The Mysterious Rider

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CHAPTER I

A September sun, losing some of its heat if not its brilliance, was dropping low in the west over the black Colorado range. Purple haze began to thicken in the timbered notches. Gray foothills, round and billowy, rolled down from the higher country. They were smooth, sweeping, with long velvety slopes and isolated patches of aspens that blazed in autumn gold. Splotches of red vine colored the soft gray of sage. Old White Slides, a mountain scarred by avalanche, towered with bleak rocky peak above the valley, sheltering it from the north.

A girl rode along the slope, with gaze on the sweep and range and color of the mountain fastness that was her home. She followed an old trail which led to a bluff overlooking an arm of the valley. Once it had been a familiar lookout for her, but she had not visited the place of late. It was associated with serious hours of her life. Here seven years before, when she was twelve, she had made a hard choice to please her guardian--the old rancher whom she loved and called father, who had indeed been a father to her. That choice had been to go to school in Denver. Four years she had lived away from her beloved gray hills and black mountains. Only once since her return had she climbed to this height, and that occasion, too, was memorable as an unhappy hour. It had been three years ago. To-day girlish ordeals and griefs seemed back in the past: she was a woman at nineteen and face to face with the first great problem in her life.

The trail came up back of the bluff, through a clump of aspens with white trunks and yellow fluttering leaves, and led across a level bench of luxuriant grass and wild flowers to the rocky edge.

She dismounted and threw the bridle. Her mustang, used to being petted, rubbed his sleek, dark head against her and evidently expected like demonstration in return, but as none was forthcoming he bent his nose to the grass and began grazing. The girl's eyes were intent upon some waving, slender, white-and-blue flowers. They smiled up wanly, like pale stars, out of the long grass that had a tinge of gold.

"Columbines," she mused, wistfully, as she plucked several of the flowers and held them up to gaze wonderingly at them, as if to see in them some revelation of the mystery that shrouded her birth and her name. Then she stood with dreamy gaze upon the distant ranges.

"Columbine!... So they named me--those miners who found me--a baby--lost in the woods--asleep among the columbines." She spoke aloud, as if the sound of her voice might convince her.

So much of the mystery of her had been revealed that day by the man she had always called father. Vaguely she had always been conscious of some mystery, something strange about her childhood, some relation never explained.

"No name but Columbine," she whispered, sadly, and now she understood a strange longing of her heart.

Scarcely an hour back, as she ran down the Wide porch of White Slides ranch-house, she had encountered the man who had taken care of her all her life. He had looked upon her as kindly and fatherly as of old, yet with a difference. She seemed to see him as old Bill Belllounds, pioneer and rancher, of huge frame and broad face, hard and scarred and grizzled, with big eyes of blue fire.

"Collie," the old man had said, "I reckon hyar's news. A letter from Jack.... He's comin' home."

Belllounds had waved the letter. His huge hand trembled as he reached to put it on her shoulder. The hardness of him seemed strangely softened. Jack was his son. Buster Jack, the range had always called him, with other terms, less

kind, that never got to the ears of his father. Jack had been sent away three years ago, just before Columbine's return from school. Therefore she had not seen him for over seven years. But she remembered him well--a big, rangy boy, handsome and wild, who had made her childhood almost unendurable.

"Yes--my son--Jack--he's comin' home," said Belllounds, with a break in his voice. "An', Collie--now I must tell you somethin'."

"Yes, dad," she had replied, with strong clasp of the heavy hand on her shoulder.

"Thet's just it, lass. I ain't your dad. I've tried to be a dad to you an' I've loved you as my own. But you're not flesh an' blood of mine. An' now I must tell you."

The brief story followed. Seventeen years ago miners working a claim of Belllounds's in the mountains above Middle Park had found a child asleep in the columbines along the trail. Near that point Indians, probably Arapahoes coming across the mountains to attack the Utes, had captured or killed the occupants of a prairie-schooner. There was no other clue. The miners took the child to their camp, fed and cared for it, and, after the manner of their kind, named it Columbine. Then they brought it to Belllounds.

"Collie," said the old rancher, "it needn't never have been told, an' wouldn't but fer one reason. I'm gettin' old. I reckon I'd never split my property between you an' Jack. So I mean you an' him to marry. You always steadied Jack. With a wife like you'll be--wal, mebbe Jack'll--"

"Dad!" burst out Columbine. "Marry Jack!... Why I--I don't even remember him!"

"Haw! Haw!" laughed Belllounds. "Wal, you dog-gone soon will. Jack's in Kremmlin', an' he'll be hyar to-night or to-morrow."

"But--I--I don't l-love him," faltered Columbine.

The old man lost his mirth; the strong-lined face resumed its hard cast; the big eyes smoldered. Her appealing objection had wounded him. She was reminded of how sensitive the old man had always been to any reflection cast upon his son.

"Wal, thet's onlucky;" he replied, gruffly. "Mebbe you'll change. I reckon no girl could help a boy much, onless she cared for him. Anyway, you an' Jack will marry."

He had stalked away and Columbine had ridden her mustang far up the valley slope where she could be alone. Standing on the verge of the bluff, she suddenly became aware that the quiet and solitude of her lonely resting-place had been disrupted. Cattle were bawling below her and along the slope of old White Slides and on the grassy uplands above. She had forgotten that the cattle were being driven down into the lowlands for the fall round-up. A great red-and-white-spotted herd was milling in the park just beneath her. Calves and yearlings were making the dust fly along the mountain slope; wild old steers were crashing in the sage, holding level, unwilling to be driven down; cows were running and lowing for their lost ones. Melodious and clear rose the clarion calls of the cowboys. The cattle knew those calls and only the wild steers kept up-grade.

Columbine also knew each call and to which cowboy it belonged. They sang and yelled and swore, but it was all music to her. Here and there along the slope, where the aspen groves clustered, a horse would flash across an open space; the dust would fly, and a cowboy would peal out a lusty yell that rang along the slope and echoed under the bluff and lingered long after the daring rider had vanished in the steep thickets.

"I wonder which is Wils," murmured Columbine, as she watched and listened, vaguely conscious of a little difference, a strange check in her remembrance of this particular cowboy. She felt the change, yet did not

understand. One after one she recognized the riders on the slopes below, but Wilson Moore was not among them. He must be above her, then, and she turned to gaze across the grassy bluff, up the long, yellow slope, to where the gleaming aspens half hid a red bluff of mountain, towering aloft. Then from far to her left, high up a scrubby ridge of the slope, rang down a voice that thrilled her: " *Go--aloong--you-ooooo* ." Red cattle dashed pell-mell down the slope, raising the dust, tearing the brush, rolling rocks, and letting out hoarse bawls.

" *Whoop-ee* !" High-pitched and pealing came a clearer yell. Columbine saw a white mustang flash out on top of the ridge, silhouetted against the blue, with mane and tail flying. His gait on that edge of steep slope proved his rider to be a reckless cowboy for whom no heights or depths had terrors. She would have recognized him from the way he rode, if she had not known the slim, erect figure. The cowboy saw her instantly. He pulled the mustang, about to plunge down the slope, and lifted him, rearing and wheeling. Then Columbine waved her hand. The cowboy spurred his horse along the crest of the ridge, disappeared behind the grove of aspens, and came in sight again around to the right, where on the grassy bench he slowed to a walk in descent to the bluff.

The girl watched him come, conscious of an unfamiliar sense of uncertainty in this meeting, and of the fact that she was seeing him differently from any other time in the years he had been a playmate, a friend, almost like a brother. He had ridden for Belllounds for years, and was a cowboy because he loved cattle well and horses better, and above all a life in the open. Unlike most cowboys, he had been to school; he had a family in Denver that objected to his wild range life, and often importuned him to come home; he seemed aloof sometimes and not readily understood.

While many thoughts whirled through Columbine's mind she watched the cowboy ride slowly down to her, and she became more concerned with a sudden restraint. How was Wilson going to take the news of this forced change about to come in her life? That thought leaped up. It gave her a strange pang. But she and he were only good friends. As to that, she reflected, of late they had not been the friends and comrades they formerly were. In the thrilling uncertainty of this meeting she had forgotten his distant manner and the absence of little attentions she had missed. By this time the cowboy had reached the level, and with the lazy grace of his kind slipped out of the saddle. He was tall, slim, round-limbed, with the small hips of a rider, and square, though not broad shoulders. He stood straight like an Indian. His eyes were hazel, his features regular, his face bronzed. All men of the open had still, lean, strong faces, but added to this in him was a steadiness of expression, a restraint that seemed to hide sadness.

"Howdy, Columbine!" he said. "What are you doing up here? You might get run over."

"Hello, Wils!" she replied, slowly. "Oh, I guess I can keep out of the way."

"Some bad steers in that bunch. If any of them run over here Pronto will leave you to walk home. That mustang hates cattle. And he's only half broke, you know."

"I forgot you were driving to-day," she replied, and looked away from him. There was a moment's pause--long, it seemed to her.

"What'd you come for?" he asked, curiously.

"I wanted to gather columbines. See." She held out the nodding flowers toward him. "Take one.... Do you like them?"

"Yes. I like columbine," he replied, taking one of them. His keen hazel eyes, softened, darkened. "Colorado's flower."

"Columbine!... It is my name."

"Well, could you have a better? It sure suits you."

"Why?" she asked, and she looked at him again.
"You're slender--graceful. You sort of hold your head high and proud. Your skin is white. Your eyes are blue. Not bluebell blue, but columbine blue--and they turn purple when you're angry."
"Compliments! Wilson, this is new kind of talk for you," she said.
"You're different to-day."
"Yes, I am." She looked across the valley toward the westering sun, and the slight flush faded from her cheeks. "I have no right to hold my head proud. No one knows who I am--where I came from."
"As if that made any difference!" he exclaimed.
"Belllounds is not my dad. I have no dad. I was a waif. They found me in the woods--a baby--lost among the flowers. Columbine Belllounds I've always been. But that is not my name. No one can tell what my name really is."
"I knew your story years ago, Columbine," he replied, earnestly. "Everybody knows. Old Bill ought to have told you long before this. But he loves you. So does--everybody. You must not let this knowledge sadden you.... I'm sorry you've never known a mother or a sister. Why, I could tell you of many orphans who--whose stories were different."
"You don't understand. I've been happy. I've not longed for any--any one except a mother. It's only--"
"What don't I understand?"
"I've not told you all."
"No? Well, go on," he said, slowly.
Meaning of the hesitation and the restraint that had obstructed her thought now flashed over Columbine. It lay in what Wilson Moore might think of her prospective marriage to Jack Belllounds. Still she could not guess why that should make her feel strangely uncertain of the ground she stood on or how it could cause a constraint she had to fight herself to hide. Moreover, to her annoyance, she found

that she was evading his direct request for the news she had withheld.
"Jack Belllounds is coming home to-night or to-morrow," she said. Then, waiting for her companion to reply, she kept an unseeing gaze upon the scanty pines fringing Old White Slides. But no reply appeared to be forthcoming from Moore. His silence compelled her to turn to him. The cowboy's face had subtly altered; it was darker with a tinge of red under the bronze; and his lower lip was released from his teeth, even as she looked. He had his eyes intent upon the lasso he was coiling. Suddenly he faced her and the dark fire of his eyes gave her a shock.
I've been expecting that shorthorn back for months." he said, bluntly.
"You--never--liked Jack?" queried Columbine, slowly. That was not what she wanted to say, but the thought spoke itself.
"I should smile I never did."
"Ever since you and he fought--long ago--all over--"
His sharp gesture made the coiled lasso loosen.
"Ever since I licked him good--don't forget that," interrupted Wilson. The red had faded from the bronze.
"Yes, you licked him," mused Columbine. "I remember that. And Jack's hated you ever since."
"There's been no love lost."
"But, Wils, you never before talked this way--spoke out so--against Jack," she protested.
"Well, I'm not the kind to talk behind a fellow's back. But I'm not mealy-mouthed, either, and--and--"
He did not complete the sentence and his meaning was enigmatic. Altogether Moore seemed not like himself. The fact disturbed Columbine. Always she had confided in him. Here was a most complex situation--she burned to tell him, yet somehow feared to--she felt an incomprehensible satisfaction in his bitter reference to Jack--she seemed to realize that she valued Wilson's friendship more than she

had known, and now for some strange reason it was slipping from her.
"We--we were such good friends--pards," said Columbine, hurriedly and irrelevantly.
"Who?" He stared at her.
"Why, you--and me."
"Oh!" His tone softened, but there was still disapproval in his glance. "What of that?"
"Something has happened to make me think I've missed you--lately--that's all."
"Ahuh!" His tone held finality and bitterness, but he would not commit himself. Columbine sensed a pride in him that seemed the cause of his aloofness.
"Wilson, why have you been different lately?" she asked, plaintively.
"What's the good to tell you now?" he queried, in reply.
That gave her a blank sense of actual loss. She had lived in dreams and he in realities. Right now she could not dispel her dream--see and understand all that he seemed to. She felt like a child, then, growing old swiftly. The strange past longing for a mother surged up in her like a strong tide. Some one to lean on, some one who loved her, some one to help her in this hour when fatality knocked at the door of her youth--how she needed that!
"It might be bad for me--to tell me, but tell me, anyhow," she said, finally, answering as some one older than she had been an hour ago--to something feminine that leaped up. She did not understand this impulse, but it was in her.
"No!" declared Moore, with dark red staining his face. He slapped the lasso against his saddle, and tied it with clumsy hands. He did not look at her. His tone expressed anger and amaze.
"Dad says I must marry Jack," she said, with a sudden return to her natural simplicity.
"I heard him tell that months ago," snapped Moore.
"You did! Was that--why?" she whispered.

"It was," he answered, ringingly.
"But that was no reason for you to be--be--to stay away from me," she declared, with rising spirit.
He laughed shortly.
"Wils, didn't you like me any more after dad said that?" she queried.
"Columbine, a girl nineteen years and about to--to get married--ought not be a fool," he replied, with sarcasm.
"I'm not a fool," she rejoined, hotly.
"You ask fool questions."
"Well, you *didn't* like me afterward or you'd never have mistreated me."
"If you say I mistreated you--you say what's untrue," he replied, just as hotly.
They had never been so near a quarrel before. Columbine experienced a sensation new to her--a commingling of fear, heat, and pang, it seemed, all in one throb. Wilson was hurting her. A quiver ran all over her, along her veins, swelling and tingling.
"You mean I lie?" she flashed.
"Yes, I do--if--"
But before he could conclude she slapped his face. It grew pale then, while she began to tremble.
"Oh--I didn't intend that. Forgive me," she faltered.
He rubbed his cheek. The hurt had not been great, so far as the blow was concerned. But his eyes were dark with pain and anger.
"Oh, don't distress yourself," he burst out. "You slapped me before--once, years ago--for kissing you. I--I apologize for saying you lied. You're only out of your head. So am I."
That poured oil upon the troubled waters. The cowboy appeared to be hesitating between sudden flight and the risk of staying longer.
"Maybe that's it," replied Columbine, with a half-laugh. She was not far from tears and fury with herself. "Let us make up--be friends again."

Moore squared around aggressively. He seemed to fortify himself against something in her. She felt that. But his face grew harder and older than she had ever seen it.
"Columbine, do you know where Jack Belllounds has been for these three years?" he asked, deliberately, entirely ignoring her overtures of friendship.
"No. Somebody said Denver. Some one else said Kansas City. I never asked dad, because I knew Jack had been sent away. I've supposed he was working--making a man of himself."
"Well, I hope to Heaven--for your sake--what you suppose comes true," returned Moore, with exceeding bitterness.
"Do *you* know where he has been?" asked Columbine. Some strange feeling prompted that. There was a mystery here. Wilson's agitation seemed strange and deep.
"Yes, I do." The cowboy bit that out through closing teeth, as if locking them against an almost overmastering temptation.
Columbine lost her curiosity. She was woman enough to realize that there might well be facts which would only make her situation harder.
"Wilson," she began, hurriedly, "I owe all I am to dad. He has cared for me--sent me to school. He has been so good to me. I've loved him always. It would be a shabby return for all his protection and love if--if I refused--"
"Old Bill is the best man ever," interrupted Moore, as if to repudiate any hint of disloyalty to his employer. "Everybody in Middle Park and all over owes Bill something. He's sure good. There never was anything wrong with him except his crazy blindness about his son. Buster Jack--the--the--"
Columbine put a hand over Moore's lips.
"The man I must marry," she said, solemnly.
"You must--you will?" he demanded.
"Of course. What else could I do? I never thought of refusing."

"Columbine!" Wilson's cry was so poignant, his gesture so violent, his dark eyes so piercing that Columbine sustained a shock that held her trembling and mute. "How can you love Jack Belllounds? You were twelve years old when you saw him last. How can you love him?"
"I don't" replied Columbine.
"Then how could you marry him?"
"I owe dad obedience. It's his hope that I can steady Jack."
" *Steady Jack!* " exclaimed Moore, passionately. "Why, you girl--you white-faced flower! *You* with your innocence and sweetness steady that damned pup! My Heavens! He was a gambler and a drunkard. He--"
"Hush!" implored Columbine.
"He cheated at cards," declared the cowboy, with a scorn that placed that vice as utterly base.
"But Jack was only a wild boy," replied Columbine, trying with brave words to champion the son of the man she loved as her father. "He has been sent away to work. He'll have outgrown that wildness. He'll come home a man."
"Bah!" cried Moore, harshly.
Columbine felt a sinking within her. Where was her strength? She, who could walk and ride so many miles, to become sick with an inward quaking! It was childish. She struggled to hide her weakness from him.
"It's not like you to be this way," she said. "You used to be generous. Am I to blame? Did I choose my life?"
Moore looked quickly away from her, and, standing with a hand on his horse, he was silent for a moment. The squaring of his shoulders bore testimony to his thought. Presently he swung up into the saddle. The mustang snorted and champed the bit and tossed his head, ready to bolt.
"Forget my temper," begged the cowboy, looking down upon Columbine. "I take it all back. I'm sorry. Don't let a word of mine worry you. I was only jealous."
"Jealous!" exclaimed Columbine, wonderingly.

"Yes. That makes a fellow see red and green. Bad medicine! You never felt it."
"What were you jealous of?" asked Columbine.
The cowboy had himself in hand now and he regarded her with a grim amusement.
"Well, Columbine, it's like a story," he replied. "I'm the fellow disowned by his family--a wanderer of the wilds--no good--and no prospects.... Now our friend Jack, he's handsome and rich. He has a doting old dad. Cattle, horses--ranches! He wins the girl. See!"
Spurring his mustang, the cowboy rode away. At the edge of the slope he turned in the saddle. "I've got to drive in this bunch of cattle. It's late. You hurry home." Then he was gone. The stones cracked and rolled down under the side of the bluff.
Columbine stood where he had left her: dubious, yet with the blood still hot in her cheeks.
"Jealous?... He wins the girl?" she murmured in repetition to herself. "What ever could he have meant? He didn't mean--he didn't--"
The simple, logical interpretation of Wilson's words opened Columbine's mind to a disturbing possibility of which she had never dreamed. That he might love her! If he did, why had he not said so? Jealous, maybe, but he did not love her!
The next throb of thought was like a knock at a door of her heart--a door never yet opened, inside which seemed a mystery of feeling, of hope, despair, unknown longing, and clamorous voices. The woman just born in her, instinctive and self-preservative, shut that door before she had more than a glimpse inside. But then she felt her heart swell with its nameless burdens.
Pronto was grazing near at hand. She caught him and mounted. It struck her then that her hands were numb with cold. The wind had ceased fluttering the aspens, but the yellow leaves were falling, rustling. Out on the brow of the slope she faced home and the west.

A glorious Colorado sunset had just reached the wonderful height of its color and transformation. The sage slopes below her seemed rosy velvet; the golden aspens on the farther reaches were on fire at the tips; the foothills rolled clear and mellow and rich in the light; the gulf of distance on to the great black range was veiled in mountain purple; and the dim peaks beyond the range stood up, sunset-flushed and grand. The narrow belt of blue sky between crags and clouds was like a river full of fleecy sails and wisps of silver. Above towered a pall of dark cloud, full of the shades of approaching night.

"Oh, beautiful!" breathed the girl, with all her worship of nature. That wild world of sunset grandeur and loneliness and beauty was hers. Over there, under a peak of the black range, was the place where she had been found, a baby, lost in the forest. She belonged to that, and so it belonged to her. Strength came to her from the glory of light on the hills.

Pronto shot up his ears and checked his trot.

"What is it, boy?" called Columbine. The trail was getting dark. Shadows were creeping up the slope as she rode down to meet them. The mustang had keen sight and scent. She reined him to a halt.

All was silent. The valley had begun to shade on the far side and the rose and gold seemed fading from the nearer. Below, on the level floor of the valley, lay the rambling old ranch-house, with the cabins nestling around, and the corrals leading out to the soft hay-fields, misty and gray in the twilight. A single light gleamed. It was like a beacon.

The air was cold with a nip of frost. From far on the other side of the ridge she had descended came the bawls of the last straggling cattle of the round-up. But surely Pronto had not shot up his ears for them. As if in answer a wild sound pealed down the slope, making the mustang jump. Columbine had heard it before.

"Pronto, it's only a wolf," she soothed him.

The peal was loud, rather harsh at first, then softened to a mourn, wild, lonely, haunting. A pack of coyotes barked in angry answer, a sharp, staccato, yelping chorus, the more piercing notes biting on the cold night air. These mountain mourns and yelps were music to Columbine. She rode on down the trail in the gathering darkness, less afraid of the night and its wild denizens than of what awaited her at White Slides Ranch.

CHAPTER II

Darkness settled down like a black mantle over the valley. Columbine rather hoped to find Wilson waiting to take care of her horse, as used to be his habit, but she was disappointed. No light showed from the cabin in which the cowboys lived; he had not yet come in from the round-up. She unsaddled, and turned Pronto loose in the pasture.

The windows of the long, low ranch-house were bright squares in the blackness, sending cheerful rays afar. Columbine wondered in trepidation if Jack Belllounds had come home. It required effort of will to approach the house. Yet since she must meet him, the sooner the ordeal was over the better. Nevertheless she tiptoed past the bright windows, and went all the length of the long porch, and turned around and went back, and then hesitated, fighting a slow drag of her spirit, an oppression upon her heart. The door was crude and heavy. It opened hard.

Columbine entered a big room lighted by a lamp on the upper table and by blazing logs in a huge stone fireplace. This was the living-room, rather gloomy in the corners, and bare, but comfortable, for all simple needs. The logs were new and the chinks between them filled with clay, still white, showing that the house was of recent build.

The rancher, Belllounds, sat in his easy-chair before the fire, his big, horny hands extended to the warmth. He was in his shirt-sleeves, a gray, bold-faced man, of over sixty years, still muscular and rugged.

At Columbine's entrance he raised his drooping head, and so removed the suggestion of sadness in his posture.

"Wal, lass, hyar you are," was his greeting. "Jake has been hollerin' thet chuck was ready. Now we can eat."

"Dad--did--did your son come?" asked Columbine.
"No. I got word jest at sundown. One of Baker's cowpunchers from up the valley. He rode up from Kremmlin' an' stopped to say Jack was celebratin' his arrival by too much red liquor. Reckon he won't be home to-night. Mebbe to-morrow."
Belllounds spoke in an even, heavy tone, without any apparent feeling. Always he was mercilessly frank and never spared the truth. But Columbine, who knew him well, felt how this news flayed him. Resentment stirred in her toward the wayward son, but she knew better than to voice it.
"Natural like, I reckon, fer Jack to feel gay on gettin' home. I ain't holdin' thet ag'in' him. These last three years must have been gallin' to thet boy."
Columbine stretched her hands to the blaze.
"It's cold, dad," she averred. "I didn't dress warmly, so I nearly froze. Autumn is here and there's frost in the air. Oh, the hills were all gold and red--the aspen leaves were falling. I love autumn, but it means winter is so near."
"Wal, wal, time flies," sighed the old man. "Where'd you ride?"
"Up the west slope to the bluff. It's far. I don't go there often."
"Meet any of the boys? I sent the outfit to drive stock down from the mountain. I've lost a good many head lately. They're eatin' some weed thet poisons them. They swell up an' die. Wuss this year than ever before."
"Why, that is serious, dad! Poor things! That's worse than eating loco.... Yes, I met Wilson Moore driving down the slope."
"Ahuh! Wal, let's eat."
They took seats at the table which the cook, Jake, was loading with steaming victuals. Supper appeared to be a rather sumptuous one this evening, in honor of the expected guest, who had not come. Columbine helped the

old man to his favorite dishes, stealing furtive glances at his lined and shadowed face. She sensed a subtle change in him since the afternoon, but could not see any sign of it in his look or demeanor. His appetite was as hearty as ever.

"So you met Wils. Is he still makin' up to you?" asked Belllounds, presently.

"No, he isn't. I don't see that he ever did--that--dad," she replied.

"You're a kid in mind an' a woman in body. Thet cowpuncher has been lovesick over you since you were a little girl. It's what kept him hyar ridin' fer me."

"Dad, I don't believe it," said Columbine, feeling the blood at her temples. "You always imagined such things about Wilson, and the other boys as well."

"Ahuh! I'm an old fool about wimmen, hey? Mebbe I was years ago. But I can see now.... Didn't Wils always get ory-eyed when any of the other boys shined up to you?"

"I can't remember that he did," replied Columbine. She felt a desire to laugh, yet the subject was anything but amusing to her.

"Wal, you've always been innocent-like. Thank the Lord you never leaned to tricks of most pretty lasses, makin' eyes at all the men. Anyway, a matter of three months ago I told Wils to keep away from you--thet you were not fer any poor cowpuncher."

"You never liked him. Why? Was it fair, taking him as boys come?"

"Wal, I reckon it wasn't," replied Belllounds, and as he looked up his broad face changed to ruddy color. "Thet boy's the best rider an' roper I've had in years. He ain't the bronco-bustin' kind. He never drank. He was honest an' willin'. He saves his money. He's good at handlin' stock. Thet boy will be a rich rancher some day."

"Strange, then, you never liked him," murmured Columbine. She felt ashamed of the good it did her to hear Wilson praised.

"No, it ain't strange. I have my own reasons," replied Belllounds, gruffly, as he resumed eating.
Columbine believed she could guess the cause of the old rancher's unreasonable antipathy for this cowboy. Not improbably it was because Wilson had always been superior in every way to Jack Belllounds. The boys had been natural rivals in everything pertaining to life on the range. What Bill Belllounds admired most in men was paramount in Wilson and lacking in his own son.
"Will you put Jack in charge of your ranches, now?" asked Columbine.
"Not much. I reckon I'll try him hyar at White Slides as foreman. An' if he runs the outfit, then I'll see."
"Dad, he'll never run the White Slides outfit," asserted Columbine.
"Wal, it is a hard bunch, I'll agree. But I reckon the boys will stay, exceptin', mebbe, Wils. An' it'll be jest as well fer him to leave."
"It's not good business to send away your best cowboy. I've heard you complain lately of lack of men."
"I sure do need men," replied Belllounds, seriously. "Stock gettin' more 'n we can handle. I sent word over the range to Meeker, hopin' to get some men there. What I need most jest now is a fellar who knows dogs an' who'll hunt down the wolves an' lions an' bears thet're livin' off my cattle."
"Dad, you need a whole outfit to handle the packs of hounds you've got. Such an assortment of them! There must be a hundred. Only yesterday some man brought a lot of mangy, long-eared canines. It's funny. Why, dad, you're the laughing-stock of the range!'
"Yes, an' the range'll be thankin' me when I rid it of all these varmints," declared Belllounds. "Lass, I swore I'd buy every dog fetched to me, until I had enough to kill off the coyotes an' lofers an' lions. I'll do it, too. But I need a hunter."

"Why not put Wilson Moore in charge of the hounds? He's a hunter."
"Wal, lass, thet might be a good idee," replied the rancher, nodding his grizzled head. "Say, you're sort of wantin' me to keep Wils on."
"Yes, dad."
"Why? Do you like him so much?"
"I like him--of course. He has been almost a brother to me."
"Ahuh! Wal, are you sure you don't like him more 'n you ought--considerin' what's in the wind?"
"Yes, I'm sure I don't," replied Columbine, with tingling cheeks.
"Wal, I'm glad of thet. Reckon it'll be no great matter whether Wils stays or leaves. If he wants to I'll give him a job with the hounds."
That evening Columbine went to her room early. It was a cozy little blanketed nest which she had arranged and furnished herself. There was a little square window cut through the logs and through which many a night the snow had blown in upon her bed. She loved her little isolated refuge. This night it was cold, the first time this autumn, and the lighted lamp, though brightening the room, did not make it appreciably warmer. There was a stone fireplace, but as she had neglected to bring in wood she could not start a fire. So she undressed, blew out the lamp, and went to bed. Columbine was soon warm, and the darkness of her little room seemed good to her. Sleep she felt never would come that night. She wanted to think; she could not help but think; and she tried to halt the whirl of her mind. Wilson Moore occupied the foremost place in her varying thoughts--a fact quite remarkable and unaccountable. She tried to change it. In vain! Wilson persisted--on his white mustang flying across the ridge-top--coming to her as never before--with his anger and disapproval--his strange, poignant cry, "Columbine!" that haunted her--with his bitter

smile and his resignation and his mocking talk of jealousy. He persisted and grew with the old rancher's frank praise.
"I must not think of him," she whispered. "Why, I'll be--be married soon.... Married!"
That word transformed her thought, and where she had thrilled she now felt cold. She revolved the fact in mind.
"It's true, I'll be married, because I ought--I must," she said, half aloud. "Because I can't help myself. I ought to want to--for dad's sake.... But I don't--I don't."
She longed above all things to be good, loyal, loving, helpful, to show her gratitude for the home and the affection that had been bestowed upon a nameless waif. Bill Belllounds had not been under any obligation to succor a strange, lost child. He had done it because he was big, noble. Many splendid deeds had been laid at the old rancher's door. She was not of an ungrateful nature. She meant to pay. But the significance of the price began to dawn upon her.
"It will change my whole life," she whispered, aghast.
But how? Columbine pondered. She must go over the details of that change. No mother had ever taught her. The few women that had been in the Belllounds home from time to time had not been sympathetic or had not stayed long enough to help her much. Even her school life in Denver had left her still a child as regarded the serious problems of women.
"If I'm his wife," she went on, "I'll have to be with him--I'll have to give up this little room--I'll never be free--alone--happy, any more."
That was the first detail she enumerated. It was also the last. Realization came with a sickening little shudder. And that moment gave birth to the nucleus of an unconscious revolt.
The coyotes were howling. Wild, sharp, sweet notes! They soothed her troubled, aching head, lulled her toward sleep, reminded her of the gold-and-purple sunset, and the slopes

of sage, the lonely heights, and the beauty that would never change. On the morrow, she drowsily thought, she would persuade Wilson not to kill all the coyotes; to leave a few, because she loved them.

Bill Belllounds had settled in Middle Park in 1860. It was wild country, a home of the Ute Indians, and a natural paradise for elk, deer, antelope, buffalo. The mountain ranges harbored bear. These ranges sheltered the rolling valley land which some explorer had named Middle Park in earlier days.

Much of this inclosed table-land was prairie, where long grass and wild flowers grew luxuriantly. Belllounds was a cattleman, and he saw the possibilities there. To which end he sought the friendship of Piah, chief of the Utes. This noble red man was well disposed toward the white settlers, and his tribe, during those troublous times, kept peace with these invaders of their mountain home.

In 1868 Belllounds was instrumental in persuading the Utes to relinquish Middle Park. The slopes of the hills were heavily timbered; gold and silver had been found in the mountains. It was a country that attracted prospectors, cattlemen, lumbermen. The summer season was not long enough to grow grain, and the nights too frosty for corn; otherwise Middle Park would have increased rapidly in population.

In the years that succeeded the departure of the Utes Bill Belllounds developed several cattle-ranches and acquired others. White Slides Ranch lay some twenty-odd miles from Middle Park, being a winding arm of the main valley land. Its development was a matter of later years, and Belllounds lived there because the country was wilder. The rancher, as he advanced in years, seemed to want to keep the loneliness that had been his in earlier days. At the time of the return of his son to White Slides Belllounds was rich in

cattle and land, but he avowed frankly that he had not saved any money, and probably never would. His hand was always open to every man and he never remembered an obligation. He trusted every one. A proud boast of his was that neither white man nor red man had ever betrayed his trust. His cowboys took advantage of him, his neighbors imposed upon him, but none were there who did not make good their debts of service or stock. Belllounds was one of the great pioneers of the frontier days to whom the West owed its settlement; and he was finer than most, because he proved that the Indians, if not robbed or driven, would respond to friendliness.

Belllounds was not seen at his customary tasks on the day he expected his son. He walked in the fields and around the corrals; he often paced up and down the porch, scanning the horizon below, where the road from Kremmling showed white down the valley; and part of the time he stayed indoors.

It so happened that early in the afternoon he came out in time to see a buckboard, drawn by dust-and-lather-stained horses, pull into the yard. And then he saw his son. Some of the cowboys came running. There were greetings to the driver, who appeared well known to them.

Jack Belllounds did not look at them. He threw a bag out of the buckboard and then clambered down slowly, to go toward the porch.

"Wal, Jack--my son--I'm sure glad you're back home," said the old rancher, striding forward. His voice was deep and full, singularly rich. But that was the only sign of feeling he showed.

"Howdy--dad!" replied the son, not heartily, as he put out his hand to his father's.

Jack Belllounds's form was tall, with a promise of his father's bulk. But he did not walk erect; he slouched a little.

His face was pale, showing he had not of late been used to sun and wind. Any stranger would have seen the resemblance of boy to man would have granted the handsome boldness, but denied the strength. The lower part of Jack Belllounds's face was weak.

The constraint of this meeting was manifest mostly in the manner of the son. He looked ashamed, almost sullen. But if he had been under the influence of liquor at Kremmling, as reported the day before, he had entirely recovered.

"Come on in," said the rancher.

When they got into the big living-room, and Belllounds had closed the doors, the son threw down his baggage and faced his father aggressively.

"Do they all know where I've been?" he asked, bitterly. Broken pride and shame flamed in his face.

"Nobody knows. The secret's been kept." replied Belllounds.

Amaze and relief transformed the young man. "Aw, now, I'm--glad--" he exclaimed, and he sat down, half covering his face with shaking hands.

"Jack, we'll start over," said Belllounds, earnestly, and his big eyes shone with a warm and beautiful light. "Right hyar. We'll never speak of where you've been these three years. Never again!"

Jack gazed up, then, with all the sullenness and shadow gone.

"Father, you were wrong about--doing me good. It's done me harm. But now, if nobody knows--why, I'll try to forget it."

"Mebbe I blundered," replied Belllounds, pathetically. "Yet, God knows I meant well. You sure were--But thet's enough palaver.... You'll go to work as foreman of White Slides. An' if you make a success of it I'll be only too glad to have you boss the ranch. I'm gettin' along in years, son. An' the last year has made me poorer. Hyar's a fine range, but I've less stock this year than last. There's been some rustlin' of

cattle, an a big loss from wolves an' lions an' poison-weed.... What d'you say, son?"
"I'll run White Slides," replied Jack, with a wave of his hand. "I hadn't hoped for such a chance. But it's due me. Who's in the outfit I know?"
"Reckon no one, except Wils Moore."
"Is that cowboy here yet? I don't want him."
"Wal, I'll put him to chasin' varmints with the hounds. An' say, son, this outfit is bad. You savvy--it's bad. You can't run that bunch. The only way you can handle them is to get up early an' come back late. Sayin' little, but sawin' wood. Hard work."
Jack Belllounds did not evince any sign of assimilating the seriousness of his father's words.
"I'll show them," he said. "They'll find out who's boss. Oh, I'm aching to get into boots and ride and tear around."
Belllounds stroked his grizzled beard and regarded his son with mingled pride and doubt. Not at this moment, most assuredly, could he get away from the wonderful fact that his only son was home.
"Thet's all right, son. But you've been off the range fer three years. You'll need advice. Now listen. Be gentle with hosses. You used to be mean with a hoss. Some cowboys jam their hosses around an' make 'em pitch an' bite. But it ain't the best way. A hoss has got sense. I've some fine stock, an' don't want it spoiled. An' be easy an' quiet with the boys. It's hard to get help these days. I'm short on hands now.... You'd do best, son, to stick to your dad's ways with hosses an' men."
"Dad, I've seen you kick horses an' shoot at men" replied Jack.
"Right, you have. But them was particular bad cases. I'm not advisin' thet way.... Son, it's close to my heart--this hope I have thet you'll--"
The full voice quavered and broke. It would indeed have been a hardened youth who could not have felt something

of the deep and unutterable affection in the old man. Jack Belllounds put an arm around his father's shoulder.
"Dad, I'll make you proud of me yet. Give me a chance. And don't be sore if I can't do wonders right at first."
"Son, you shall have every chance. An' thet reminds me. Do you remember Columbine?"
"I should say so," replied Jack, eagerly. "They spoke of her in Kremmling. Where is she?"
"I reckon somewheres about. Jack, you an' Columbine are to marry."
"Marry! Columbine and me?" he ejaculated.
"Yes. You're my son an' she's my adopted daughter. I won't split my property. An' it's right she had a share. A fine, strong, quiet, pretty lass, Jack, an' she'll make a good wife. I've set my heart on the idee."
"But Columbine always hated me."
"Wal, she was a kid then an' you teased her. Now she's a woman, an' willin' to please me. Jack, you'll not buck ag'in' this deal?"
"That depends," replied Jack. "I'd marry `most any girl you wanted me to. But if Columbine were to flout me as she used to--why, I'd buck sure enough.... Dad, are you sure she knows nothing, suspects nothing of where you--you sent me?"
"Son, I swear she doesn't."
"Do you mean you'd want us to marry soon?"
"Wal, yes, as soon as Collie would think reasonable. Jack, she's shy an' strange, an' deep, too. If you ever win her heart you'll be richer than if you owned all the gold in the Rockies. I'd say go slow. But contrariwise, it'd mebbe be surer to steady you, keep you home, if you married right off."
"Married right off!" echoed Jack, with a laugh. "It's like a story. But wait till I see her."

At that very moment Columbine was sitting on the topmost log of a high corral, deeply interested in the scene before her.

Two cowboys were in the corral with a saddled mustang. One of them carried a canvas sack containing tools and horseshoes. As he dropped it with a metallic clink the mustang snorted and jumped and rolled the whites of his eyes. He knew what that clink meant.

"Miss Collie, air you-all goin' to sit up thar?" inquired the taller cowboy, a lean, supple, and powerful fellow, with a rough, red-blue face, hard as a rock, and steady, bright eyes.

"I sure am, Jim," she replied, imperturbably.

"But we've gotta hawg-tie him," protested the cowboy.

"Yes, I know. And you're going to be gentle about it."

Jim scratched his sandy head and looked at his comrade, a little gnarled fellow, like the bleached root of a tree. He seemed all legs.

"You hear, you Wyomin' galoot," he said to Jim. "Them shoes goes on Whang right gentle."

Jim grinned, and turned to speak to his mustang. "Whang, the law's laid down an' we wanta see how much hoss sense you hev."

The shaggy mustang did not appear to be favorably impressed by this speech. It was a mighty distrustful look he bent upon the speaker.

"Jim, seein' as how this here job's aboot the last Miss Collie will ever boss us on, we gotta do it without Whang turnin' a hair," drawled the other cowboy.

"Lem, why is this the last job I'll ever boss you boys?" demanded Columbine, quickly.

Jim gazed quizzically at her, and Lem assumed that blank, innocent face Columbine always associated with cowboy deviltry.

"Wal, Miss Collie, we reckon the new boss of White Slides rode in to-day."