OWEN WISTER

INVENTOR OF THE GOOD-GUY COWBOY

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

TACET BOOKS

ESSENTIAL NOVELISTS

Owen Wister

EDITED BY

August Nemo

The Author

Owen Wister (1860-1938) was a prominent American writer during the late 1800s and early 1900s. He is best known as the author of the famed Western novel The Virginian. In addition, Wister was the author of numerous other works concerning the American West and other subjects as well.

Wister was born to Dr. Owen Jones Wister and Sarah Butler Wister in Germantown (now part of Philadelphia), Pennsylvania on July 14, 1860. His father was a physician and a member of a wealthy Philadelphia family. Wister's mother was the daughter of Fanny Kemble, a famed Shakespearean actress.

Owen Wister grew up in a household that was considered to be a very cultured one. The family frequently traveled in Europe and both Wister and his mother spoke several languages. In addition, his mother was a respected pianist and essayist. Wister himself acquired a keen interest in music and learned to play the piano at an early age.

Wister attended St. Paul's School, a boarding school in Concord, New Hampshire. Here, he discovered and started developing his talents as a writer. His first published story, Down in a Diving Bell, appeared in his school literary magazine in 1874. He continued to write for the magazine until his graduation in 1878.

Pursuing his interest in music, Owen Wister entered Harvard University. A music major and aspiring composer, he graduated summa cum laude in 1882. While at Harvard, he became a lifelong friend of fellow student and future

president Theodore Roosevelt. After graduation he studied music in France for a year. Upon returning to the United States, Wister took a job at Union Safe Deposit Vaults in Boston.

Wister's health broke down in 1885. On his doctor's orders, he traveled to Wyoming to spend a summer at a friend's ranch. This trip spurred his interest in the American West. Between 1885-1891, Wister made five trips to the West. On these trips, he kept diaries which provided material for his Western works. During these years, he kept himself busy in other ways as well. Wister graduated from Harvard Law School in 1888. He was admitted to the Philadelphia Bar and briefly practiced law at Francis Rawle's law firm.

In 1891, Owen Wister wrote his first two Western short stories: Hank's Woman and How Lin McLean Went East. Both of these stories appeared in Harper's Weekly. Encouraged by the success of these stories, he gave up law and became a full-time writer in 1893. Between 1893-1900, Wister made several additional trips to the West. From material collected on these trips, he wrote the Western novel Lin McLean (1897) and Jimmy John Boss (1900), a collection of Western short stories. During this period, he also wrote the biographies U.S. Grant (1900) and The Seven Ages of Washington (1900).

In 1902, Wister published his most famous work, The Virginian. This book, which first appeared as a serial in Harper's Weekly, is considered by many to be the prototypical Western novel. The Virginian is based upon material gathered on his Western trips. According to Wister, the novel's main character was a composite of several people he met and knew in his travels. The book was a wildly popular bestseller, being reprinted numerous times and translated into many languages. In 1904, Wister and Kirk La Shell co-produced the original stage version of The

Virginian, which had a successful ten-year run. The first motion picture version of The Virginian premiered in 1914.

After the success of The Virginian, Owen Wister continued to be a prolific writer. In 1904, he wrote Philosophy 4, a satirical short story about Harvard students studying for an exam. His second bestseller, Lady Baltimore, was published in 1906. This novel concerned society in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1911, he published Members of the Family, another collection of Western short stories.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Wister turned his attention to European affairs. A firm supporter of Great Britain and France, he pleaded for American support of the Allied war effort. In 1915, at the Duke University commencement, Wister delivered the speech The Pentecost of Calamity, in which he urged the United States to join the war against Germany. This speech was published and became a non-fiction bestseller. After the war, Wister frequently traveled to Europe and became friendly with noted European authors such as Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling.

Between 1919-1930, Wister continued to be a productive author. Showing his continued concern for American relations with Europe, his works The Ancient Grudge or a Straight Deal (1920) and Neighbors Henceforth (1922) urged friendlier relations with Great Britain and France respectively. A staunch opponent of Prohibition, Wister wrote the satirical light opera Watch Your Thirst (1923) for Boston’s Tavern Club. When the West was West, another collection of Western short stories, was published in 1928. In 1930, he wrote his last book, Roosevelt, the Story of a Friendship, which documented his lifelong friendship with Theodore Roosevelt.

Owen Wister had many other interests besides literature. In 1908, he unsuccessfully ran for a seat on the Philadelphia

City Council. He was a member of Harvard University's Board of Overseers and president of both the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Club. Wister received honorary degrees from the University of Pennsylvania (1907), Williams College (1912), and Duke University (1915).

In 1898, Owen Wister married Mary Channing Wister. A second cousin once removed, she was a descendent of abolitionist and Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing. Mrs. Wister was a respected member of the Philadelphia School Board. Before her death in 1913, the couple had six children, including daughter Frances K. Stokes.

Owen Wister passed away on July 23, 1938.

The Virginian

By Owen Wister

To the reader

Certain of the newspapers, when this book was first announced, made a mistake most natural upon seeing the sub-title as it then stood, A TALE OF SUNDRY ADVENTURES. “This sounds like a historical novel,” said one of them, meaning (I take it) a colonial romance. As it now stands, the title will scarce lead to such interpretation; yet none the less is this book historical—quite as much so as any colonial romance. Indeed, when you look at the root of the matter, it is a colonial romance. For Wyoming between 1874 and 1890 was a colony as wild as was Virginia one hundred years earlier. As wild, with a scantier population, and the same primitive joys and dangers. There were, to be sure, not so many Chippendale settees.

We know quite well the common understanding of the term “historical novel.” HUGH WYNNE exactly fits it. But SILAS LAPHAM is a novel as perfectly historical as is Hugh Wynne, for it pictures an era and personifies a type. It matters not that in the one we find George Washington and in the other none save imaginary figures; else THE SCARLET LETTER were not historical. Nor does it matter that Dr. Mitchell did not live in the time of which he wrote, while Mr. Howells saw many Silas Laphams with his own eyes; else UNCLE TOM'S CABIN were not historical. Any narrative which presents faithfully a day and a generation is of necessity historical; and this one presents Wyoming between 1874 and 1890. Had you left New York or San Francisco at ten o'clock this

morning, by noon the day after to-morrow you could step out at Cheyenne. There you would stand at the heart of the world that is the subject of my picture, yet you would look around you in vain for the reality. It is a vanished world. No journeys, save those which memory can take, will bring you to it now. The mountains are there, far and shining, and the sunlight, and the infinite earth, and the air that seems forever the true fountain of youth, but where is the buffalo, and the wild antelope, and where the horseman with his pasturing thousands? So like its old self does the sage-brush seem when revisited, that you wait for the horseman to appear.

But he will never come again. He rides in his historic yesterday. You will no more see him gallop out of the unchanging silence than you will see Columbus on the unchanging sea come sailing from Palos with his caravels.

And yet the horseman is still so near our day that in some chapters of this book, which were published separate at the close of the nineteenth century, the present tense was used. It is true no longer. In those chapters it has been changed, and verbs like “is” and “have” now read “was” and “had.” Time has flowed faster than my ink.

What is become of the horseman, the cow-puncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil? For he was romantic. Whatever he did, he did with his might. The bread that he earned was earned hard, the wages that he squandered were squandered hard,—half a year's pay sometimes gone in a night,—“blown in,” as he expressed it, or “blowed in,” to be perfectly accurate. Well, he will be here among us always, invisible, waiting his chance to live and play as he would like. His wild kind has been among us always, since the beginning: a young man with his temptations, a hero without wings.

The cow-puncher's ungoverned hours did not unman him. If he gave his word, he kept it; Wall Street would have found him behind the times. Nor did he talk lewdly to women; Newport would have thought him old-fashioned. He and his brief epoch make a complete picture, for in themselves they were as complete as the pioneers of the land or the explorers of the sea. A transition has followed the horseman of the plains; a shapeless state, a condition of men and manners as unlovely as is that moment in the year when winter is gone and spring not come, and the face of Nature is ugly. I shall not dwell upon it here. Those who have seen it know well what I mean. Such transition was inevitable. Let us give thanks that it is but a transition, and not a finality.

Sometimes readers inquire, Did I know the Virginian? As well, I hope, as a father should know his son. And sometimes it is asked, Was such and such a thing true? Now to this I have the best answer in the world. Once a cow-puncher listened patiently while I read him a manuscript. It concerned an event upon an Indian reservation. “Was that the Crow reservation?” he inquired at the finish. I told him that it was no real reservation and no real event; and his face expressed displeasure. “Why,” he demanded, “do you waste your time writing what never happened, when you know so many things that did happen?”

And I could no more help telling him that this was the highest compliment ever paid me than I have been able to help telling you about it here!

CHARLESTON, S.C., March 31st, 1902

I

Enter the man

Some notable sight was drawing the passengers, both men and women, to the window; and therefore I rose and crossed the car to see what it was. I saw near the track an enclosure, and round it some laughing men, and inside it some whirling dust, and amid the dust some horses, plunging, huddling, and dodging. They were cow ponies in a corral, and one of them would not be caught, no matter who threw the rope. We had plenty of time to watch this sport, for our train had stopped that the engine might take water at the tank before it pulled us up beside the station platform of Medicine Bow. We were also six hours late, and starving for entertainment. The pony in the corral was wise, and rapid of limb. Have you seen a skilful boxer watch his antagonist with a quiet, incessant eye? Such an eye as this did the pony keep upon whatever man took the rope. The man might pretend to look at the weather, which was fine; or he might affect earnest conversation with a bystander: it was bootless. The pony saw through it. No feint hoodwinked him. This animal was thoroughly a man of the world. His undistracted eye stayed fixed upon the dissembling foe, and the gravity of his horse-expression made the matter one of high comedy. Then the rope would sail out at him, but he was already elsewhere; and if horses laugh, gayety must have abounded in that corral. Sometimes the pony took a turn alone; next he had slid in a flash among his brothers, and the whole of them like a school of playful fish whipped round the corral, kicking up the fine dust, and (I take it) roaring with laughter. Through the window-glass of our Pullman the thud of their mischievous hoofs reached us, and the strong, humorous curses of the cow-boys. Then for the first time I noticed a man who sat on the high gate of the corral, looking on. For he now climbed down with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin. The others had all visibly whirled

the rope, some of them even shoulder high. I did not see his arm lift or move. He appeared to hold the rope down low, by his leg. But like a sudden snake I saw the noose go out its length and fall true; and the thing was done. As the captured pony walked in with a sweet, church-door expression, our train moved slowly on to the station, and a passenger remarked, “That man knows his business.”

But the passenger's dissertation upon roping I was obliged to lose, for Medicine Bow was my station. I bade my fellow-travellers good-by, and descended, a stranger, into the great cattle land. And here in less than ten minutes I learned news which made me feel a stranger indeed.

My baggage was lost; it had not come on my train; it was adrift somewhere back in the two thousand miles that lay behind me. And by way of comfort, the baggage-man remarked that passengers often got astray from their trunks, but the trunks mostly found them after a while. Having offered me this encouragement, he turned whistling to his affairs and left me planted in the baggage-room at Medicine Bow. I stood deserted among crates and boxes, blankly holding my check, hungry and forlorn. I stared out through the door at the sky and the plains; but I did not see the antelope shining among the sage-brush, nor the great sunset light of Wyoming. Annoyance blinded my eyes to all things save my grievance: I saw only a lost trunk. And I was muttering half-aloud, “What a forsaken hole this is!” when suddenly from outside on the platform came a slow voice: “Off to get married AGAIN? Oh, don't!”

The voice was Southern and gentle and drawling; and a second voice came in immediate answer, cracked and querulous. “It ain't again. Who says it's again? Who told you, anyway?”

And the first voice responded caressingly: “Why, your Sunday clothes told me, Uncle Hughey. They are speakin'

mighty loud o' nuptials.”

“You don't worry me!” snapped Uncle Hughey, with shrill heat.

And the other gently continued, “Ain't them gloves the same yu' wore to your last weddin'?”

“You don't worry me! You don't worry me!” now screamed Uncle Hughey.

Already I had forgotten my trunk; care had left me; I was aware of the sunset, and had no desire but for more of this conversation. For it resembled none that I had heard in my life so far. I stepped to the door and looked out upon the station platform.

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat; and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, as the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone through it duskily, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. But no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength. The old man upon whose temper his remarks were doing such deadly work was combed and curried to a finish, a bridegroom swept and garnished; but alas for age! Had I been the bride, I should have taken the giant, dust and all. He had by no means done with the old man.

“Why, yu've hung weddin' gyarments on every limb!” he now drawled, with admiration. “Who is the lucky lady this trip?”

The old man seemed to vibrate. “Tell you there ain't been no other! Call me a Mormon, would you?”

“Why, that—”

“Call me a Mormon? Then name some of my wives. Name two. Name one. Dare you!”

“—that Laramie wido' promised you—'

“Shucks!”

“—only her doctor suddenly ordered Southern climate and —”

“Shucks! You're a false alarm.”

“—so nothing but her lungs came between you. And next you'd most got united with Cattle Kate, only—”

“Tell you you're a false alarm!”

“—only she got hung.”

“Where's the wives in all this? Show the wives! Come now!”

“That corn-fed biscuit-shooter at Rawlins yu' gave the canary—”

“Never married her. Never did marry—”

“But yu' come so near, uncle! She was the one left yu' that letter explaining how she'd got married to a young cyard-player the very day before her ceremony with you was due, and—”

“Oh, you're nothing; you're a kid; you don't amount to—”

“—and how she'd never, never forgot to feed the canary.”

“This country's getting full of kids,” stated the old man, witheringly. “It's doomed.” This crushing assertion plainly satisfied him. And he blinked his eyes with renewed anticipation. His tall tormentor continued with a face of

unchanging gravity, and a voice of gentle solicitude: “How is the health of that unfortunate—”

“That's right! Pour your insults! Pour 'em on a sick, afflicted woman!” The eyes blinked with combative relish.

“Insults? Oh, no, Uncle Hughey!”

“That's all right! Insults goes!”

“Why, I was mighty relieved when she began to recover her mem'ry. Las' time I heard, they told me she'd got it pretty near all back. Remembered her father, and her mother, and her sisters and brothers, and her friends, and her happy childhood, and all her doin's except only your face. The boys was bettin' she'd get that far too, give her time. But I reckon afteh such a turrable sickness as she had, that would be expectin' most too much.”

At this Uncle Hughey jerked out a small parcel. “Shows how much you know!” he cackled. “There! See that! That's my ring she sent me back, being too unstrung for marriage. So she don't remember me, don't she? Ha-ha! Always said you were a false alarm.”

The Southerner put more anxiety into his tone. “And so you're a-takin' the ring right on to the next one!” he exclaimed. “Oh, don't go to get married again, Uncle Hughey! What's the use o' being married?”

“What's the use?” echoed the bridegroom, with scorn. “Hm! When you grow up you'll think different.”

“Course I expect to think different when my age is different. I'm havin' the thoughts proper to twenty-four, and you're havin' the thoughts proper to sixty.”

“Fifty!” shrieked Uncle Hughey, jumping in the air.

The Southerner took a tone of self-reproach. “Now, how could I forget you was fifty,” he murmured, “when you have

been telling it to the boys so careful for the last ten years!”

Have you ever seen a cockatoo—the white kind with the top-knot—enraged by insult? The bird erects every available feather upon its person. So did Uncle Hughey seem to swell, clothes, mustache, and woolly white beard; and without further speech he took himself on board the Eastbound train, which now arrived from its siding in time to deliver him.

Yet this was not why he had not gone away before. At any time he could have escaped into the baggage-room or withdrawn to a dignified distance until his train should come up. But the old man had evidently got a sort of joy from this teasing. He had reached that inevitable age when we are tickled to be linked with affairs of gallantry, no matter how.

With him now the Eastbound departed slowly into that distance whence I had come. I stared after it as it went its way to the far shores of civilization. It grew small in the unending gulf of space, until all sign of its presence was gone save a faint skein of smoke against the evening sky. And now my lost trunk came back into my thoughts, and Medicine Bow seemed a lonely spot. A sort of ship had left me marooned in a foreign ocean; the Pullman was comfortably steaming home to port, while I—how was I to find Judge Henry's ranch? Where in this unfeatured wilderness was Sunk Creek? No creek or any water at all flowed here that I could perceive. My host had written he should meet me at the station and drive me to his ranch. This was all that I knew. He was not here. The baggage-man had not seen him lately. The ranch was almost certain to be too far to walk to, to-night. My trunk—I discovered myself still staring dolefully after the vanished East-bound; and at the same instant I became aware that the tall man was looking gravely at me,—as gravely as he had looked at Uncle Hughey throughout their remarkable conversation.

To see his eye thus fixing me and his thumb still hooked in his cartridge-belt, certain tales of travellers from these parts forced themselves disquietingly into my recollection. Now that Uncle Hughey was gone, was I to take his place and be, for instance, invited to dance on the platform to the music of shots nicely aimed?

“I reckon I am looking for you, seh,” the tall man now observed.

II

“When you call me that, smile!”

We cannot see ourselves as others see us, or I should know what appearance I cut at hearing this from the tall man. I said nothing, feeling uncertain.

“I reckon I am looking for you, seh,” he repeated politely.

“I am looking for Judge Henry,” I now replied.

He walked toward me, and I saw that in inches he was not a giant. He was not more than six feet. It was Uncle Hughey that had made him seem to tower. But in his eye, in his face, in his step, in the whole man, there dominated a something potent to be felt, I should think, by man or woman.

“The Judge sent me afteh you, seh,” he now explained, in his civil Southern voice; and he handed me a letter from my host. Had I not witnessed his facetious performances with Uncle Hughey, I should have judged him wholly ungifted with such powers. There was nothing external about him but what seemed the signs of a nature as grave as you could

meet. But I had witnessed; and therefore supposing that I knew him in spite of his appearance, that I was, so to speak, in his secret and could give him a sort of wink, I adopted at once a method of easiness. It was so pleasant to be easy with a large stranger, who instead of shooting at your heels had very civilly handed you a letter.

“You're from old Virginia, I take it?” I began.

He answered slowly, “Then you have taken it correct, seh.”

A slight chill passed over my easiness, but I went cheerily on with a further inquiry. “Find many oddities out here like Uncle Hughey?”

“Yes, seh, there is a right smart of oddities around. They come in on every train.”

At this point I dropped my method of easiness.

“I wish that trunks came on the train,” said I. And I told him my predicament.

It was not to be expected that he would be greatly moved at my loss; but he took it with no comment whatever. “We'll wait in town for it,” said he, always perfectly civil.

Now, what I had seen of “town” was, to my newly arrived eyes, altogether horrible. If I could possibly sleep at the Judge's ranch, I preferred to do so.

“Is it too far to drive there to-night?” I inquired.

He looked at me in a puzzled manner.

“For this valise,” I explained, “contains all that I immediately need; in fact, I could do without my trunk for a day or two, if it is not convenient to send. So if we could arrive there not too late by starting at once—” I paused.

“It's two hundred and sixty-three miles,” said the Virginian.

To my loud ejaculation he made no answer, but surveyed me a moment longer, and then said, “Supper will be about ready now.” He took my valise, and I followed his steps toward the eating-house in silence. I was dazed.

As we went, I read my host's letter—a brief hospitable message. He was very sorry not to meet me himself. He had been getting ready to drive over, when the surveyor appeared and detained him. Therefore in his stead he was sending a trustworthy man to town, who would look after me and drive me over. They were looking forward to my visit with much pleasure. This was all.

Yes, I was dazed. How did they count distance in this country? You spoke in a neighborly fashion about driving over to town, and it meant—I did not know yet how many days. And what would be meant by the term “dropping in,” I wondered. And how many miles would be considered really far? I abstained from further questioning the “trustworthy man.” My questions had not fared excessively well. He did not propose making me dance, to be sure: that would scarcely be trustworthy. But neither did he propose to have me familiar with him. Why was this? What had I done to elicit that veiled and skilful sarcasm about oddities coming in on every train? Having been sent to look after me, he would do so, would even carry my valise; but I could not be jocular with him. This handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil had set between us the bar of his cold and perfect civility. No polished person could have done it better. What was the matter? I looked at him, and suddenly it came to me. If he had tried familiarity with me the first two minutes of our acquaintance, I should have resented it; by what right, then, had I tried it with him? It smacked of patronizing: on this occasion he had come off the better gentleman of the two. Here in flesh and blood was a truth which I had long believed in words, but never met before. The creature we call a GENTLEMAN lies deep in the hearts of thousands that

are born without chance to master the outward graces of the type.

Between the station and the eating-house I did a deal of straight thinking. But my thoughts were destined presently to be drowned in amazement at the rare personage into whose society fate had thrown me.

Town, as they called it, pleased me the less, the longer I saw it. But until our language stretches itself and takes in a new word of closer fit, town will have to do for the name of such a place as was Medicine Bow. I have seen and slept in many like it since. Scattered wide, they littered the frontier from the Columbia to the Rio Grande, from the Missouri to the Sierras. They lay stark, dotted over a planet of treeless dust, like soiled packs of cards. Each was similar to the next, as one old five-spot of clubs resembles another. Houses, empty bottles, and garbage, they were forever of the same shapeless pattern. More forlorn they were than stale bones. They seemed to have been strewn there by the wind and to be waiting till the wind should come again and blow them away. Yet serene above their foulness swam a pure and quiet light, such as the East never sees; they might be bathing in the air of creation's first morning. Beneath sun and stars their days and nights were immaculate and wonderful.

Medicine Bow was my first, and I took its dimensions, twenty-nine buildings in all,—one coal shute, one water tank, the station, one store, two eating-houses, one billiard hall, two tool-houses, one feed stable, and twelve others that for one reason and another I shall not name. Yet this wretched husk of squalor spent thought upon appearances; many houses in it wore a false front to seem as if they were two stories high. There they stood, rearing their pitiful masquerade amid a fringe of old tin cans, while at their very doors began a world of crystal light, a land without end, a

space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis. Into that space went wandering a road, over a hill and down out of sight, and up again smaller in the distance, and down once more, and up once more, straining the eyes, and so away.

Then I heard a fellow greet my Virginian. He came rollicking out of a door, and made a pass with his hand at the Virginian's hat. The Southerner dodged it, and I saw once more the tiger undulation of body, and knew my escort was he of the rope and the corral.

“How are yu' Steve?” he said to the rollicking man. And in his tone I heard instantly old friendship speaking. With Steve he would take and give familiarity.

Steve looked at me, and looked away—and that was all. But it was enough. In no company had I ever felt so much an outsider. Yet I liked the company, and wished that it would like me.

“Just come to town?” inquired Steve of the Virginian.

“Been here since noon. Been waiting for the train.”

“Going out to-night?”

“I reckon I'll pull out to-morro'.”

“Beds are all took,” said Steve. This was for my benefit.

“Dear me,” said I.

“But I guess one of them drummers will let yu' double up with him.” Steve was enjoying himself, I think. He had his saddle and blankets, and beds were nothing to him.

“Drummers, are they?” asked the Virginian.

“Two Jews handling cigars, one American with consumption killer, and a Dutchman with jew'lry.”

The Virginian set down my valise, and seemed to meditate. “I did want a bed to-night,” he murmured gently.

“Well,” Steve suggested, “the American looks like he washed the oftenest.”

“That's of no consequence to me,” observed the Southerner.

“Guess it'll be when yu' see 'em.”

“Oh, I'm meaning something different. I wanted a bed to myself.”

“Then you'll have to build one.”

“Bet yu' I have the Dutchman's.”

“Take a man that won't scare. Bet yu' drinks yu' can't have the American's.”

“Go yu'” said the Virginian. “I'll have his bed without any fuss. Drinks for the crowd.”

“I suppose you have me beat,” said Steve, grinning at him affectionately. “You're such a son-of-a—— when you get down to work. Well, so long! I got to fix my horse's hoofs.”

I had expected that the man would be struck down. He had used to the Virginian a term of heaviest insult, I thought. I had marvelled to hear it come so unheralded from Steve's friendly lips. And now I marvelled still more. Evidently he had meant no harm by it, and evidently no offence had been taken. Used thus, this language was plainly complimentary. I had stepped into a world new to me indeed, and novelties were occurring with scarce any time to get breath between them. As to where I should sleep, I had forgotten that problem altogether in my curiosity. What was the Virginian going to do now? I began to know that the quiet of this man was volcanic.

“Will you wash first, sir?”

We were at the door of the eating-house, and he set my valise inside. In my tenderfoot innocence I was looking indoors for the washing arrangements.

“It's out hyeh, seh,” he informed me gravely, but with strong Southern accent. Internal mirth seemed often to heighten the local flavor of his speech. There were other times when it had scarce any special accent or fault in grammar.

A trough was to my right, slippery with soapy water; and hanging from a roller above one end of it was a rag of discouraging appearance. The Virginian caught it, and it performed one whirling revolution on its roller. Not a dry or clean inch could be found on it. He took off his hat, and put his head in the door.

“Your towel, ma'am,” said he, “has been too popular.”

She came out, a pretty woman. Her eyes rested upon him for a moment, then upon me with disfavor; then they returned to his black hair.

“The allowance is one a day,” said she, very quietly. “But when folks are particular—” She completed her sentence by removing the old towel and giving a clean one to us.

“Thank you, ma'am,” said the cow-puncher.

She looked once more at his black hair, and without any word returned to her guests at supper.

A pail stood in the trough, almost empty; and this he filled for me from a well. There was some soap sliding at large in the trough, but I got my own. And then in a tin basin I removed as many of the stains of travel as I was able. It was not much of a toilet that I made in this first wash-trough of my experience, but it had to suffice, and I took my seat at supper.

Canned stuff it was,—corned beef. And one of my table companions said the truth about it. “When I slung my teeth over that,” he remarked, “I thought I was chewing a hammock.” We had strange coffee, and condensed milk; and I have never seen more flies. I made no attempt to talk, for no one in this country seemed favorable to me. By reason of something,—my clothes, my hat, my pronunciation, whatever it might be, I possessed the secret of estranging people at sight. Yet I was doing better than I knew; my strict silence and attention to the corned beef made me in the eyes of the cow-boys at table compare well with the over-talkative commercial travellers.

The Virginian's entrance produced a slight silence. He had done wonders with the wash-trough, and he had somehow brushed his clothes. With all the roughness of his dress, he was now the neatest of us. He nodded to some of the other cow-boys, and began his meal in quiet.

But silence is not the native element of the drummer. An average fish can go a longer time out of water than this breed can live without talking. One of them now looked across the table at the grave, flannel-shirted Virginian; he inspected, and came to the imprudent conclusion that he understood his man.

“Good evening,” he said briskly.

“Good evening,” said the Virginian.

“Just come to town?” pursued the drummer.

“Just come to town,” the Virginian suavely assented.

“Cattle business jumping along?” inquired the drummer.

“Oh, fair.” And the Virginian took some more corned beef.

“Gets a move on your appetite, anyway,” suggested the drummer.

The Virginian drank some coffee. Presently the pretty woman refilled his cup without his asking her.

“Guess I've met you before,” the drummer stated next.

The Virginian glanced at him for a brief moment.

“Haven't I, now? Ain't I seen you somewhere? Look at me. You been in Chicago, ain't you? You look at me well. Remember Ikey's, don't you?”

“I don't reckon I do.”

“See, now! I knowed you'd been in Chicago. Four or five years ago. Or maybe it's two years. Time's nothing to me. But I never forget a face. Yes, sir. Him and me's met at Ikey's, all right.” This important point the drummer stated to all of us. We were called to witness how well he had proved old acquaintanceship. “Ain't the world small, though!” he exclaimed complacently. “Meet a man once and you're sure to run on to him again. That's straight. That's no bar-room josh.” And the drummer's eye included us all in his confidence. I wondered if he had attained that high perfection when a man believes his own lies.

The Virginian did not seem interested. He placidly attended to his food, while our landlady moved between dining room and kitchen, and the drummer expanded.

“Yes, sir! Ikey's over by the stock-yards, patronized by all cattle-men that know what's what. That's where. Maybe it's three years. Time never was nothing to me. But faces! Why, I can't quit 'em. Adults or children, male and female; onced I seen 'em I couldn't lose one off my memory, not if you were to pay me bounty, five dollars a face. White men, that is. Can't do nothing with niggers or Chinese. But you're white, all right.” The drummer suddenly returned to the Virginian with this high compliment. The cow-puncher had taken out a

pipe, and was slowly rubbing it. The compliment seemed to escape his attention, and the drummer went on.

“I can tell a man when he's white, put him at Ikey's or out loose here in the sage-brush.” And he rolled a cigar across to the Virginian's plate.

“Selling them?” inquired the Virginian.

“Solid goods, my friend. Havana wrappers, the biggest tobacco proposition for five cents got out yet. Take it, try it, light it, watch it burn. Here.” And he held out a bunch of matches.

The Virginian tossed a five-cent piece over to him.

“Oh, no, my friend! Not from you! Not after Ikey's. I don't forget you. See? I knowed your face right away. See? That's straight. I seen you at Chicago all right.”

“Maybe you did,” said the Virginian. “Sometimes I'm mighty careless what I look at.”

“Well, py damn!” now exclaimed the Dutch drummer, hilariously. “I am ploom disappointed. I vas hoping to sell him somedings myself.”

“Not the same here,” stated the American. “He's too healthy for me. I gave him up on sight.”

Now it was the American drummer whose bed the Virginian had in his eye. This was a sensible man, and had talked less than his brothers in the trade. I had little doubt who would end by sleeping in his bed; but how the thing would be done interested me more deeply than ever.

The Virginian looked amiably at his intended victim, and made one or two remarks regarding patent medicines. There must be a good deal of money in them, he supposed, with a live man to manage them. The victim was flattered. No other person at the table had been favored with so much

of the tall cow-puncher's notice. He responded, and they had a pleasant talk. I did not divine that the Virginian's genius was even then at work, and that all this was part of his satanic strategy. But Steve must have divined it. For while a few of us still sat finishing our supper, that facetious horseman returned from doctoring his horse's hoofs, put his head into the dining room, took in the way in which the Virginian was engaging his victim in conversation, remarked aloud, “I've lost!” and closed the door again.

“What's he lost?” inquired the American drummer.

“Oh, you mustn't mind him,” drawled the Virginian. “He's one of those box-head jokers goes around openin' and shuttin' doors that-a-way. We call him harmless. Well,” he broke off, “I reckon I'll go smoke. Not allowed in hyeh?” This last he addressed to the landlady, with especial gentleness. She shook her head, and her eyes followed him as he went out.

Left to myself I meditated for some time upon my lodging for the night, and smoked a cigar for consolation as I walked about. It was not a hotel that we had supped in. Hotel at Medicine Bow there appeared to be none. But connected with the eating-house was that place where, according to Steve, the beds were all taken, and there I went to see for myself. Steve had spoken the truth. It was a single apartment containing four or five beds, and nothing else whatever. And when I looked at these beds, my sorrow that I could sleep in none of them grew less. To be alone in one offered no temptation, and as for this courtesy of the country, this doubling up—!

“Well, they have got ahead of us.” This was the Virginian standing at my elbow.

I assented.

“They have staked out their claims,” he added.

In this public sleeping room they had done what one does to secure a seat in a railroad train. Upon each bed, as notice of occupancy, lay some article of travel or of dress. As we stood there, the two Jews came in and opened and arranged their valises, and folded and refolded their linen dusters. Then a railroad employee entered and began to go to bed at this hour, before dusk had wholly darkened into night. For him, going to bed meant removing his boots and placing his overalls and waistcoat beneath his pillow. He had no coat. His work began at three in the morning; and even as we still talked he began to snore.

“The man that keeps the store is a friend of mine,” said the Virginian; “and you can be pretty near comfortable on his counter. Got any blankets?”

I had no blankets.

“Looking for a bed?” inquired the American drummer, now arriving.

“Yes, he's looking for a bed,” answered the voice of Steve behind him.

“Seems a waste of time,” observed the Virginian. He looked thoughtfully from one bed to another. “I didn't know I'd have to lay over here. Well, I have sat up before.”

“This one's mine,” said the drummer, sitting down on it. “Half's plenty enough room for me.”

“You're cert'nly mighty kind,” said the cow-puncher. “But I'd not think o' disconveniencing yu'.”

“That's nothing. The other half is yours. Turn in right now if you feel like it.”

“No. I don't reckon I'll turn in right now. Better keep your bed to yourself.”

“See here,” urged the drummer, “if I take you I'm safe from drawing some party I might not care so much about. This here sleeping proposition is a lottery.”

“Well,” said the Virginian (and his hesitation was truly masterly), “if you put it that way—”

“I do put it that way. Why, you're clean! You've had a shave right now. You turn in when you feel inclined, old man! I ain't retiring just yet.”

The drummer had struck a slightly false note in these last remarks. He should not have said “old man.” Until this I had thought him merely an amiable person who wished to do a favor. But “old man” came in wrong. It had a hateful taint of his profession; the being too soon with everybody, the celluloid good-fellowship that passes for ivory with nine in ten of the city crowd. But not so with the sons of the sagebrush. They live nearer nature, and they know better.

But the Virginian blandly accepted “old man” from his victim: he had a game to play. “Well, I cert'nly thank yu',” he said. “After a while I'll take advantage of your kind offer.”

I was surprised. Possession being nine points of the law, it seemed his very chance to intrench himself in the bed. But the cow-puncher had planned a campaign needing no intrenchments. Moreover, going to bed before nine o'clock upon the first evening in many weeks that a town's resources were open to you, would be a dull proceeding. Our entire company, drummer and all, now walked over to the store, and here my sleeping arrangements were made easily. This store was the cleanest place and the best in Medicine Bow, and would have been a good store anywhere, offering a multitude of things for sale, and kept by a very civil proprietor. He bade me make myself at home, and placed both of his counters at my disposal. Upon the grocery side there stood a cheese too large and strong to

sleep near comfortably, and I therefore chose the dry-goods side. Here thick quilts were unrolled for me, to make it soft; and no condition was placed upon me, further than that I should remove my boots, because the quilts were new, and clean, and for sale. So now my rest was assured. Not an anxiety remained in my thoughts. These therefore turned themselves wholly to the other man's bed, and how he was going to lose it.

I think that Steve was more curious even than myself. Time was on the wing. His bet must be decided, and the drinks enjoyed. He stood against the grocery counter, contemplating the Virginian. But it was to me that he spoke. The Virginian, however, listened to every word.

“Your first visit to this country?”

I told him yes.

“How do you like it?”

I expected to like it very much.

“How does the climate strike you?”

I thought the climate was fine.

“Makes a man thirsty though.”

This was the sub-current which the Virginian plainly looked for. But he, like Steve, addressed himself to me.

“Yes,” he put in, “thirsty while a man's soft yet. You'll harden.”

“I guess you'll find it a drier country than you were given to expect,” said Steve.

“If your habits have been frequent that way,” said the Virginian.

“There's parts of Wyoming,” pursued Steve, “where you'll go hours and hours before you'll see a drop of wetness.”

“And if yu' keep a-thinkin' about it,” said the Virginian, “it'll seem like days and days.”

Steve, at this stroke, gave up, and clapped him on the shoulder with a joyous chuckle. “You old son-of-a!” he cried affectionately.

“Drinks are due now,” said the Virginian. “My treat, Steve. But I reckon your suspense will have to linger a while yet.”

Thus they dropped into direct talk from that speech of the fourth dimension where they had been using me for their telephone.

“Any cyards going to-night?” inquired the Virginian.

“Stud and draw,” Steve told him. “Strangers playing.”

“I think I'd like to get into a game for a while,” said the Southerner. “Strangers, yu' say?”

And then, before quitting the store, he made his toilet for this little hand at poker. It was a simple preparation. He took his pistol from its holster, examined it, then shoved it between his overalls and his shirt in front, and pulled his waistcoat over it. He might have been combing his hair for all the attention any one paid to this, except myself. Then the two friends went out, and I bethought me of that epithet which Steve again had used to the Virginian as he clapped him on the shoulder. Clearly this wild country spoke a language other than mine—the word here was a term of endearment. Such was my conclusion.

The drummers had finished their dealings with the proprietor, and they were gossiping together in a knot by the door as the Virginian passed out.

“See you later, old man!” This was the American drummer accosting his prospective bed-fellow.

“Oh, yes,” returned the bed-fellow, and was gone.