight,
You'll see when you and Venus light!
But then—I'm sure that I should worry!"

Mary V was tempted to write more. She rather fancied that term "witless wight" as applied to Johnny Jewel. It had a classical dignity which atoned for the slang made necessary by her instant need of a rhyme for sorry.

But there was the danger of being caught in the act by some meddlesome fellow who loved to come snooping

around where he had no business, so Mary V placed the tablet open on the table just as she had found it, and left the bunk house without deigning to fulfill the errand of mercy that had taken her there. Why should she trouble to sew the lining in a coat sleeve for a fellow who pined for a silly flirtation with Venus? Let Johnny Jewel paw and struggle to get into his coat. Better, let Venus sew that lining for him!

Mary V stopped halfway to the house, and hesitated. It had occurred to her that she might add another perfectly withering verse to that poem. It could start: "While sailing in my airplane boat, I'll ask Venus to mend my coat."

Mary V started back, searing couplets forming with incredible swiftness in her brain. How she would flay Johnny Jewel with the keen blade of her wit! If he thought he was the only person at the Rolling R ranch who could write poetry, it would be a real kindness to show him his mistake.

Just then Bud Norris and Bill Hayden came up from the corrals, heading straight for the bunk house. Mary V walked on, past the bunk house and across the narrow flat opposite the corrals and up on the first bench of the bluff that sheltered the ranch buildings from the worst of the desert winds. She did it very innocently, and as though she had never in her life had any thought of invading the squat, adobe building kept sacred to the leisure hours of the Rolling R boys.

There was a certain ledge where she had played when she was a child, and which she favored nowadays as a place to sit and look down upon the activities in the big corral—whenever activities were taking place therein—an interested spectator who was not suspected of being within hearing. As a matter of fact, Mary V could hear nearly everything that was said in that corral, if the wind was right. She could also see very well indeed, as the boys had learned to their cost

when their riding did not come quite up to the mark. She made for that ledge now.

She had no more than settled herself comfortably when Bud and Bill came cackling from the bunk house. A little chill of apprehension went up Mary V's spine and into the roots of her hair. She had not thought of the possibilities of that open tablet falling into other hands than Johnny Jewel's.

"Hyah! You gol-darn witless wight," bawled Bud Norris, and slapped Bill Hayden on the back and roared. "Hee-yah! Skyrider! When yo' all git done kissin' Venus's snow-white hand, come and listen at what's been wrote for yo' all by Mary V! Whoo-ee! Where's the Great Bear at that yo' all was goin' to lead home, Skyrider?" Then they laughed like two maniacs. Mary V gritted her teeth at them and wished aloud that she had her shotgun with her.

A youth, whose sagging chaps pulled in his waistline until he looked almost as slim as a girl, ceased dragging at the bridle reins of a balky bronk and glanced across the corral. His three companions were hurrying that way, lured by a paper which Bud was waving high above his head as he straddled the top rail of the fence.

"Johnny's a poet, and we didn't know it!" bawled Bud. "Listen here at what the witless wight's been a-writin'!" Then, seated upon the top rail and with his hat set far back on his head, Bud Norris began to declaim inexorably the first two verses, until the indignant author came over and interfered with voice and a vicious yank at Bud's foot, which brought that young man down forthwith.

"Aw, le' me alone while I read the rest! Honest, it's swell po'try, and I want the boys to hear it. Listen—get out, Johnny! '*I'll circle high as if passing by, then—v-o-l—then vollup, bank, an' land—*' Hold him off'n me, boys! This is rich

stuff I'm readin'! Hey, hold your hand over his mouth, why don't yuh, Aleck? Yo' all want to wait till I git to where—"

"I can't," wailed Aleck. "He bit me!"

"Well, take 'im down an' set on him, then. I tell yuh, boys, this is rich—"

"You give that back here, or I'll murder yuh!" a full-throated young voice cried hoarsely.

"Here, quit yore kickin'!" Bill admonished.

"Go on, Bud; the boys have got to hear it—it's *rich*!"

"Yeh—shut up, Johnny! Po'try is wrote to be read—go on, Bud. Start 'er over again. I never got to hear half of it on account of Johnny's cussin'. Go on—I got him chewin' on my hat now. Read 'er from the start-off."

"The best is yet to come," Bill gloated pantingly, while he held the author's legs much as he would hold down a yearling. "All set, Bud—let 'er go!"

Whereupon Bud cleared his throat and began again, rolling the words out sonorously, so that Mary V heard every word distinctly:

"'Before I die, I'll ride the sky;
I'll part the clouds like foam.
I'll brand each star with the Rolling R,
And lead the Great Bear home.'"

"Say, that's *swe//*!" a little fellow they called Curley interjected. "By gosh, that's darned good po'try! I never knowed Johnny could—"

He was frowned into silence by the reader, who went on exuberantly, the lines punctuated by profane gurgles from

the author.

"Now this here," Bud paused to explain, "was c'lab'rated on by Mary V. The first line was wrote by our 'steemed young friend an' skyrider poet, but the balance is in Mary V's handwritin'. And I claim she's some poet! Quit cussin' and listen, Johnny; yo' all never heard this 'un, and I'll gamble on it:

"Through the clouds we'll float in my airplane boat—' That, there's by Skyrider. And here Mary V finishes it up:

""For Venus I am truly sorry!
All the stars you sight, you witless wight,
You'll see when you and Venus light!
But then—I'm sure that I should worry!""

"I don't believe she ever wrote that!" Johnny struggled up to declare passionately. "You give that here, Bud Norris. Worry—sorry—they don't even rhyme!"

"Aw, ferget that stuff! Witless wight's all right, ain't it? I claim Mary V's some poetry writer. Don't you go actin' up jealous. She ain't got the jingle, mebbby, but she shore is there with the big idee."

"Drink the dipper dry"—that shore does hit me where I live!" cried little Curley. "Did you make it up outa yore own head, Johnny?"

"Naw. I made it up out of a spellin' book!" Johnny, being outnumbered five to one, decided to treat the whole matter with lofty unconcern. "Hand it over, Bud."

Bud did not want to hand it over. He had just discovered that he could sing it, which he proceeded to do to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" and the full capacity of his lungs. Bill and Aleck surged up to look over his shoulder and join their

efforts to his, and the half dozen horses held captive in that corral stampeded to a far corner and huddled there, shrinking at the uproar.

"And kiss 'er snow-white ha-a-and, and kiss 'er snow-white ha-and," howled the quartet inharmoniously, at least two of them off key; for Tex Martin had joined the concert and was performing with a bull bellow that could be heard across a section. Then Bud began suddenly to improvise, and his voice rose valiantly that his words might carry their meaning to the ears of Johnny Jewel, who had stalked back across the corral and was striving now to catch the horse he had let go, while his one champion, little Curley, shooed the animal into a corner for him.

"It would be grand to kiss her hand, her snow-white hand, if I had the sand!" Bud chanted vain-gloriously. "How's that, Sky rider? Ain't that purty fair po'try?"

"It don't fit into the tune with a cuss," Tex criticized jealously. "Pass over that po'try of Johnny's. Yo' all ain't needin' it—not if you aims to make up yore own words."

"C'm 'ere! You wall-eyed weiner-wurst!" Johnny harshly addressed the horse he was after. "You've got about as much brains as the rest of this outfit—and that's putting it strong! If I owned you—"

"I'd cir-cle high 's if pass-in' by, then vol-lup bank an' la-a-and," the voice of Tex roared out in a huge wave that drowned all other sounds, the voices of Bill, Aleck, and Bud trailing raucously after.

Johnny, goaded out of his lofty contempt of them, whirled suddenly and picked up a rock. Johnny could pitch a very fair ball for an amateur, and the rock went true without any frills or curving deception. It landed in the middle of Bud

Norris's back, and Bud's vocal efforts ended in a howl of pain.

"Serves you right, you devil!" Mary V commented unsympathetically from her perch on the ledge.

Three more rocks ended the concert abruptly and started something else. Curley had laughed hysterically until the four faced belligerently Johnny's bombardment and started for him. "Beat it, Johnny! Beat it!" cried Curley then, and made for the fence.

"I will like hell!" snarled Johnny, and gathered more rocks.

"Oh, Johnny! Sudden's comin'!" wailed Curley from the top rail. "Quit it, Johnny, or you'll git fired!"

"I don't give a damn if I do!" Johnny's full, young voice shouted ragefully. "It'll save me firing myself. Before I'll work with a bunch of yellow-bellied, pin-headed fools—" He threw a clod of dirt that caught Tex on the chin and filled his mouth so that he nearly choked, and a jagged pebble that hit Aleck just over the ear a glancing blow that sent him reeling. The third was aimed at Bill, but Bill ducked in time, and the rock went on over his head and very nearly laid out Mary V's father, he whom the boys called "Sudden" for some inexplicable reason.

Mary V's father dodged successfully the rock, saw a couple of sheets of paper lying on the ground, and methodically picked them up before he advanced to where his men were trying to appear very busy with the horses, or with their ropes, or with anything save what had held their attention just previous to his coming.

All save Johnny, who was too mad to care a rap what old Sudden Selmer thought of him or did to him. He went straight up to the boss.

"I'll thank you for that paper," he said hardily. "It's mine, and the boys have been acting the fool with it."

"Yeh? They have?" Selmer turned from the first page and read the second without any apparent emotion. "You write that?"

Johnny flushed. "Yes, sir, I did. Do you mind letting—"

"That what I heard them yawping here in the corral?" Selmer folded the paper with care, his fingers smoothing out the wrinkles and pausing to observe the place where Mary V had torn off a corner.

"Poets and song birds on the pay roll, eh? Thought I hired you boys to handle horses." Having folded the papers as though they were to be placed in an envelope, Sudden held the verses out to Johnny. "As riders," he observed judicially, "I know just about what you boys are worth to me. As poets and singers, I doubt whether the Rolling R can find use for you. What capacity do I find you in, Curley? Director of the orchestra, or umpire?"

Curley climbed shamefacedly off the fence and picked up his rope. The business of taming bronks was resumed in a dead silence broken only by the trampling of the horses and a muttered oath now and then. A lump over Aleck's ear was swelling so that the hair lifted there, and Bud limped and sent scowling glances at Johnny Jewel. Tex spat dirt off his tongue and scowled while he did it; indeed, no eyes save those of little Curley seemed able to look upon Johnny with a kindly light.

Mary V's father stood dispassionately watching them for five minutes or so before he turned back to the gate. Not once had he smiled or shown any emotion whatever. But he had a new story to tell his friends in the clubs of Tucson, Phoenix, Yuma, Los Angeles. And whenever he told it, Sudden Selmer

would repeat what he called *The Sky rider's Dream* from the first verse to Mary V's last—even unto Bud's improvisation. He would paint Johnny's bombardment of the choir practice until his audience could almost hear the thud of the rocks when they landed. He would describe the welt on Aleck's head, the exact shade of purple in Curley's face when his boss called him off the fence. He would not smile at all during the recital, but his audience would shout and splutter and roar, and when he paused as though the story was done, some one would be sure to demand more.

Then a little twitching smile would show at the corner of Sudden's lips, and he would drawl whimsically: "Those boys were so scared they never chirped when the poet actually went sky-riding to an altitude of about ten feet above the saddle horn, and lit on the back of his neck. Johnny's a good rider, too, but he was mad. He was so mad I don't believe he knows yet that he was piled. Afterwards? Oh, well, they came to along about supper time and yawped his poetry all over the place, I heard. But that was after I had left the ranch."

There were a few details which Sudden, being only human, could not possibly give his friends. He could not know that Mary V went back down the hill, sneaked into the bunk house and got Johnny's coat, and sewed the sleeve lining in very neatly, and took the coat back without being seen. Nor did he know that she violently regretted the deed of kindness, when she discovered that Johnny remained perfectly unconscious of the fact that his coat sleeve no longer troubled him.

CHAPTER TWO

ONE FIGHT, TWO QUARRELS, AND A RIDDLE

Rolling R ranch lies down near the border of Mexico—near as distances are counted in Arizona. Possibly a hawk could make it in one flight straight across that jagged, sandy, spiney waste of scenery which the chance traveler visions the moment you mention southern Arizona, but if you wanted to ride to the Border from the Rolling R corrals, you would find the trip a half-day proposition. As to the exact location, never mind about that.

The Selmer Stock Company had other ranches where they raised other animals, but the Rolling R raised horses almost exclusively, the few hundred head of cattle not being counted as a real ranch industry, but rather an incidental by-product. Rolling R Ranch was the place Sudden Selmer called home, although there was a bungalow out in the Wilshire District in Los Angeles about which Sudden would grumble when the tax notice came in his mail. There was a big touring car in the garage on the back of the lot, and there was a colored couple who lived in two rooms of the bungalow for sake of the fire insurance and as a precaution against thieves, and to keep the lawn watered and clipped and the dust off the furniture. They admitted that they had a snap, for they were seldom disturbed in their leisurely caretaking routine save in the winter. Even Mary V always tired of the place after a month or two in it, and would pack her trunk and "hit the trail" for the Rolling R.

Speaking of Mary V, you would know that a girl with modern upbringing lived a good deal at the ranch. You could tell by the low, green bungalow with wide, screened porches and

light cream trim, that was almost an exact reproduction of the bungalow in Los Angeles. A man and woman who have lived long together on a ranch like the Rolling R would have gone on living contentedly in the adobe house which was now abandoned to the sole occupancy of the boys. It is the young lady of the family who demands up-to-date housing.

So the bungalow stood there in the glaring sun, surrounded by a scrap of lawn which the Arizona winds whipped and buffeted with sand and wind all summer, and vines which the wind tousled into discouragement. And fifty yards away squatted the old adobe house in the sand, with a tree at each front corner and a narrow porch extending from one to the other.

Beyond the adobe, toward the sheltering bluff, a clutter of low sheds, round-pole corrals, a modern barn of fair size, and beside it a square corral of planks and stout, new posts, continued the tale of how progress was joggling the elbow of picturesqueness. Sudden's father had built the adobe and the oldest sheds and corrals, when he took all the land he could lawfully hold under government claims. Later he had bought more; and Sudden, growing up and falling heir to it all, had added tract after tract by purchase and lease and whatever other devices a good politician may be able to command.

Sudden's father had been a simple man, content to run his ranch along the lines of least resistance, and to take what prosperity came to him in the natural course of events. Sudden had organized a Company, had commercialized his legacy, had "married money," and had made money. Far to the north and to the east and west ran the lines of other great ranches, where sheep were handled in great, blatting bands and yielded a fortune in wool. There were hills where Selmer cattle were wild as deer—cattle that never heard the

whistle of a locomotive until they were trailed down to the railroad to market.

These made the money for Selmer and his Company. But it was the Rolling R, where the profits were smaller, that stood closest to Sudden's heart. There was not so much money in horses as there was in sheep; Sudden admitted it readily enough. But he hated sheep; hated the sound of them and the smell of them and the insipid, questioning faces of them. And he loved horses; loved the big-jointed, wobbly legged colts and the round-bodied, anxious mothers; loved the grade geldings and fillies and the registered stock that he kept close to home in fenced pastures; loved the broom-tail bronks that ranged far afield and came in a dust cloud moiling up from their staccato hoof beats, circled by hoarse, shouting riders seen vaguely through the cloud.

There was a thrill in watching a corral full of wild horses milling round and round, dodging the whispering ropes that writhed here and there overhead to settle and draw tight over some unlucky head. There was a thrill in the taming—more thrills than dollars, for until the war overseas brought eager buyers, the net profits of the horse ranch would scarcely have paid for Mary V's clothes and school and what she demurely set down as "recreation."

But Sudden loved it, and Mary V loved it, and Mary V's mother loved whatever they loved. So the Rolling R was home. And that is why the Rolling R boys looked upon Mary V with unglamoured eyes, being thoroughly accustomed to the sight of her and to the sharp tongue of her and to the frequent discomfort of having her about.

They liked her, of course. They would have fought for her if ever the need of fighting came, just as they would have fought for anything else in their outfit. But they took her very calmly and as a matter of course, and were not inclined

to that worshipful bearing which romancers would have us accept as the inevitable attitude of cowboys toward the daughter of the rancho.

Wherefore Johnny Jewel was not committing any heinous act of treason when he walked past Mary V with stiffened spine and head averted. Johnny was mad at the whole outfit, and that included Mary V. Indeed, his anger particularly included Mary V. A young man who has finished high school and one year at a university, and who reads technical books rather than fiction and has ambitions for something much higher than his present calling,—oh, very much higher!—would naturally object to being called a witless wight.

Johnny objected. He had cussed Aleck for repeating the epithet in the bunk house, and he had tried to lick Bud Norris, and had failed. He blamed Mary V for his skinned knuckles and the cut on his lip, and for all his other troubles. Johnny did not know about the coat, though he had it on; and if he had known, I doubt whether it would have softened his mood. He was a terribly incensed young man.

Mary V had let her steps lag a little, knowing that Johnny must overtake her presently unless he turned short around and went the other way, which would not be like Johnny. She had meant to say something that would lead the conversation gently toward the verses, and then she meant to say something else about the difficulty of making two lines rhyme, and the necessity of using perfectly idiotic words—such as wight. Mary V was disgusted with the boys for the way they had acted. She meant to tell Johnny that she thought his verses were very clever, and that she, too, was keen for flying. And would he like to borrow a late magazine she had in the house, that had an article about the growth of the "game"? Mary V did not know that she would have sounded rather patronizing. Her girl friends in Los Angeles had filled her head with romantic ideas about

cowboys, especially her father's cowboys. They had taken it so for granted that the Rolling R boys must simply worship the ground she walked on, that Mary V had unconsciously come to believe that adoration was her birthright.

And then Johnny stepped out of the trail and passed her as though she had been a cactus or a rock that he must walk around! Mary V went hot all over, with rage before her wits came back. Johnny had not gone ten feet ahead of her when she was humming softly to herself a little, old-fashioned tune. And the tune was "Auld Lang Syne."

Johnny whirled in the trail and faced her, hard-eyed.

"You're trying to play smart Aleck, too, are yuh?" he demanded. "Why don't yuh sing the words that's in your mind? Why don't you *try* to sing your own ideas of poetry? You know as much about writing poetry as I do about tatting! 'Worry!' 'surrey!' Or did you mean that it should be read 'wawry,' 'sorry'?"

A fine way to talk to the Flower of the Rancho! Mary V looked as though she wanted to slap Johnny Jewel's smooth, boyish face.

"Of course, you're qualified to teach me," she retorted. "Such doggerel! You ought to send it to the comic papers. Really, Mr. Jewel, I have read a good deal of amateurish, childish attempts at poetry—in the infant class at school. But never in all my life—"

"Oh, well, if you ever get out of the infant class, Miss Selmer, you may learn a few rudimentary rules of metrical composition. I apologize for criticising your efforts. It is not so bad—for infant class work." He said that, standing there in the very coat which she had mended for him!

Mary V turned white; also she wished that *she* had thought of mentioning the "rudimentary rules of metrical composition" instead of infant classes. She smiled as disagreeably as was possible to such humanly kissable lips as hers.

"No, is it?" she agreed sweetly. "Witless wight was rather good, I thought. Wight fits you so well."

"Oh, that!" Johnny turned defensively to a tolerant condescension. "That wasn't so bad, if it hadn't shown on the face of it that it was just dragged in to make a rhyme. Do you know what wight means, Miss Selmer?"

Mary V was inwardly shaken. She had always believed that wight was a synonym for dunce, but now that he put the question to her in that tone, she was not positive. Her angry eyes faltered a little.

"I see you don't—of course. Used as a noun—you know what a noun is, don't you? It means the name of anything. Wight means a person—any creature. Originally it meant a fairy, a supernatural being. As an adjective it means brave, valiant, strong or powerful. Or, it used to mean clever."

"Oh, *you*! I hate the sight of you, you great bully!" Mary V ducked past him and ran.

"I'll help you look it up in the dictionary if you don't know how," Johnny called after her maliciously, not at all minding the epithet she had hurled at him. He went on more cheerfully, telling himself unchivalrously that he had got Mary V's goat, all right. He began to whistle under his breath, until he discovered that he was whistling "Auld Lang Syne," and was mentally fitting to the tune the words: "*Before I die, I'll ride the sky. I'll part the clouds like foam!*"

He stopped whistling then, but the words went on repeating themselves over and over in his mind. "And by gosh, I will too," he stated defiantly. "I'll show 'em, the darned mutts! They can yawp and chortle and call me Sky rider as if it was a joke. That's as much as they know, the ignorant boobs. Why, they couldn't tell an aileron from an elevator if it was to save their lives!—and still they think I'm crazy and don't know anything. Why, darn 'em, they'll *pay money* some day to see me fly! Boy, I'd like to circle over this ranch at about three or four thousand feet, and then do a loop or two and volplane right down *at* 'em! Gosh, they'd be hunting holes to crawl into before I was through with 'em! I will, too—"

Johnny went off into a pet daydream and was almost happy for a little while. Some day the Rolling R boys would be telling with pride how they used to know Johnny Jewel, the wonderful birdman that had his picture in all the papers and was getting thousands of dollars for exhibition flights. Tex, Aleck, Bud, Bill—Mary V, too, gol darn her!—would go around bragging just because they used to know him! And right then he'd sure play even for some of the insults they were handing him now.

"Mary V Selmer? Let's see—the name sounds familiar, somehow. O-oh! You mean that little red-headed ranch girl from Arizona? Oh-h, yes! Well, give her a free pass—but I mustn't be bothered personally with her. The girl's all right, but no training, no manners. Hick stuff; no class, you understand. But give her a good seat, where she can view the getaway."

Tex, Aleck, Bud, and Bill—little Curley was all right; Curley could have a job as watchman at the hangar. But the rest of the bunch could goggle at him from a distance and be darned to them. Old Sudden too. He'd be kind of nice to old Sudden—nice in an offhand, indifferent kind of way. But

Mary V could get down on her *knees*, and he wouldn't be nice to her. He should say not!

So dreamed Johnny Jewel, all the way to the mail box out by the main road, and nearly all the way back again. But then his ears were assailed with lugubrious singing:

"An' dlead the Great Bear ho-o-ome,
An' dlead the Great Bear hoo-me,
I'll brand each star with the Rollin' R,
An-n dlead the Great Bear home!"

That was Bud's contribution.

"Aw, for gosh sake, *shut up!*" yelled Johnny, his temper rising again.

From the bungalow, when he passed it on his way to the bunk house, came the measured thump-thump of a piano playing the same old tune with a stress meant to mock him and madden him.

"Then if she'll smile I'll stop awhile,
And kiss her snow-white hand."

That was Mary V, singing at the top of her voice, and Johnny walked stiff-backed down the path. He wanted to turn and repeat to Mary V what he had shouted to Bud, but he refrained, though not from any chivalry, I am sorry to say. Johnny feared that it would be playing into her hand too much if he took that much notice of her. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing he heard her.

"It would be grand to kiss 'er hand,
Her-rr snow-white hand if I had the sand,"

Bud finished unctuously, adjusting the tune to fit the words.

Johnny swore, flung open the low door of the bunk house, went in, and slammed it shut after him, and began to pack his personal belongings. Presently Tex came in, warbling like a lovesick crow:

"I'll cir-cle high 's if pass-in' by,
Then vol-lup bank-an' la-a-and—"

"So will this la-and," Johnny said viciously and threw one of his new riding boots straight at the warbler. "For gosh sake, lay off that stuff!"

Tex caught the boot dexterously without interrupting his song, except that he forgot the words and sang ta-da-da-da to the end of the verse.

"Po'try was wrote to be read," he replied sententiously when he had finished. "And tunes was made to be sung. And yo' all oughta be proud to death at the way yo' all made a hit with yore po'try. It beats what Mary V wrote, Sky rider. If yo' all want to know my honest opinion, Mary V's plumb sore because yo' all made up po'try about Venus instid of about her." He sat down on a corner of the littered table and began to roll a cigarette, jerking his head towards the bungalow and lowering one eyelid slowly. "Girls, I'm plumb next to 'em, Sky rider. I growed up with four of 'em. Mary V loves that there Venus stuff, and kissin' her snow-white hand, same as a cat loves snow. Jealous—that's what's bitin' Mary V."

Johnny was sorting letters, mostly circulars and "follow up" letters from various aviation schools. He looked up suspiciously at Tex, but Tex manifested none of the symptoms of sly "kidding." Tex was smoking meditatively and gazing absently at Johnny's suitcase.

"Yo' all ain't quittin'?" Tex roused himself to ask. "Not over a little josh? Say, you're layin' yoreself wide open to more of the same. Yo' all wants to take it the way it's meant, Skyrider. Listen here, boy, if yo' all wants to git away from the ranch right now, why don't yo' all speak for to stay at Sinkhole camp? Yo' all could have mo' time to write po'try an' study up on flyin' machines, down there. And Pete, he's aimin' to quit the first. He don't like it down there."

Johnny dropped the letters back into his suitcase and sat down on the side of his bed to smoke. His was not the nature to hold a grudge, and Tex seemed to be friendly. Still, his youthful dignity had been very much hurt, and by Tex as much as the other boys. He gave him a supercilious glance.

"I don't know where you get the idea that I'm a quitter," he said pettishly. "First I knew that a bunch of rough-necks could kid me out of a job. Go down to Sinkhole yourself, if you're so anxious about that camp. Furthermore," he added stiffly, "it's nobody's business but mine what I write or study, or where I write and study. So don't set there trying to look wise, Tex—telling me what to do and how to do it. You can't put anything over on me; your work is too raw. Altogether too raw!"

He glanced sidewise at a circular letter he had dropped, picked it up and began reading it slowly, one eye squinted against the smoke of his cigarette, his manner that of supreme indifference to Tex and all his kind. Johnny could be very, very indifferent when he chose.

He did not really believe that Tex was trying to put anything over on him; he just said that to show Tex he didn't give a darn one way or the other. But Tex seemed to take it seriously, and glowered at Johnny from under his black eyebrows that had a hawklike arch.

"What yo' all think I'm trying to put over? Hey? What yo' all mean by that statement?"

Johnny looked up, one eye still squinted against the smoke. The other showed surprise back of the indifference. "You there yet?" he wanted to know. "What's the big idea? Gone to roost for the night?"

Tex leaned toward him, wagging one finger at Johnny. The outer end of his eyebrows were twitching—a sign of anger in Tex, as Johnny knew well.

"What yo' all got up yore sleeve—saying my work is raw! What yo' all aimin' at? That's what I'm roostin' here to learn."

Johnny fanned away the smoke and gave a little chuckle meant to exasperate Tex, which it did.

"I guess the roosting's going to be pretty good," he said. "You better send cookee word to bring your meals to yuh, Tex. Because if you roost there till I tell yuh, you'll be roosting a good long while!" He got up and lounged out, his hands in his pockets, his well-shaped head carried at a provocative tilt. He heard Tex swear under his breath and mutter something about making the darned little runt come through yet, whereat Johnny grinned maliciously.

Halfway to the corral, however, Johnny's steps slowed as though he were walking straight up to a wall. The wall was there, but it was mental, and it was his mind that halted before it, astonished.

What had touched Tex off so suddenly when Johnny had flung out that meaningless taunt? Meaningless to Johnny—but how about Tex?

"Gosh! He took it like a guilty conscience," said Johnny. "What the horn-toad has Tex been doin'?"