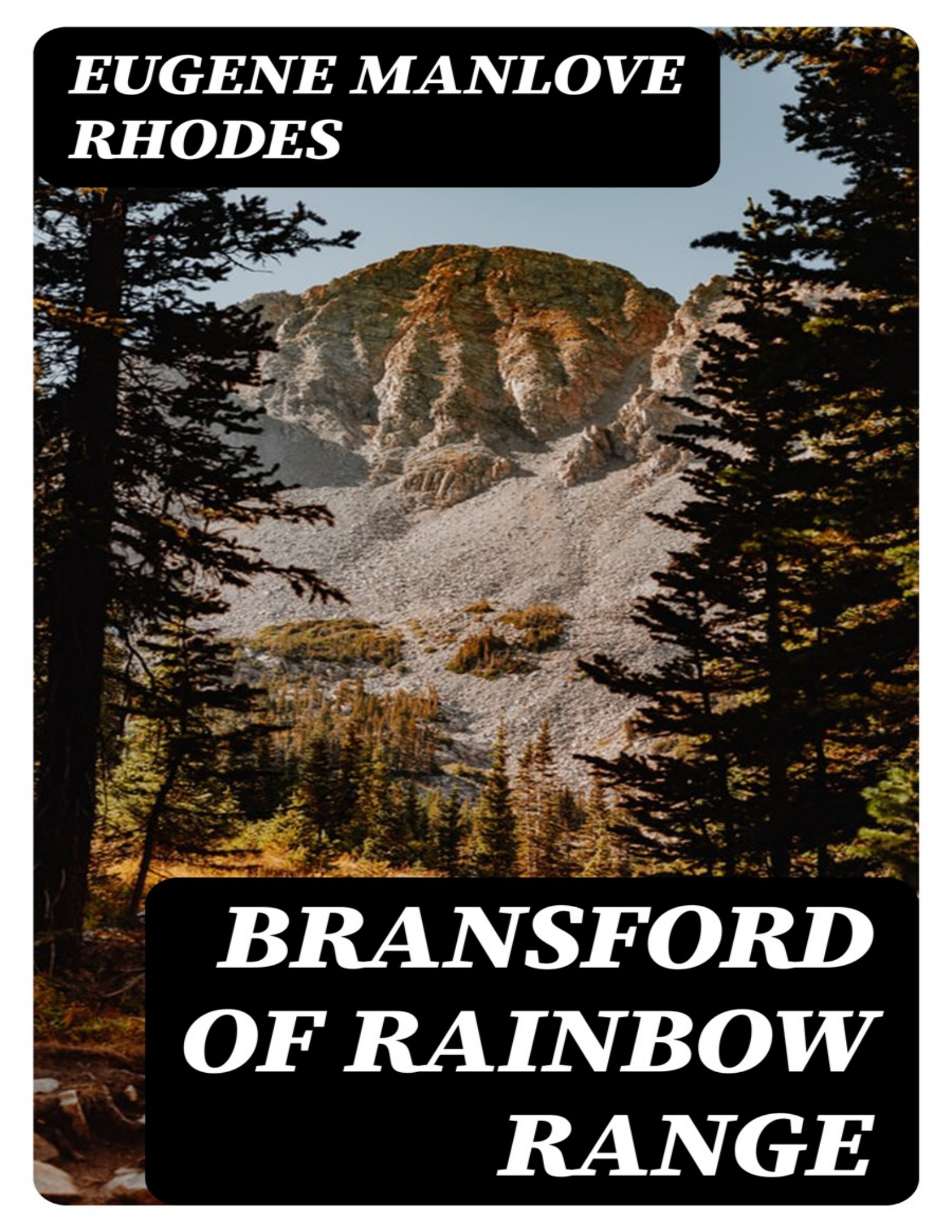




***EUGENE MANLOVE
RHODES***

***BRANSFORD
OF RAINBOW
RANGE***

Eugene Manlove Rhodes

Bransford of Rainbow Range

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PROLOGUE

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I

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The long fall round-up was over. The wagon, homeward bound, made camp for the last night out at the Sinks of Lost River. Most of the men, worn with threescore night-guards, were buried under their tarps in the deep sleep of the weary; sound as that of the just, and much more common.

By the low campfire a few yet lingered: old-timers, iron men, whose wiry and seasoned strength was toil-proof—and Leo Ballinger, for whom youth, excitement and unsated novelty served in lieu of fitness.

The “firelighters,” working the wide range again from Ancho to Hueco, from the Mal Pais to Glencoe, fell silent now, to mark an unstaled miracle.

The clustered lights of Rainbow’s End shone redly, near and low. Beyond, above, dominant, the black, unbroken bulk of Rainbow Range shut out the east. The clear-cut crest mellowed to luminous curves, feathery with far-off pines; the long skyline thrilled with frosty fire, glowed, sparkled—the cricket’s chirp was stilled; the slow, late moon rose to a hushed and waiting world.

On the sharp crest she paused, irresolute, tiptoe, quivering, rosily aflush. Above floated a web of gossamer. She leaped up, spurning the black rim; glowed, palpitant, through that filmy lace—and all the desert throbbed with vibrant light.

Cool and sweet and fresh, from maiden leagues of clean, brown earth the desert winds made whisper in grass and fragrant shrub; yucca, mesquite and greasewood swayed—so softly, you had not known save as the long shadows courtesied and danced.

Leo flung up his hand. The air was wine to him. A year had left the desert still new and strange. “Gee!” he said eloquently.

Headlight nodded. “You’re dead right on that point, son. If Christopher K. Columbus had only thought to beach his shallops on the sundown side of this here continent he might have made a name for himself. Just think how much different, hysterically, these United States——”

“*This* United States,” corrected Pringle dispassionately. Their fathers had disagreed on the same grammatical point.

Headlight scowled. “By Jings! ‘That *this* United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States,’” he quoted. “I was goin’ to give you something new to exercise your talons on. You sit here every night, ridin’ broncs and four-footin’ steers, and never grab a horn or waste a loop, not once. Sure things ain’t amusin’. Some variety and doubtful accuracy, now, would develop our guessin’ gifts.”

Aforesaid Smith brandished the end-gate rod. “Them speculations of yours sorter opens up of themselves. If California had been settled first the salmon would now be our national bird instead of the potato. Think of Arizona, mother of Presidents! Seat of government at Milipitas; center of population about Butte; New Jersey howlin’ about

Nevada trusts!" He impaled a few beef ribs and held them over the glowing embers.

"Georgia and South Carolina would be infested by cow-persons in décolleté leather panties," said Jeff Bransford. "New York and Pennsylvania would be fondly turning a credulous ear to the twenty-fourth consecutive solemn promise of Statehood—with the Senator from Walla Walla urging admission of both as one mighty State with Maryland and Virginia thrown in for luck."

Headlight forgot his pique. "Wouldn't the railroads sound funny, though? Needles and Eastern, Northern Atlantic, Southern Atlantic, Union, Western, Kansas and Central Atlantic! Earnest and continuous demand for a President from east of the Mississippi. All the prize-fights pulled off at Boston."

"Columbus done just right," said Pringle decisively. "You fellers ain't got no imagination a-tall. If this Western country'd been settled first, the maps would read: 'Northeast Territory.—Uninhabitable wilderness; region of storm and snow, roaming savages and fierce wild beasts.' When the intrepid explorer hit the big white weather he'd say, 'Little old San Diego's good enough for me!' Yes, sir!"

"Oh, well, climate alone doesn't account for the charm of this country—nor scenery," said Leo. "You feel it, but you don't know why it is."

"It sure agrees with your by-laws," observed Pringle. "You're a sight changed from the furtive behemoth you was. You'll make a hand yet. But, even now, your dimensions from east to west is plumb fascinatin'. I'd sure admire to have your picture to put in my cornfield."

“Very well, Mr. Pringle: I’ll exchange photographs with you,” said Leo artlessly. A smothered laugh followed this remark; uncertainty as to what horrible and unnamed use Leo would make of Pringle’s pictured face appealed to these speculative minds.

“I’ve studied out this charm business,” said Jeff. “See if I’m not right. It’s because there’s no habitually old men here to pattern after, to steady us, to make us ashamed of just staying boys. Now and then you hit an octagonal cuss like Wes here, that on a mere count of years and hairs might be sized up as old by the superficial observer. But if I have ever met that man more addicted with vivid nonchalance as to further continuance of educational facilities than this same Also Ran, his number has now escaped me. Really aged old people stay where they was.”

“I think, myself, that what makes life so easy and congenial in these latigos and longitudes is the dearth of law and the ladies.” Thus Pringle, the cynic.

A fourfold outcry ensued; indignant repudiation of the latter heresy. Their protest rose above the customary subdued and quiet drawl of the out-of-doors man.

“But has the law no defenders?” demanded Leo. “We’ve got to have laws to make us behave.”

“Sure thing! Likewise, ’tis the waves that make the tide come in,” said Jeff. “A good law is as handy as a good pocketbook. But law, as simply such, independent of its merits, rouses no enthusiasm in my manly bosom, no more than a signboard the day after Hallowe’en. If it occurs to me in a moment of emotional sanity that the environments of the special case in hand call for a compound fracture of the

statutes made and provided—for some totally different cases that happen to be called by the same name—I fall upon it with my glittering hew-gag, without no special wonder. For,” he declaimed, “I am endowed by nature with certain inalienable rights, among which are the high justice, the middle, and the low!”

“And who’s to be the judge of whether it’s a good law or not? You?”

“Me. Me, every time. Some one must. If I let some other man make up my mind I’ve got to use my judgment—picking the man I follow. By organizing myself into a Permanent Committee of One to do my own thinking I take my one chance of mistakes instead of two.”

“So you believe in doing evil that good may come, do you?”

“Well,” said Jeff judicially, “it seems to be at least as good a proposition as doing good that evil may come of it. Why, Capricorn, there isn’t one thing we call wrong, when other men do it, that hasn’t been lawful, some time or other. When to break a law is to do a wrong, it’s evil. When it’s doing right to break a law, it’s not evil. Got that? It’s not wrong to keep a just law—and if it’s wrong to break an unjust law I want a new dictionary with pictures of it in the back.”

“But laws is useful and excitin’ diversions to break up the monogamy,” said Aforesaid. “And it’s a dead easy way to build up a rep. Look at the edge I’ve got on you fellows. You’re just supposed to be honest—but I’ve been proved honest, frequent!”

“Hark!” said Pringle.

A weird sound reached them—the night wrangler, beguiling his lonely vigil with song.

“Oh, the cuckoo is a pretty bird; she comes in the spring
——”

“What do you s’pose that night-hawk thinks about the majesty of the law?” he said. There was a ringing note in his voice. Smith and Headlight nodded gravely; their lean, brown faces hardened.

“You haven’t heard of it? Old John Taylor, daddy to yonder warbler, drifted here from the East. Wife and little girl both puny. Taylor takes up a homestead on the Feliz. He wasn’t affluent none. I let him have my old paint pony, Freckles—him being knee-sprung and not up to cow-work. To make out an unparalleled team, he got Ed Poe’s Billy Bowlegs, née Gambler, him havin’ won a new name by a misunderstanding with a prairie-dog hole. Taylor paid Poe for him in work. He was a willin’ old rooster, Taylor, but futile and left-handed all over.

“John, Junior, he was only thirteen. Him and the old man moseyed around like two drunk ants, fixin’ up a little log house with rock chimbleys, a horse-pen and shelter, rail-fencin’ of the little *vegas* to put to crops, and so on.

“Done you good to drop in and hear ’em plan and figger. They was one happy family. How Sis Em’ly bragged about their hens layin’! In the spring we all held a bee and made their *’cequias* for ’em. Baker, he loaned ’em a plow. They dragged big branches over the ground for a harrow. They could milk anybody’s cows they was a mind to tame, and the boys took to carryin’ over motherless calves for Mis’

Taylor to raise. Taylor, he done odd jobs, and they got along real well with their crops. They went into the second winter peart as squirrels.

“But, come spring, Sis wasn’t doin’ well. They had the Agency doctor. Too high up and too damp, he said. So the missus and Em’ly they went to Cruces, where Em’ly could go to school.

“That meant right smart of expense—rentin’ a house and all. So the Johns they hires out. John, Junior, made his dayboo as wrangler for the Steam Pitchfork, acquirin’ the obvious name of Felix.

“The old man he got a job muckin’ in Organ mines. Kept his hawses in Jeff Isaack’s pasture, and Saturday nights he’d get one and slip down them eighteen miles to Cruces for Sunday with the folks.

“Well, you know, a homesteader can’t be off his claim more’n six months at a time.

“I reckon if there was ever a homestead taken up in good faith ’twas the Butterbowl. They knew the land laws from A to Izzard. Even named their hound pup Boney Fido!

“But the old man waited at Organ till the last bell rang, so’s to draw down his wages, payday. Then he bundles the folks into his little old wagon and lights out. Campin’ at Casimiro’s Well, half-way ’cross, that ornery Freckles hawse has a fit of malignant nostalgia and projects off for Butterbowl, afoot, in his hobbles. Next day, Taylor don’t overtake him till the middle of the evenin’, and what with going back and what with Freckles being hobble-sore, he’s two days late in reachin’ home. For Lake, of Agua Chiquite,

that prosperous person, had been keeping cases. He entered contest on the Butterbowl, allegin' abandonment.

"Now, if it was me—but, then, if 'twas me I could stay away six years and two months without no remonstrances from Lake or his likes. I'm somewhat abandoned myself.

"But poor old Taylor, he's been drug up where they hold bipped life unaccountable high. He sits him down resignedly beneath the sky, as the poet says, meek and legal. We all don't abnormally like to precipitate in another man's business, but we makes it up to sorter saunter in on Lake, spontaneous, and evince our disfavor with a rope. But Taylor says, 'No.' He allows the Land Office won't hold him morally responsible for the sinful idiocy of a homesick spotted hawse that's otherwise reliable.

"He's got one more guess comin'. There ain't no sympathies to machinery. Your intentions may be strictly honorable, but if you get your hand caught in the cogs, off it goes, regardless of how handy it is for flankin' calves, holdin' nails, and such things. 'Absent over six months. Entry canceled. Contestant is allowed thirty days' prior right to file. Next.'

"That's the way that decision'll read. It ain't come yet, but it's due soon.

"This here Felix looks at it just like the old man, only different—though he ain't makin' no statements for publication. He come here young, and having acquired the fixed habit of riskin' his neck, regular, for one dollar per each and every diem, shoo in the reluctant steer, or a fool hawse pirouettin' across the pinnacles with a nosebag on—or, mebbe, just for fun—why, natural, he don't see why life

is so sweet or peace so dear as to put up with any damn foolishness, as Pat Henry used to say when the boys called on him for a few remarks. He's a some serious-minded boy, that night-hawk, and if signs is any indications, he's fixin' to take an appeal under the Winchester Act. I ain't no seventh son of a son-of-a-gun, but my prognostications are that he presently removes Lake to another and, we trust, a better world."

"Good thing, too," grunted Headlight. "This Lake person is sure-lee a muddy pool."

"Shet your fool head," said Pringle amiably. "You may be on the jury. I'm going to seek my virtuous couch. Glad we don't have to bed no cattle, *viva voce*, this night."

"Ain't he the Latin scholar?" said Headlight admiringly. "They blow about that wire Julius Cæsar sent the Associated Press, but old man Pringle done him up for levity and precision when he wrote us the account of his visit to the Denver carnival. Ever hear about it, Sagittarius?"

"No," said Leo. "What did he say?"

"Hic—hock—hike!"



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Escondido, half-way of the desert, is designed on simple lines. The railroad hauls water in tank-cars from Dog Cañon. There is one depot, one section-house, and one combination post-office-hotel-store-saloon-stage-station, kept by Ma Sanders and Pappy Sanders, in about the order mentioned. Also, one glorious green cottonwood, one pampered rosebush, jointly the pride and delight of Escondido,

ownerless, but cherished by loving care and “toted” tribute of waste water.

Hither came Jeff and Leo, white with the dust of twenty starlit leagues, for accumulated mail of Rainbow South. Horse-feeding, breakfast, gossip with jolly, motherly Ma Sanders, reading and answering of mail—then their beauty nap; so missing the day’s event, the passing of the Flyer. When they woke Escondido basked drowsily in the low, westering sun. The far sunset ranges had put off their workaday homespun brown and gray for chameleon hues of purple and amethyst; their deep, cool shadows, edged with trembling rose, reached out across the desert; the velvet air stirred faintly to the promise of the night.

The agent was putting up his switch-lights; from the kitchen came a cheerful clatter of tinware.

“Now we buy some dry goods and wet,” said Leo. They went into the store.

“That decision’s come!” shrilled Pappy in tremulous excitement. “It’s too durn bad! Registered letters from Land Office for Taylor and Lake, besides another for Lake, not registered.”

“That one from the Land Office, too?” said Jeff.

“Didn’t I jest tell ye? Say, it’s a shame! Why don’t some of you fellers—Gosh! If I was only young!”

“It’s a travesty on justice!” exclaimed Leo indignantly. “There’s really no doubt but that they decided for Lake, I suppose?”

“Not a bit. He’s got the law with him. Then him and the Register is old cronies. Guess this other letter is from him unofficial, likely.”

Jeff seated himself on a box. "How long has this Lake got to do his filing in, Pappy?"

"Thirty days from the time he signs the receipt for this letter—durn him!"

"Some one ought to kidnap him," said Leo.

"Why, that's illegal!" Jeff nursed his knee, turned his head to one side and chanted thoughtfully:

"Said the little Eohippus,
'I'm going to be a horse,
And on my middle fingernails
To run my earthly course'——"

He broke off and smiled at Leo indulgently. Leo glanced at him sharply; this was Jeff's war-song aforesaid. But it was to Pappy that Jeff spoke:

"Dad, you're a better'n any surgeon. Wish you'd go out and look at Leo's horse. His ankle's all swelled up. I'll be mixin' me up a toddy, if Ma's got any hot water. I'm feeling kinder squeamish."

"Hot toddy, this weather? Some folks has queer tastes," grumbled Pappy. "Ex-cuse me! Me and Leo'll go look at the Charley-horse. That bottle under the shelf is the best." He bustled out. But Jeff caught Ballinger by the sleeve.

"Will you hold my garments while I stone Stephen?" he hissed.

"I will," said Leo, meeting Jeff's eye. "Hit him once for me."

"Move the lever to the right, you old retrograde, and get Pappy to gyратin' on his axis some fifteen or twenty minutes, you listenin' reverently. Meanwhile, I'll make the

necessary incantations. Git! Don't look so blamed intelligent, or Pappy'll be suspicious."

Bransford hastened to the kitchen. "Ma Sanders, a bronc fell on me yesterday and my poor body is one big stone bruise. Can I borrow some boiling water to mix a small prescription, or maybe seven? One when you first feel like it, and repeat at intervals, the doctor says."

"Don't you get full in *my* house, Jeff Bransford, or I'll feed you to the hawgs. You take three doses, and that'll be a-plenty for you."

Jeff put the steaming kettle on the rusty store stove, used as a waste-paper basket through the long summer. Touching off the papers with a match, he smashed an empty box and put it in. Then he went into the post-office corner and laid impious hands on the United States Mail.

First he steamed open Lake's unregistered letter from the Land Office. It was merely a few typewritten lines, having no reference to the Butterbowl: "Enclosing the Plat of TP. 14 E. of First Guide Meridan East Range S. of 3d Standard Parallel South, as per request."

He paused to consider. His roving eye lit on the wall, where the Annual Report of the Governor of New Mexico hung from a nail. "The very thing," he said. Pasted in the report was a folded map of the Territory. This he cut out, refolded it till it slipped in the violated envelope, dabbed the flap neatly with Pappy's mucilage, and returned the letter to its proper pigeonhole.

He replenished the fire with another box, subjected Lake's registered letter to the steaming process and opened it with delicate caution. It was the decision; it was in Lake's

favor; and it went into the fire. Substituting for it the Plat of TP. 14 and the accompanying letter he resealed it with workmanlike neatness, and then restored it with a final inspection. "The editor sits on the madhouse floor, and plays with the straws in his hair!" he murmured, beaming with complacent pride and reaching for the bottle.

Pappy and Leo found him with his hands to the blaze, shivering. "I feel like I was going to have a chill," he complained. But with a few remedial measures he recuperated sufficiently to set off for Rainbow after supper.

"Charley's ankle seems better," said Leo artlessly.

"Don't you lay no stress on Charley's ankle," said Jeff, in a burst of confidence. "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be otherwise. Just let Charley's ankle slip your memory."

The following day Bransford drew rein at Wes Pringle's shack and summoned him forth.

"Mr. John Wesley Also Ran Pringle," he said impressively, "I have taken a horse-ride over here to put you through your cataclysm. Will you truthfully answer the rebuses I shall now propound to the best of your ability, and govern yourself accordingly till the surface of Hades congeals to glistening bergs, and that with no unseemly curiosity?"

"Is it serious?" asked Pringle anxiously.

"This is straight talk."

Pringle took a long look and held up his hand. "I will," he said soberly.

"John Wesley, do you or do you not believe Stephen W. Lake, of Agua Chiquite, to be a low-down, coniferous skunk by birth, inclination and training?"

"I do."

“John Wesley, do you or do you not possess the full confidence and affection of Felix, the night-hawk, otherwise known and designated as John Taylor, Junior, of Butterbowl, Esquire?”

“I do.”

“Do you, John Wesley Pringle, esteem me, Jeff Bransford, irrespective of color, sex or previous condition of turpitude, to be such a one as may be safely tied to when all the hitching-posts is done pulled up, and will you now promise to love, honor and obey me till the cows come home, or till further orders?”

“I do—I will. And may God have mercy on my soul.”

“Here are your powders, then. Do you go and locate the above-mentioned and described Felix, and impart to him, under the strict seal of secrecy, these tidings, to wit, namely: That you have a presentiment, almost amounting to conviction, that the Butterbowl contest is decided in Lake’s favor, but that your further presentiments is that said Lake will not use his prior right. If Taylor should get such a decision from the Land Office don’t let him or Felix say a word to no one. If Mr. B. Body should ask, tell ’em ’twas a map, or land laws, or something. Moreover, said Felix he is not to stab, cut, pierce or otherwise mutilate said Lake, nor to wickedly, maliciously, feloniously and unlawfully fire at or upon the person of said Lake with any rifle, pistol, musket or gun, the same being then and there loaded with powder and with balls, shots, bullets or slugs of lead or other metal. You see to that, personal. I’d go to him myself, but he don’t know me well enough to have confidence in my divinations.

“You promulgate these prophecies as your sole personal device and construction—*sabe*? Then, thirty days after Lake signs a receipt for his decision—and you will take steps to inform yourself of that—you sidle casually down to Roswell with old man Taylor and see that he puts preëmption papers on the Butterbowl. Selah!”



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The first knowledge Lake had of the state of affairs was when the Steam Pitchfork punchers informally extended to him the right hand of fellowship (hitherto withheld) under the impression that he had generously abstained from pushing home his vantage. When, in the mid-flood of his unaccountable popularity, the situation dawned upon him, he wisely held his peace. He was a victim of the accomplished fact. Taylor had already filed his preëmption. So Lake reaped volunteer harvest of good-will, bearing his honors in graceful silence.

On Lake's next trip to Escondido, Pappy Sanders laid aside his marked official hauteur. Lake stayed several days, praised the rosebush and Ma Sanders' cookery, and indulged in much leisurely converse with Pappy. Thereafter he had a private conference with Stratton, the Register of the Roswell Land Office. His suspicion fell quite naturally on Felix, and on Jeff as accessory during the fact.

So it was that, when Jeff and Leo took in Roswell fair (where Jeff won a near-prize at the roping match), Hobart, the United States Marshal, came to their room. After introducing himself he said:

“Mr. Stratton would like to see you, Mr. Bransford.”

“Why, that’s all right!” said Jeff genially. “Some of my very great grandfolks was Dacotahs and I’ve got my name in ‘Who’s Sioux’—but I’m not proud! Trot him around. Exactly who is Stratton, anyhow?”

“He’s the Register of the Land Office—and he wants to see you there on very particular business. I’d go if I was you,” said the Marshal significantly.

“Oh, that way!” said Jeff. “Is this an arrest, or do you just give me this *in-vite* semi-officiously?”

“You accuse yourself, sir. Were you expecting arrest? That sounds like a bad conscience.”

“Don’t you worry about my conscience. ‘If I’ve ever done anything I’m sorry for I’m glad of it.’ Now this Stratton party—is he some aged and venerable? ‘Cause, if he is, I waive ceremony and seek him in his lair at the witching hour of two this *tarde*. And if not, not.”

“He’s old enough—even if there were no other reasons.”

“Never mind any other reasons. It shall never be said that I fail to reverence gray hairs. I’ll be there.”

“I guess I’ll just wait and see that you go,” said the Marshal.

“Have you got any papers for me?” asked Jeff politely.

“No.”

“This is my room,” said Jeff. “This is my fist. This is me. That is my door. Open it, Leo. Mr. Hobart, you will now make rapid forward motions with your feet, alternately, like a man removing his company from where it is not desired—or I’ll go through you like a domesticated cyclone. See you at two, sharp!” Hobart obeyed. He was a good judge of men.

Jeff closed the door. “‘We went upon the battlefield,’” he said plaintively, “‘before us and behind us, and every which-a-way we looked, we seen a roscerhinus.’ We went into another field—behind us and before us, and every which-a-way we looked, we seen a rhinusorus. Mr. Lake has been evidently browsin’ and pe-rusing around, and poor old Pappy, not being posted, has likely been narratin’ about Charley’s ankle and how I had a chill. Wough-ough!”

“It looks that way,” confessed Leo. “*Did* you have a chill, Jeff?”

Jeff’s eyes crinkled. “Not so nigh as I am now. But shucks! I’ve been in worse emergencies, and I always emerged. Thanks be, I can always do my best when I have to. Oh, what a tangled web we weave when we don’t keep in practice! If I’d just come out straightforward and declared myself to Pappy, he’d ‘a’ tightened up his drawstrings and forgot all about my chill. But, no, well as I know from long experience that good old human nature’s only too willin’ to do the right thing and the fair thing—if somebody’ll only tip it off to ‘em—I must play a lone hand and not even call for my partner’s best. Well, I’m goin’ to ramify around and scrutinize this here Stratton’s numbers, equipments and disposition. Meet me in the office at the fatal hour!”

The Marshal wore a mocking smile. Stratton, large, florid, well-fed and eminently respectable, turned in his revolving chair with a severe and majestic motion; adjusted his glasses in a prolonged and offensive examination, and frowned portentously.