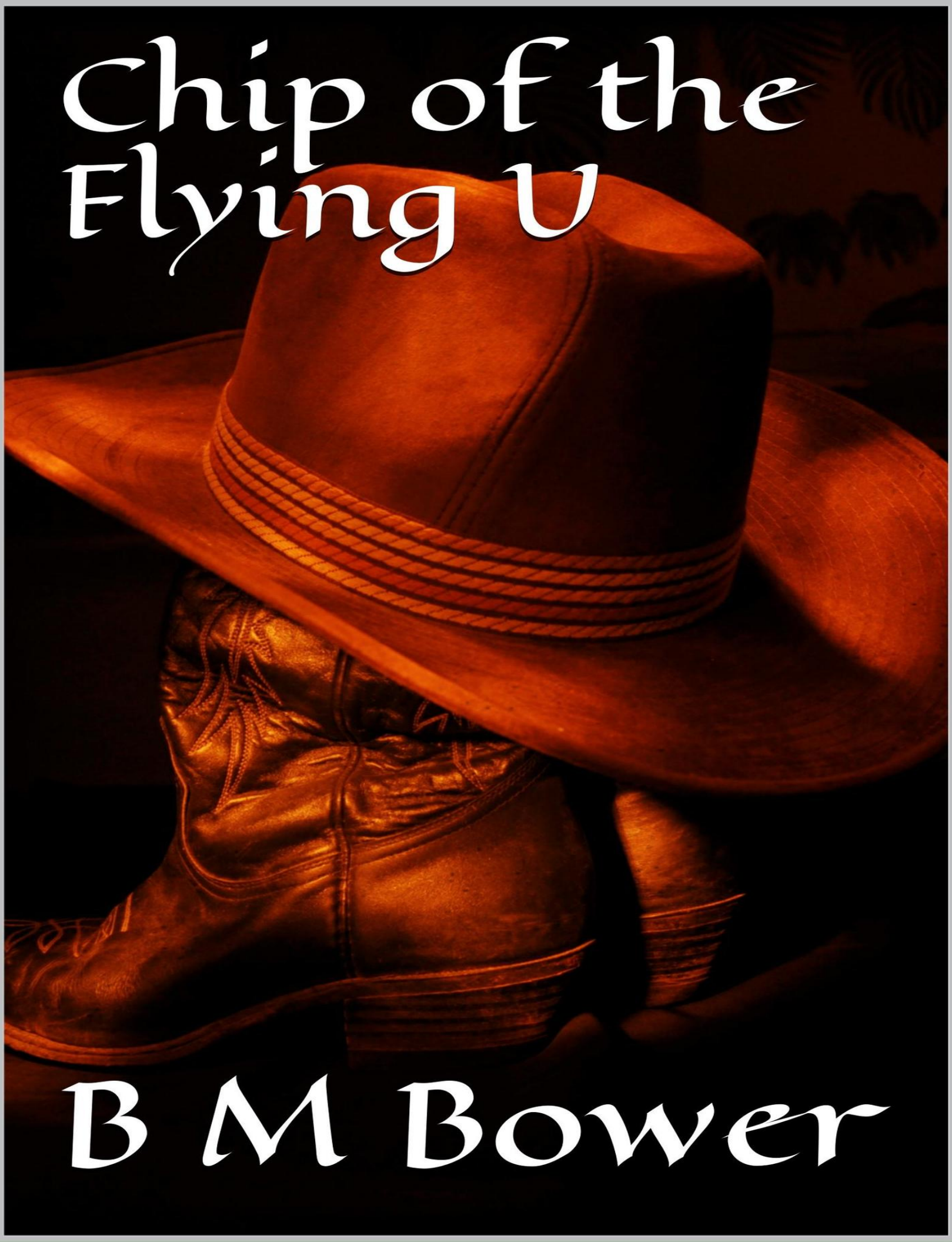
Chip of the Flying U



B M Bower

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CHAPTER I.—The Old Man's Sister.

The weekly mail had just arrived at the Flying U ranch. Shorty, who had made the trip to Dry Lake on horseback that afternoon, tossed the bundle to the "Old Man" and was halfway to the stable when he was called back peremptorily.

"Shorty! O-h-h, Shorty! Hi!"

Shorty kicked his steaming horse in the ribs and swung round in the path, bringing up before the porch with a jerk.

"Where's this letter been?" demanded the Old Man, with some excitement. James G. Whitmore, cattleman, would have been greatly surprised had he known that his cowboys were in the habit of calling him the Old Man behind his back. James G. Whitmore did not consider himself old, though he was constrained to admit, after several hours in the saddle, that rheumatism had searched him out—because of his fourteen years of roughing it, he said. Also, there was a place on the crown of his head where the hair was thin, and growing thinner every day of his life, though he did not realize it. The thin spot showed now as he stood in the path, waving a square envelope aloft before Shorty, who regarded it with supreme indifference.

Not so Shorty's horse. He rolled his eyes till the whites showed, snorted and backed away from the fluttering, white object.

"Doggone it, where's this been?" reiterated James G., accusingly.

"How the devil do I know?" retorted Shorty, forcing his horse nearer. "In the office, most likely. I got it with the rest to-day."

"It's two weeks old," stormed the Old Man. "I never knew it

to fail—if a letter says anybody's coming, or you're to hurry up and go somewhere to meet somebody, that letter's the one that monkeys around and comes when the last dog's hung. A letter asking yuh if yuh don't want to get rich in ten days sellin' books, or something, 'll hike along out here in no time. Doggone it!"

"You got a hurry-up order to go somewhere?" queried Shorty, mildly sympathetic.

"Worse than that," groaned James G. "My sister's coming out to spend the summer—t'-morrow. And no cook but Patsy—and she can't eat in the mess house—and the house like a junk shop!"

"It looks like you was up against it, all right," grinned Shorty. Shorty was a sort of foreman, and was allowed much freedom of speech.

"Somebody's got to meet her—you have Chip catch up the creams so he can go. And send some of the boys up here to help me hoe out a little. Dell ain't used to roughing it; she's just out of a medical school—got her diploma, she was telling me in the last letter before this. She'll be finding microbes by the million in this old shack. You tell Patsy I'll be late to supper—and tell him to brace up and cook something ladies like—cake and stuff. Patsy'll know. I'd give a dollar to get that little runt in the office—"

But Shorty, having heard all that it was important to know, was clattering down the long slope again to the stable. It was supper time, and Shorty was hungry. Also, there was news to tell, and he was curious to see how the boys would take it. He was just turning loose the horse when supper was called. He hurried back up the hill to the mess house, performed hasty ablutions in the tin wash basin on the bench beside the door, scrubbed his face dry on the roller towel, and took his place at the long table within.

"Any mail for me?" Jack Bates looked up from emptying the third spoon of sugar into his coffee.

"Naw—she didn't write this time, Jack." Shorty reached a

long arm for the "Mulligan stew."
"How's the dance coming on?" asked Cal Emmett.
"I guess it's a go, all right. They've got them coons engaged to play. The hotel's fixing for a big crowd, if the weather holds like this. Chip, Old Man wants you to catch up the creams, after supper; you've got to meet the train to-morrow."
"Which train?" demanded Chip, looking up. "Is old Dunk coming?"
"The noon train. No, he didn't say nothing about Dunk. He wants a bunch of you fellows to go up and hoe out the White House and slick it up for comp'ny—got to be done t'-night. And Patsy, Old Man says for you t' git a move on and cook something fit to eat; something that ain't plum full uh microbes."
Shorty became suddenly engaged in cooling his coffee, enjoying the varied emotions depicted on the faces of the boys.
"Who's coming?"
"What's up?"
Shorty took two leisurely gulps before he answered:
"Old Man's sister's coming out to stay all summer—and then some, maybe. Be here to-morrow, he said."
"Gee whiz! Is she pretty?" This from Cal Emmett.
"Hope she ain't over fifty." This from Jack Bates.
"Hope she ain't one of them four-eyed school-ma'ams," added Happy Jack—so called to distinguish him from Jack Bates, and also because of his dolorous visage.
"Why can't some one else haul her out?" began Chip. "Cal would like that job—and he's sure welcome to it."
"Cal's too dangerous. He'd have the old girl dead in love before he got her over the first ridge, with them blue eyes and that pretty smile of his'n. It's up to you, Splinter—Old Man said so."
"She'll be dead safe with Chip. *He* won't make love to her," retorted Cal.

"Wonder how old she is," repeated Jack Bates, half emptying the syrup pitcher into his plate. Patsy had hot biscuits for supper, and Jack's especial weakness was hot biscuits and maple syrup.
"As to her age," remarked Shorty, "it's a cinch she ain't no spring chicken, seeing she's the Old Man's sister."
"Is she a schoolma'am?" Happy Jack's distaste for schoolma'ams dated from his tempestuous introduction to the A B C's, with their daily accompaniment of a long, thin ruler.
"No, she ain't a schoolma'am. She's a darn sight worse. She's a doctor."
"Aw, come off!" Cal Emmett was plainly incredulous."
"That's right. Old Man said she's just finished taking a course uh medicine—what'd yuh call that?"
"Consumption, maybe—or snakes." Weary smiled blandly across the table.
"She got a diploma, though. Now where do you get off at?"
"Yeah—that sure means she's a doctor," groaned Cal.
"By golly, she needn't try t' pour any dope down *me*," cried a short, fat man who took life seriously—a man they called Slim, in fine irony.
"Gosh, I'd like to give her a real warm reception," said Jack Bates, who had a reputation for mischief. "I know them Eastern folks, down t' the ground. They think cow-punchers wear horns. Yes, they do. They think we're holy terrors that eat with our six-guns beside our plates—and the like of that. They make me plum tired. I'd like to—wish we knew her brand."
"I can tell you that," said Chip, cynically. "There's just two bunches to choose from. There's the Sweet Young Things, that faint away at sight of a six-shooter, and squawk and catch at your arm if they see a garter snake, and blush if you happen to catch their eye suddenly, and cry if you don't take off your hat every time you see them a mile off." Chip held out his cup for Patsy to refill.

"Yeah—I've run up against that brand—and they're sure all right. They suit *me*," remarked Cal.
"That don't seem to line up with the doctor's diploma," commented Weary.
"Well, she's the other kind then—and if she is, the Lord have mercy on the Flying U! She'll buy her some spurs and try to rope and cut out and help brand. Maybe she'll wear double-barreled skirts and ride a man's saddle and smoke cigarettes. She'll try to go the men one better in everything, and wind up by making a darn fool of herself. Either kind's bad enough."
"I'll bet she don't run in either bunch," began Weary. "I'll bet she's a skinny old maid with a peaked nose and glasses, that'll round us up every Sunday and read tracts at our heads, and come down on us with both feet about tobacco hearts and whisky livers, and the evils and devils wrapped up in a cigarette paper. I seen a woman doctor, once—she was stopping at the T Down when I was line-riding for them—and say, she was a holy fright! She had us fellows going South before a week. I stampeded clean off the range, soon as my month was up."
"Say," interrupted Cal, "don't yuh remember that picture the Old Man got last fall, of his sister? She was the image of the Old Man—and mighty near as old."
Chip, thinking of the morrow's drive, groaned in real anguish of spirit.
"You won't dast t' roll a cigarette comin' home, Chip," predicted Happy Jack, mournfully. "Yuh want t' smoke double goin' in."
"I don't *think* I'll smoke double going in," returned Chip, dryly. "If the old girl don't like my style, why the walking isn't all taken up."
"Say, Chip," suggested Jack Bates, "you size her up at the depot, and, if she don't look promising, just slack the lines on Antelope Hill. The creams 'll do the rest. If they don't, we'll finish the job here."

Shorty tactfully pushed back his chair and rose. "You fellows don't want to git too gay," he warned. "The Old Man's just beginning to forget about the calf-shed deal." Then he went out and shut the door after him. The boys liked Shorty; he believed in the old adage about wisdom being bliss at certain times, and the boys were all the better for his living up to his belief. He knew the Happy Family would stop inside the limit—at least, they always had, so far.

"What's the game?" demanded Cal, when the door closed behind their indulgent foreman.

"Why, it's this. (Pass the syrup, Happy.) T'morrow's Sunday, so we'll have time t' burn. We'll dig up all the guns we can find, and catch up the orneriest cayuses in our strings, and have a real, old lynching bee—sabe?"

"Who yuh goin' t' hang?" asked Slim, apprehensively. "Yuh needn't think *I'll* stand for it."

"Aw, don't get nervous. There ain't power enough on the ranch t' pull yuh clear of the ground. We ain't going to build no derrick," said Jack, witheringly. "We'll have a dummy rigged up in the bunk house. When Chip and the doctor heave in sight on top of the grade, we'll break loose down here with our bronks and our guns, and smoke up the ranch in style. We'll drag out Mr. Strawman, and lynch him to the big gate before they get along. We'll be 'riddling him with bullets' when they arrive—and by that time she'll be so rattled she won't know whether it's a man or a mule we've got strung up."

"You'll have to cut down your victim before I get there," grinned Chip. "I never could get the creams through the gate, with a man hung to the frame; they'd spill us into the washout by the old shed, sure as fate."

"That'd be all right. The old maid would sure know she was out West—we need something to add to the excitement, anyway."

"If the Old Man's new buggy is piled in a heap, you'll wish

you had cut out some of the excitement," retorted Chip.
"All right, Splinter. We won't hang him there at all. That old cottonwood down by the creek would do fine. It'll curdle her blood like Dutch cheese to see us marching him down there—and she can't see the hay sticking out of his sleeves, that far off."
"What if she wants to hold an autopsy?" bantered Chip.
"By golly, we'll stake her to a hay knife and tell her to go after him!" cried Slim, suddenly waking up to the situation.
The noon train slid away from the little, red depot at Dry Lake and curled out of sight around a hill. The only arrival looked expectantly into the cheerless waiting room, gazed after the train, which seemed the last link between her and civilization, and walked to the edge of the platform with a distinct frown upon the bit of forehead visible under her felt hat.
A fat young man threw the mail sack into a weather-beaten buggy and drove leisurely down the track to the post office. The girl watched him out of sight and sighed disconsolately. All about her stretched the rolling grass land, faintly green in the hollows, brownly barren on the hilltops. Save the water tank and depot, not a house was to be seen, and the silence and loneliness oppressed her.
The agent was dragging some boxes off the platform. She turned and walked determinedly up to him, and the agent became embarrassed under her level look.
"Isn't there anyone here to meet me?" she demanded, quite needlessly. "I am Miss Whitmore, and my brother owns a ranch, somewhere near here. I wrote him, two weeks ago, that I was coming, and I certainly expected him to meet me." She tucked a wind-blown lock of brown hair under her hat crown and looked at the agent reproachfully, as if he were to blame, and the agent, feeling suddenly that somehow the fault was his, blushed guiltily and kicked at a box of oranges.
"Whitmore's rig is in town," he said, hastily. "I saw his man

at dinner. The train was reported late, but she made up time." Grasping desperately at his dignity, he swallowed an abject apology and retreated into the office.

Miss Whitmore followed him a few steps, thought better of it, and paced the platform self-pityingly for ten minutes, at the end of which the Flying U rig whirled up in a cloud of dust, and the agent hurried out to help with the two trunks, and the mandolin and guitar in their canvas cases.

The creams circled fearsomely up to the platform and stood quivering with eagerness to be off, their great eyes rolling nervously. Miss Whitmore took her place beside Chip with some inward trepidation mingled with her relief. When they were quite ready and the reins loosened suggestively, Pet stood upon her hind feet with delight and Polly lunged forward precipitately.

The girl caught her breath, and Chip eyed her sharply from the corner of his eye. He hoped she was not going to scream—he detested screaming women. She looked young to be a doctor, he decided, after that lightning survey. He hoped to goodness she wasn't of the Sweet Young Thing order; he had no patience with that sort of woman. Truth to tell, he had no patience with *any* sort of woman.

He spoke to the horses authoritatively, and they obeyed and settled to a long, swinging trot that knew no weariness, and the girl's heart returned to its normal action.

Two miles were covered in swift silence, then Miss Whitmore brought herself to think of the present and realized that the young man beside her had not opened his lips except to speak once to his team. She turned her head and regarded him curiously, and Chip, feeling the scrutiny, grew inwardly defiant.

Miss Whitmore decided, after a close inspection, that she rather liked his looks, though he did not strike her as a very amiable young man. Perhaps she was a bit tired of amiable young men. His face was thin, and refined, and strong—the strength of level brows, straight nose and square chin, with

a pair of paradoxical lips, which were curved and womanish in their sensitiveness; the refinement was an intangible expression which belonged to no particular feature but pervaded the whole face. As to his eyes, she was left to speculate upon their color, since she had not seen them, but she reflected that many a girl would give a good deal to own his lashes.

Of a sudden he turned his eyes from the trail and met her look squarely. If he meant to confuse her, he failed—for she only smiled and said to herself: "They're hazel."

"Don't you think we ought to introduce ourselves?" she asked, composedly, when she was quite sure the eyes were not brown.

"Maybe." Chip's tone was neutrally polite.

Miss Whitmore had suspected that he was painfully bashful, after the manner of country young men. She now decided that he was not; he was passively antagonistic.

"Of course you know that I'm Della Whitmore," she said.

Chip carefully brushed a fly off Polly's flank with the whip.

"I took it for granted. I was sent to meet a Miss Whitmore at the train, and I took the only lady in sight."

"You took the right one—but I'm not—I haven't the faintest idea who you are."

"My name is Claude Bennett, and I'm happy to make your acquaintance."

"I don't believe it—you don't look happy," said Miss Whitmore, inwardly amused.

"That's the proper thing to say when you've been introduced to a lady," remarked Chip, noncommittally, though his lips twitched at the corners.

Miss Whitmore, finding no ready reply to this truthful statement, remarked, after a pause, that it was windy. Chip agreed that it was, and conversation languished.

Miss Whitmore sighed and took to studying the landscape, which had become a succession of sharp ridges and narrow coulees, water-worn and bleak, with a purplish line of

mountains off to the left. After several miles she spoke. "What is that animal over there? Do dogs wander over this wilderness alone?"

Chip's eyes followed her pointing finger.

"That's a coyote. I wish I could get a shot at him—they're an awful pest, out here, you know." He looked longingly at the rifle under his feet. "If I thought you could hold the horses a minute—"

"Oh, I can't! I—I'm not accustomed to horses—but I can shoot a little."

Chip gave her a quick, measuring glance. The coyote had halted and was squatting upon his haunches, his sharp nose pointed inquisitively toward them. Chip slowed the creams to a walk, raised the gun and laid it across his knees, threw a shell into position and adjusted the sight.

"Here, you can try, if you like," he said. "Whenever you're ready I'll stop. You had better stand up—I'll watch that you don't fall. Ready? Whoa, Pet!"

Miss Whitmore did not much like the skepticism in his tone, but she stood up, took quick, careful aim and fired.

Pet jumped her full length and reared, but Chip was watching for some such performance and had them well under control, even though he was compelled to catch Miss Whitmore from lurching backward upon her baggage behind the seat—which would have been bad for the guitar and mandolin, if not for the young woman.

The coyote had sprung high in air, whirled dizzily and darted over the hill.

"You hit him," cried Chip, forgetting his prejudice for a moment. He turned the creams from the road, filled with the spirit of the chase. Miss Whitmore will long remember that mad dash over the hilltops and into the hollows, in which she could only cling to the rifle and to the seat as best she might, and hope that the driver knew what he was about—which he certainly did.

"There he goes, sneaking down that coulee! He'll get into

one of those washouts and hide, if we don't head him off. I'll drive around so you can get another shot at him," cried Chip. He headed up the hill again until the coyote, crouching low, was fully revealed.

"That's a fine shot. Throw another shell in, quick! You better kneel on the seat, this time—the horses know what's coming. Steady, Polly, my girl!"

Miss Whitmore glanced down the hill, and then, apprehensively, at the creams, who were clanking their bits, wild-eyed and quivering. Only their master's familiar voice and firm grip on the reins held them there at all. Chip saw and interpreted the glance, somewhat contemptuously.

"Oh, of course if you're *afraid*—"

Miss Whitmore set her teeth savagely, knelt and fired, cutting the sentence short in his teeth and forcing his undivided attention to the horses, which showed a strong inclination to bolt.

"I think I got him that time," said she, nonchalantly, setting her hat straight—though Chip, with one of his quick glances, observed that she was rather white around the mouth.

He brought the horses dexterously into the road and quieted them.

"Aren't you going to get my coyote?" she ventured to ask.

"Certainly. The road swings back, down that same coulee, and we'll pass right by it. Then I'll get out and pick him up, while you hold the horses."

"You'll hold those horses yourself," returned Miss Whitmore, with considerable spirit. "I'd much rather pick up the coyote, thank you."

Chip said nothing to this, whatever he may have thought. He drove up to the coyote with much coaxing of Pet and Polly, who eyed the gray object askance. Miss Whitmore sprang out and seized the animal by its coarse, bushy tail.

"Gracious, he's heavy!" she exclaimed, after one tug.

"He's been fattening up on Flying U calves," remarked