HARRY LEON WILSON

EWING'S LADY

Harry Leon Wilson

Ewing's Lady

EAN 8596547236122

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

EWING'S KID

Table of Contents

TWO weeks of instructive contact with the Bar-7 school of gallantry had prepared Mrs. Laithe to be amazed at her first encounter with Ewing's kid. Riding out from the ranch one afternoon and turning, for coolness, up the wooded mesa that rises from the creek flat, she overwhelmed him at a bend in the trail. Stricken motionless, he glared at the lady with eyes in which she was compelled to believe that she read more horror than admiration. There was a moment of this; then her pony neighed a greeting to the statue—of dusty bronze—as if to say that things were not so bad as they seemed, and the gazing youth broke the spell his vision had laid upon him. He bowed his head doggedly and vanished beyond some low-growing cedars that lined the way.

As he fled the lady laughed softly, yet was silent, with face austerely set as she passed the point of his evanishment. His behavior recalled that of a deer she had terrorized one day in this same green isle of the woods; and she had laughed the same furtive laugh, as if in confidence to herself, when the creature tossed its head in challenge, pawed the earth with a dainty bravado, and then fled in such an ecstasy of panic that she could hear it crashing through the underbrush long after it had vanished. But this human woods-creature had gone silently; and no great way, she suspected—far enough only to screen himself while his

eyes still held her through some opening in the green curtain. Wherefore let us comprehend the mien of austerity as she passed.

Elusiveness in the male, be it bluntly said, was confounding to the experience of Mrs. Laithe since she had ventured into the San Juan Mountains under the nominal care of an inattentive brother, and her belief was still firm that the men about her suffered little from shyness. This latest specimen would be a single variation from type and of slight value in determining the ways of his kind.

As her pony picked its way up the trail she mused over the not unpleasant picture of the youth at bay. It was a thing to be caught at the moment, for she would find him otherwise, she believed, at their next meeting. She would come on him some day at Bar-7, or at one of the ranches neighboring it, and find him quite like his fellows, rigidly respectful, but with a self-confidence and a simple directness in his gallantry that had entertained her not a little as practiced by local courtiers. He would be like the others, from Beulah Pierce, owner of Bar-7, down to Shane Riley, humble helper in the cookhouse.

An hour later, refreshed by the balsam-laden air of the upper reaches, she left the woods at the foot of the mesa and rode out on the willow flat, lush with grass for Bar-7's winter feeding. From the first bench above the creek she descried the figures of two men in front of the ranch house. One she saw to be Beulah Pierce, his incredible length draped lazily over the gate that opened into his wife's flower garden. Outside this gate, under the flow of his talk (Pierce would surely be talking) stood one whom the lady, riding

nearer, identified as the youth who so lately had shirked a meeting with her. At this sight she warmed with a little glow of pride in her powers of prophecy. Truly he had waited no long time. His hat was off and he leaned restfully against the withers of a saddled horse, a horse that drooped, head to the ground, in some far low level of dejection.

She laughed again, comprehending the fellow at last. His variation from type had been but seeming, due to an erratic but not constitutional embarrassment. Brazenly enough now he contrived to await her coming, craftily engaging the not difficult Pierce in idle talk. And Pierce, as she rode up, would perform, with stiff importance, the orthodox ceremony of presentation. Whereupon the youth would bow with visible effort, shake her hand with a rigid cordiality, once up, once down, and remark, after swallowing earnestly, "Pleased to meet you, ma'am!" or perhaps, "Glad to make your acquaintance!" Then, tactfully affecting to ignore her, he would demand if Pierce had seen anything of that buckskin mare and colt that strayed off last Tuesday; or if anyone had brought mail up from Pagosa Springs lately; or if Pierce happened to need two thousand hemlock shakes. This query he would follow with a popular local witticism concerning sheepmen or the Colorado climate—nominally addressed to Pierce but intended for her own refreshment. And, in readjusting the silk kerchief at his throat, he would manage a quick side glance at her to see how she relished the jest. For Mrs. Laithe had learned their ways in two weeks, and this was one of them—to favor one another with witty sallies in her presence, and solely in her behalf. All the men of Bar-7 practiced this amiable strategy. When a group of them

assembled within her hearing the swift exchange of repartee, accompanied by the inevitable side glance, was a thing to wonder at.

Indeed, the lady had learned their ways. Even before she neared the gate Alonzo Pierce, son of Beulah, appeared round the corner of the ranch house to take her pony, sauntering with a flagrant *ennui*, in full knowledge that Sandy Goodhue had started violently on the same gallant mission, but from the farthest corral. Shane Riley, chained by his labors to the doorway of the cookhouse, smirked genially out over a pot that he polished; and Red Phinney, star rider at Bar-7, seated himself on the step before the front door, so that he might have to arise with flourishing apologies—a performance that would move the lady to ask about his sprained wrist, now in bandage.

This familiar assembling of her court, professedly casual, was swiftly detected by Mrs. Laithe. But she saw now, being near the gate, a quick turning toward her of the strange youth. It was a brief, impersonal survey that seemed not to disengage her from the background of gray road and yellowish-green willows; but clearly it sufficed. With a curt nod to Pierce he was mounted; in another breath his amazed and indignant horse, spurred viciously from its trance, raged with protesting snorts over the road to the east. As Mrs. Laithe reined up at the gate she beheld, through a nimbus of dust, the rider's boots groping pathetically for their stirrups.

She repressed a little gasp of astonishment in which the natural woman might have betrayed her view of so headlong a retreat, although, had Beulah Pierce been alone

at the gate, she might have descended to speech with him about this strangely retiring youth. But as 'Lon Pierce waited for her pony, with a masterly taunt for Sandy Goodhue, who came up breathless but late, and as Red Phinney had already risen from his obstructive seat in the doorway, his wrist held cunningly forward to provoke solicitous inquiry, the lady passed in with only such easy words as the moment demanded. She was reflecting, with agreeable interest, that the young man's avoidance of her would presently begin to seem pointed.

This conjecture was to be abundantly confirmed. Returning from her ride the following afternoon, she saw that the youth must pass her on the public highway. They were out on the flat, with no arboreal sanctuary for the timid one. The lady looked forward with genial malice to a meeting which, it appeared, he was now powerless to avoid. But the youth, perceiving his plight, instantly had trouble with a saddle girth. Turning well out of the road, he dismounted on the farther side of his horse and busied himself with the mechanics of proper cinching. As Mrs. Laithe rode by she saw only the top of a wide-brimmed gray hat above the saddle.

The day following, when, in an orderly sequence of events, they should have met at the ford, he turned with admirable promptness down the stream, where no trail was, sharply scanning the thinned edge of a wood in the perfect manner of one absorbed in a search for lost stock. Clearly, his was a mind fertile, if not subtle, in resource.

Not until a day later did he come truly to face her, and then only by the circumstance of his being penned by her

within the high-walled corral where Red Phinney broke green horses to ride, work or carry. Returning this day earlier than was her wont, and finding no one at the front of the house to take her pony, she had ridden back to the corrals. Here she delivered the animal to Phinney, but not before the timid one had been compelled to pass her. He did this, she thought, only after swiftly calculating the height of the walls that pent him. And though his hat was doffed as he hurtled by, his eyes were on the ground. Mrs. Laithe, feeling thus at liberty to stare brutally at him, felt a prodigious heightening of that tower of amazement he had been rearing within her mind, for she saw him blush most furiously; beheld it under the brown of his beardless face.

Yet there was more in the young face than this flaunted banner of embarrassment; and scanning it intently, she resolved forthwith to know him.

Late that day she was pleased to come upon Beulah Pierce alone in the big living room of the ranch house. Smoking a last pipe before the call to supper, Beulah relaxed on the "lounge" after a toilsome season of ditch-making.

"Oh, him?" he answered, luxuriously extending legs that seemed much too long for any reasonable need of man, and pulling at his ragged red mustache. "Why, that's Ewing's kid."

"Ewing?" retorted Mrs. Laithe, provocatively, winningly.

"Ewing," affirmed Pierce, with unaccustomed brevity, his mind at dalliance with other matters.

"Ewing's kid," murmured the lady, as if in careless musing.

"Sure, Ewing's kid—Hi Mighty! I struck one o' them willow roots to-day, on that piece o' ditch over on the west forty, an' say! it yanked me clean over the plow handles. It did, fur a fact—straightened me out like a whiplash. It scraped all the wall paper off'n this left shoulder o' mine when I landed, too, say nothin' o' the jounce it give me. Ma, whur's that embrycation fur man *and* beast?" And Beulah laid a gentle hand on the abraded member.

"After you've et a bite," called his wife from the next room. "Shane has the things all on, so come along an' set up."

Beulah erected himself with an unctuous groan and spoke his favorite jest: "Wa'al, le's go out an' see what the neighbors has brought in."

The meal over, Mrs. Laithe again found herself with Pierce in the living room. She sat on the bearskin before the open fire, her hands clasped about her knees. Through the dancing jets of flame she observed the kid of Ewing with his downward, troubled face. Pierce, tucking shreds of tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, glanced toward her, the light of coming talk in his eyes.

"How'd you like that there little red roan you're ridin', Mis' Laithe?" he began.

"Cooney? Oh, Cooney's a dear, generally. Sometimes he's stubborn and pretends to know the way better than I do."

"Sound and kind, though, I bet you."

"Oh, yes; but when I want to ride down the east side of the valley, why does he always try to go up that steep trail to the left? Sometimes I've quite a struggle to keep him in the valley road."

"Wa'al, you see I bought him off'n Ewing's kid an' he wants to git back home. Sure's ever we dast let him loose with the saddle band, he's over to Ewing's place, come sun-up. You give him his head any time—he'll carry you straight there."

"He will?"

"Surest thing *you* know! When that kid breaks a pony he gits it all gentled up so's it hones to git back to him."

"How interesting!"

"Naw—makes lashin's o' trouble fur them that buys off'n him. Say, Mis' Laithe, you was askin' about Ewing's kid."

"Was I?" She looked politely blank.

"Sure you was—jest 'fore supper. Wa'al, Ewing's kid is the son of a man named—now hear me *talk*! Course he's his father's son. Wa'al, anyway, this man Ewing comes in here with this kid about fifteen, sixteen year ago, an' takes that place over there by the lake to git cured up o' the consumption. He was a painter, painted pitchers an' all sech, understand?—puts up a big stoodio with a winder in it six feet high to paint by. But he was puny. He couldn't fat up none. You never seen a critter so gaunted as he was. Some said he never got over losin' his wife. Anyway, 't wa'n't no surprise when he was took off, seven, eight year ago. An' since he died that there kid has sort o' half run the place along with a feller named Ben Crider that the old man had got fur help. O' course we all kind o' looked in on the boy at first to make sure he wa'n't in need, an' done a day's work now an' then, an' they raised a few horses an' a few cattle an' one thing an' another. Trouble with that boy, though, he's always putterin' round with his dad's paint brushes, an'

talkin' about portrayin' art an' all like that, understand? I've told that kid time an' time again, 'Kid,' I says, 'never *you* mind about portrayin' art an' depictin' the linnerments an' the varied aspecks o' nature,' I says; 'you jes' burn up them foolish little long-shanked paint brushes in your Charter Oak cookstove,' I says, 'an' ten' to portrayin' a good little bunch of cattle an' depictin' Ben Crider to work also, an' you'll *git* somewhur's,' I says. But him—why, he jes' moons along. An' Ben Crider ain't much better. Ben ain't no *stimulant* to him. Ben had ort to been the only son of a tenderhearted widow lady of means. That's what he'd ort to been. You give him a new coon song out of a Sunday supplement an' his guitar, an' Ben's fixed fur half a day at least. *He* ain't goin' to worry none about a strayed yearlin' or two. Why, one time, I rec'lect——"

"Then young Mr. Ewing is a painter, too?" she interrupted.

"Wa'al"—Pierce became judicial—"yes an' *no*. He ain't a reg'ler one, like you might say—not like his pa was. Still, he can do hand paintin'—if you want to call it that. Made a pitcher o' me this summer, bein' buckjumped by old Tobe. Tobe was cert'n'y actin' high, wide an' handsome, comin' down with his four hoofs in a bunch, an' me lookin' like my works was comin' all apart the next minute. A *lively* pitcher—yes; but, my Lord! it wa'n't a thing you could show! It made me out that reediculous. Course, I ain't Mrs. Langtry, but you got to draw the line somewhurs, hain't you? Now there"—Beulah pushed an informing thumb toward crayon portraits of himself and Mrs. Pierce that graced the opposite wall in frames of massive gilt, one on either side of the

organ—"that's what you can call art—drawn by a reg'ler one down to Durango—everything showin' like it ort to, expressions *an'* all, even down to Ma Pierce's breastpin an' my watch chain, made out o' my own mother's hair. They're *decent* pitchers. That other one was plumb indecent, I can tell you. Ma she up an' hid it away, quick as she seen it."

"And has he done other things?"

"Hey?"

"Painted other pictures?"

"Slathers—horses an' animals an' Ben Crider with his gun an' all sech, an' deer. Say now, I seen another artist down to the Durango fair last fall that was a genuine wonder an' no mistake. He was writin' callin' cards at a little table, an' he could draw a runnin' deer all in flourishes an' curlycurves, without liftin' his pen from the card, all slick an' natural as you'd want to——"

"Did you know his mother?"

"No-o-o—didn't even know him. I jest stopped to look an' he drawed a fine big bird right while I watched, havin' a ribbon in its bill with my name on it in red ink; about as tasty a thing as you'd care to see, fur a quarter of a dollar. It's round the house somewhur now, I reckon, if you——"

"Ewing's kid's mother?"

"Hey? Oh, no, I never knew that lady. She passed away sommers off up the state before these other parties moved in."

"Does the boy resemble his father?"

"Ewing? Wa'al, not to *say* resemble. In fact he didn't favor him, not at all, that I can rec'lect. He must of been most like his ma."

The lady had been speaking as from a distance, staring fixedly into the fire, with the distraction of one engaged in some hopeless feat of memory. So intently aloof was she that Pierce had to repeat his next remark.

"I say, you don't never want to let Cooney git you started up that trail you was speakin' about. First place, it's steeper'n the side of a house. Next place, ever let him git you to the top, he'd land you slambang over to Ewing's, spite of all you could do."

"Thank you! I'll be sure to remember that. Good night!"

She left him, still with the far-centered, puzzled look on her face—the shadow of some resemblance, indefinite, nameless, but insistent.

CHAPTER II

A LADY LOSES HERSELF

Table of Contents

ONLY a few miles separate Bar-7 from the Ewing place; but they are interesting miles and at least one of them will be found exciting by the town-bred novice. There is a stretch where the trail leaves the valley road and zigzags up the face of the east bench to a height from which one may survey the whole sleeping valley of the Wimmenuche as through a reducing glass. The way seems no broader than one's hand, and to Mrs. Laithe, who approached it from across the flat and studied it for the first time as a practicable thoroughfare, it looked to be impossibly perpendicular; a climb that no horse in its right mind would attempt, an angle of elevation that no rider could sustain.

Brought to incredulity by this survey, she pulled Cooney to a walk as she neared the parting of the ways. Then, indecisively, she let the bridle rein fall on his neck. The little horse loitered on, splashing through the creek with a few leisurely sips of its icy water (taken merely in the spirit of a connoisseur), and a moment later halted where the bench trail turned out. At the beginning of his intimacy with his present rider he had adopted rushing tactics at this point, leaping at the trail in a fine pretense that no other way could have been thought of, and showing a hurt bewilderment when the sudden pull brought him about and into the valley road. For that was a road that led nowhere, since it led away from his home. Day after day he had

played this game, seemingly with an untouched faith that some time he would win. Day after day had he exercised all his powers of astonished protest when the frustrating tug was felt. But these tugs had become sharper, to betoken the rider's growing impatience, and it may be surmised that on this day Cooney had lost his faith. If it were inevitable that one should be whirled back into the broad, foolish way, one might save effort by omitting that first futile rush; one might stop and let evil come. Cooney stopped now, drooping in languid cynicism.

His rider waited, wishing that he had not stopped; wishing he had rushed the trail as always before. She felt the need of every excuse for daring the hazards of that climb. Cooney waited—and waited—morosely anticipating the corrective jerk of a rider who refused to guide him properly by pressing a rein across his neck. The shock was delayed. Cooney thrilled, aspiring joyously. He waited still another uncertain moment, bracing his slim legs. At last, with a quick indrawing of breath, he sprang up the only desirable trail in all the world, with an energy of scurrying hoofs that confined his rider's attention wholly to keeping her seat. She hardly dared look down even when the little horse stopped on a narrow ledge to breathe. Nor did Cooney tarry. Still fearful, perhaps, of that deadly backward jerk, he stopped but once again before the summit was reached. Doubtless he suspected that the most should be made of this probably fleeting mood of compliance in one who had hitherto shown herself inveterately hostile to his most cherished design.

Looking back over the ascent while the stanch little animal panted under her, Mrs. Laithe discovered that the thing had been worth while. The excitement had been pleasurable and the view was a thing to climb for. On the north the valley narrowed to a cañon, its granite sides muffled in clouds of soft green spruce. To the south it widened away until, beyond a broad plain, quickened with flying cloud shadows, a long, low-lying range of blue hills showed hazily, far over the New Mexico border. Straight before her, across the valley, were mountains whose rough summits leaped gray and barren above their ragged hemming of timber—mountains not to be seen from the ranch because of the intervening mesa.

But the picture was not long to be enjoyed—no longer a time than Cooney needed to recover his wind. He was presently off through a sparse grove of aspen, breaking by his own will into a lope as they crossed a wide, grassy meadow, level between the wooded hills that sloped to its edge on either side. And this was the horse who, when he bore her lazily up and down the valley, constantly cropped the good green stuff to right and left, a horse always before willing to loiter, or to stand motionless for an hour with his bridle rein on the ground, while she adventured beyond him on foot. The rider caught his new spirit and laughed as she felt herself hurried to the consummation of this mild adventure; hurried up the long ridge, over a cross system of sudden gullies, through another wide meadow of the mountains where strange cattle paused to regard her rather disconcertingly; on through the gloom of other woods, the trail worrying itself up another ascent, and then out upon an

open summit that looked down upon a tiny lake set in a cup of the hills. On one side the water, its shining surface pierced only by the heaps of hungry trout, flashed the green of chrysoprase up to the spruce trees that crept to its edge; on the other it mirrored a scarred wall of rock that rose sheer from the water to some far, incalculable height, its summit carved into semblances of buttressed castles with gray and splendid battlements.

But Cooney was still loath to linger over mere scenery. He hurried his rider down the ridge and out on a flat of marshy grass, thickly starred with purple gentians. Here he delayed only to recall, as it later appeared, a duty familiar to him in the days before he was sold into bondage. Standing across the trail where it neared the margin of the lake, a sedate-looking cow grazed and was at peace with the world.

Looking up as the horse bore down upon her, and observing that she was expected to move, the cow did so with but slight signs of annoyance in the shaking of her head. The incident, however, was not thus simply to be closed, for now began that which enabled the lady to regard the day as one of red adventure. Cooney swerved from the trail with a suddenness that was like to have unseated his rider. Then as the cow halted, head down and forefeet braced, he swerved once more, heading so obviously for the beast that she turned and trotted off on the trail, mumbling petulant remonstrance. With a knowing shake of his head Cooney fell in behind her.

His intention might no longer be mistaken. He meant to drive the cow. Did she turn aside, Cooney turned aside, ever alert for her slightest deviation. The trail now lay through a

grove of spruce and balsam that had been partially cleared, but the trees were still too many for the lady to relish being hurtled among them by a volatile and too-conscientious cow pony. She found herself eying their charge as alertly as did Cooney himself, praying that the driven beast might prove less reluctant. When she did break from the trail Mrs. Laithe braced herself to meet Cooney's simultaneous detour, and thereafter, until the indignant animal was again in the beaten way, the rider was engaged in avoiding fearful impact with trees and entanglement with low-growing branches. She debated the wisdom of dropping from the saddle and abandoning herself to the more seemly fate of starvation in this wooded fastness. To be sure, there was a chance that Cooney would rush on to find his late master, who might return to solve the problem of the empty saddle. But even so, that young man would only glance at her and run swiftly away, after he had blushed. Moreover Cooney, whom she now believed to be demented, had increased his speed, despite her restraining pulls, while the cow, in a frenzy of desperation, became more daring in her sorties.

Then, to the glad relief of the rider, an opening showed through the trees close ahead, and in another moment Cooney had galloped her out into an extensive clearing. Swiftly about its edge he circled, to thwart a last dash of his prey for the glad, free grazing life from which she had so summarily been withdrawn. Half round the clearing they went in the startled gaze of a person who had been at work over a deer hide in the shade of a mighty hemlock. Then, with lightning swerve pursued and pursuers fled straight and swiftly across the clearing—Cooney close on the flanks

of his prize—into the astounded vision of Ewing's kid, who had sauntered to the open door at the sound of flying hoofs.

Hereupon the little roan abandoned his task, halting before the figure in the doorway. The halt was so abrupt that Mrs. Laithe never knew whether she dismounted or was thrown.

They looked at each other helplessly, the lady's eyes still wide with the dismay that had been growing in them since Cooney's mysterious seizure. She felt herself trembling and she tried to smile. The young man released the arm he had seized to support her and stepped back, putting a hand up to Cooney, who had been mouthing his sleeve with little whinnies of rejoicing.

Then the lady heard the voice of Ewing's kid, heard him say with quick, embarrassed utterance, "It's too bad you went to all that trouble. We're not milking Clara any more."

Still breathing rapidly, she turned half away, confused by this cryptic utterance.

"Clara?—I didn't know—I don't—I beg your pardon, but I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Yes, we don't drive her in any more. Midge came in fresh a few weeks ago, and we let Clara run along with her calf again."

Pondering this item, she put her hands to her head. One of them found her cap which a low branch had raked awry; the other grasped a tangle of hair that muffled the other side of her head, regrettably out of place. From this surprising touch of things she divined the picture she must be making. More, she saw herself dash into this sylvan opening apparently in mad pursuit of a frenzied cow; for, as

a requisite to keeping her seat in the saddle, she had been compelled to seem as eager in the chase as Cooney himself. She sank—collapsed, rather—upon the broad slab of stone before the door, laughing weakly.

The youth looked down at her with puzzled eyes in which she saw alarm rising.

"But I didn't try to chase your cow—I didn't want to," she broke out. "It was your horse; *his* idea, his alone."

There was such fine, shy commiseration in his face as she rose that she laughed again.

"Of course it must have been Cooney's fault," he said. "I might have known that. He used to have to drive her in every day." He regarded her for a moment with a sort of dumb chivalry, then politely offered his hand, saying, with a curious little air of taught formality: "I'm very glad to see you. Thank you so much for coming!"

In avoiding each other's eyes, as their hands fell apart, they both looked out to the person who stooped busily over a deer hide in the shade of the big hemlock. His view of the circumstance was revealing itself. Only his rounded back could be seen, but this rose and fell in the rapid, rhythmic convulsions of silent laughter. They turned quickly back to each other and smiled in a sudden sympathy with his mirth.

"If I may have a glass of water—" she suggested, as a device for establishing ease between them.

"Of course!" He called to the person under the tree, arresting the back at the height of one of its recurrent spasms. The face turned upon them was rigidly sad, a face of almost saturnine solemnity, the face of one who has been brought to view life as an engine of woe. As he ambled

dejectedly toward them, his head bowed from his work-bent shoulders, the lines of grief in his face seemed to deepen, and a gnarled hand tugged at the already drooping ends of his long mustache, as if he would be assured that they, also, testified to the world's objectionableness.

"Mr. Crider, this is Mrs. Laithe—she has come to see us." The youth achieved this with austere formality. The sad one nodded and put forth his hand with a funereal "Glad to know you, ma'am!" as if they met at the open grave of a friend.

"Ben, won't you go to the spring and get her some fresh water? She's thirsty. She's had a hard ride."

The other turned quickly away, and there was a sound as if he had manfully stifled a sob. Ewing faced his guest with eyes that twinkled a bit, she thought, beneath their apologetic droop.

"I'd be glad to have you come inside," he ventured.

CHAPTER III

A PRIVATE VIEW

Table of Contents

FROM the first room, a kitchen and general living room, such as she had learned to know in the other ranch houses, he conducted her up two steps to a doorway, from which he pushed aside a Navajo blanket with its rude coloring of black and red. There was disclosed beyond this an apartment of a sort with which she was more familiar, a spacious studio with its large window giving to the north. In the clear light her eyes ran quickly over its details: the chinked logs that made its walls, the huge stone fireplace on one side, the broad couch along the opposite wall, covered with another of the vivid Navajo weaves, the skins of bear and lynx and cougar on the stained floor, the easel before the window, a canvas in place on it; the branching antlers over the fireplace, contrived into a gun rack; a tall, roughly made cabinet, its single shelf littered with half-squeezed tubes of paint, a daubed palette, and a red-glazed jar from which brushes protruded. Above the couch were some shelves of books, and between it and the fireplace was a table strewn with papers, magazines, a drawing board with a sheet of paper tacked to it, and half a dozen sharpened pencils.

He indicated the couch. "It will be a good thing for you to rest a little," he said. She seated herself with a smile of assent. He rashly began to arrange the pillows for her, but left off in a sudden consciousness of his temerity, withdrawing a few paces to regard her. He was still

apprehensive, but his boy's eyes were full of delight, amusement, curiosity, and, more than all, of a wistfulness like that of a dumb creature. He stepped to the door for the pitcher of water and glass that Ben now brought.

She had studied him coolly as he spoke—the negligent out-of-doors carriage of the figure, not without a kind of free animal grace, the grace of a trampling horse rather than that of soft-going panthers. The floor boards reëchoed to his careless, rattling tread, and occasionally, his attention being drawn to this reverberation, he was at great pains for a moment to go on tiptoe. He was well set up, with a sufficient length of thigh. Mrs. Laithe approved of this, for, in her opinion, many a goodly masculine torso in these times goes for nothing because of a shortness of leg. His hair was a lightish brown and so straight that a lock was prone to come out behind and point uncompromisingly toward distant things. This impropriety he wholly disregarded, whereas the more civilized man would have borne the fault in mind and remembered occasionally to apply a restrictive hand. His face was a long, browned square, with gray eyes, so imbedded under the brow that they had a look of fierceness. His lips showed only a narrow line of color, and trembled constantly with smiles. These he tried to restrain from time to time, with an air of pinning down the corners of his mouth.

She had noted so much while he poured out the water, and now he came to her, walking carefully so as not to thunder with his boots.

"You must have been frightened," he said, and his eyes sought hers with a young, sorry look.

"Not after we left the woods; it wasn't funny among those trees."

He brightened. "I'd always thought women don't like to look funny."

"They don't," said the lady incisively, "no more than men do."

"But you can laugh at yourself," he insisted.

"Can you?" She meditated a swift exposure of his own absurdity at their meetings in the valley, but forbore and spoke instead of his pictures.

"You must show me your work," she said.

For a moment it seemed that she had lost all she had gained with him. He patently meditated a flying leap through the door and an instant vanishing into the nearest thicket. She had an impulse to put out a hand and secure him by the coat. But he held his ground, though all his geniality was suddenly veiled, while he vibrated behind the curtain, scheming escape, like a child harried by invading grown people in its secret playhouse.

She looked cunningly away, examining a rip in her glove.

"I tried to paint a little myself once," she essayed craftily. Nothing came of it. He remained in ambush.

"But it wasn't in me," she continued, and was conscious that he at least took a breath.

"You see, I hadn't anything but the liking," she went on, "and so I had the sense to give it up. Still, I learned enough to help me see other people's work better—and to be interested in pictures."

"Did anyone try to teach you?" he asked.

"Yes, but they couldn't make me paint; they could only make me see."

"Perhaps you could tell me some things," he admitted at last, "if you've tried." He paltered a little longer. Then, "Ben Crider says this is the best thing I've ever done," and he quickly took a canvas from against the wall and placed it on a chair before her.

She considered it so quietly that he warmed a little, like a routed animal lulled once more into security by the stillness.

"Do you get the right light?" he asked anxiously.

She nodded, and managed a faint, abstracted smile, indicative of pleasure. She heard him emit a sigh of returning ease. He spoke in almost his former confiding tone.

"That's our lake, you know, painted in the late afternoon. Ben is set on my sending it down to the Durango fair next month."

It was the lake, indeed, but, alas! an elaborate, a labored parody of it. The dead blue water, the granite wall evenly gray in shadow, garishly pink where it caught the sun, the opaque green of the trees, the carefully arranged clouds in the flat blue sky—all smirked conscious burlesque. It recalled the things in gilt frames which Mrs. Laithe remembered to have seen in front of "art emporiums," on Fourteenth Street, tagged "Genuine Oil Painting," the "$12.00" carefully crossed out and "$3.98" written despairingly below to tempt the alert connoisseur.

She knew the artist's eyes were upon her in appeal for praise. She drew in her under lip and narrowed her eyes as one in the throes of critical deliberation.

"Yes, I should recognize the spot at once," she dared to say at last. "How well you've drawn the rock."

"I hoped you'd like it. I don't mind telling you I put in a lot of time on that thing. I 'carried it along' as my father used to say. I don't believe I could better that. And here are some others."

He displayed them without further urging, his shyness vanished by his enthusiasm, in his eye a patent confusion of pride and anxiety. She found them in quality like the first. In one the valley of the Wimmenuche from the east bench was as precisely definite as a topographical map; in another the low-lying range of hills to the south had lost all their gracious and dignifying haze.

"They are immensely interesting," observed his critic with animation, "It may be"—she searched for a tempering phrase—"it is just possible there's a trick of color you need to learn yet. You know color is so difficult to convict. It's shifty, evasive, impalpable. I dare say that lake isn't as flatly blue as you've painted it, nor that cliff as flatly pink in sunlight. And those hills—isn't there a mistiness that softens their lines and gives one a sense of their distance? Color is *so* difficult—*so* tricky!"

She had spoken rapidly, her eyes keeping to the poor things before her. Now she ventured a glance at the painter and met a puzzled seriousness in his look.

"You may be right," he assented at last. "Sometimes I've felt I was on the wrong track. I see what you mean. You mean you could reach over a mile and pick up the ranch house at Bar-7—that it's like a little painted doll's house; and you mean you could push your finger into those hills, though

they're meant to be a hundred miles away. Well, it serves me right, I guess. My father warned me about color. And I never saw any good pictures but his, and that was years ago. I've forgotten how they ought to look. He sold all his when I was young—all but one."

"You've done well, considering that."

"He said I must learn to draw first—really to draw—and he taught me to do that. I *can* draw. But black and white is so dingy, and these colors are always nagging you, daring you to try them. If I could only learn to get real air between me and those hills. I wonder, now, if my colors seem like those Navajo blankets to you." He flung himself away from the canvases like an offended horse.

"Let me see your black-and-whites," she suggested hastily.

"Oh, those! They don't amount to much, but I'll show you." He thrust aside the canvases and opened a portfolio on the chair.

She saw at a glance that he had been right when he said he could draw. She let her surprise have play and expanded in the pleasure of honest praise. She had not realized how her former disappointment had taken her aback. But he could draw. Here were true lines and true modeling, not dead, as he had warned her, but quick with life, portrayed not only with truth but with a handling all his own, free from imitative touches. He had achieved difficult feats of action, of foreshortening, with an apparently effortless facility—the duck of a horse's head to avoid the thrown rope; the poise of the man who had cast it; the braced tension of a cow pony holding a roped and thrown steer while his rider

dismounted; the airy grace of Red Phinney at work with a stubborn broncho, coming to earth on his stiff-legged mount and raking its side from shoulder to flank with an effective spur. There was humor in them, the real feeling in one of the last. Mrs. Laithe lingered over this.

"It's Beulah Pierce's wife in that flower garden of hers," the artist explained. "It seems kind of sad when she goes out there alone sometimes. You know how tired she generally is, and how homesick she's been for twenty years or so—'all gaunted up,' as Ben says, like every ranchman's wife—they have to work so hard. And in the house she's apt to be peevish and scold Beulah and the boys like she despised them. But when she goes out into that garden——"

"Tell me," said his listener, after waiting discreetly a moment.

"Well, she's mighty different. She stands around mooning at the hollyhocks and petunias and geraniums and things, the flowers that grew in her garden back East, and I reckon she kind of forgets and thinks she's a girl back home again. Her face gets all gentled up. I've watched her when she didn't notice me—she's looking so far off—and when she goes into the house again her voice is queer, and she forgets to rampage till Shane Riley lets the stew burn, or Beulah tracks mud into the front room, or something. I tried to show her there, looking soft, just that way." He sounded a little apologetic as he finished.

"It's delightful," she insisted, "and they're all good—I can't tell you how good. You must do more of them, and"—she paused and shot him a careful glance to determine how wary it behooved her to be—"and I believe you should let