

A photograph of a wooden fence with tall grass in the foreground and trees in the background. The fence is made of dark wood and has a wire mesh section. The grass is tall and thin, with some seed heads. The background shows trees and a clear sky.

***ZANE
GREY***

***THE DRIFT
FENCE***

Zane Grey

The Drift Fence

EAN 8596547397564

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

[CHAPTER XV](#)

[CHAPTER XVI](#)

[CHAPTER XVII](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIX](#)

[CHAPTER XX](#)

[CHAPTER XXI](#)

[CHAPTER XXII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII](#)

[THE END](#)

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

MOLLY DUNN sat waiting on the rickety old porch of Enoch Summers' store in the village of West Fork. For once she was oblivious to the approach of the lean-faced, long-legged young backwoodsmen who lounged there with their elders. Molly was sixteen and on the eve of a great adventure. She had been invited to ride to Flagerstown with the Sees. She had been there once some years before and the memory had haunted her. In her pocket she had money to buy new stockings and shoes, which compensated somewhat for the fact that she carefully kept her feet and ankles hidden under the bench. She wore her good dress and bonnet, and though not satisfied with them she was not ashamed.

Andy Stoneham, a tall youth with sallow face and fuzzy beard, edged over closer and closer.

"Reckon you're orful stuck up this mawnin'," he drawled.

Molly looked at the bullet holes in the wall of the old store. She had seen them before, and long ago when she was ten she had stuck her finger in them and wondered about the battle that had been fought there once.

"Goin' up to Flag, huh?"

"Do you think I'd dress up like this for West Fork?" inquired Molly, loftily.

"Wal, you used to, didn't you? You shore look purty. But I can't see you've any call to get uppish. I've seen you in thet rig before, haven't I?"

"I don't remember, Andy."

"Then you've got a darn short memory," replied Andy, bluntly. "Didn't I take you to the last dance in that dress?"

"Did you?"

"Wal, I shore did. An' didn't I hug you in it?"

"Did you?" queried Molly, flippantly.

"You bet I did."

"I've forgotten. But I've heard it said you're so big an' awkward you have to hold on to a girl when you dance. Else you'd fall down."

"Wal, how about kissin' you, too? On the way to the dance an' drivin' home?"

"Oh, did you!" retorted Molly, her face hot. Andy's voice carried rather far. "An' what did I do?"

"Wal, I figger that you kissed me back an' then slapped my face."

"Andy Stoneham, you're a liar about that first."

"Haw! Haw! ... Say, Molly, there's goin' to be a dance next week."

"Where at?"

"Hall's Mill. Come on an' go."

"Andy, I don't like that place," returned Molly, regretfully. "Besides, I wouldn't go with you, anyway."

"Wal, you shore air gettin' stuck up. An' why not?"

"Because of what you said—about huggin' an' kissin' me."

"What of that? I did an' you liked it. Aw, you're funny. Haven't all the boys done the same?"

"They have not," declared Molly. "Who ever said such a thing?"

"I heerd Sam Wise say it. An' Bill Smith laughed, though he didn't say nothin'."

"So that's the kind of fellows you are!" exclaimed Molly. "Talk about a girl behind her back? ... To kiss an' tell!"

"Wal, at thet we're not so gabby as your cowboy admirers from Pleasant Valley. Take thet red-headed cowpuncher. Accordin' to his talk he's a tall fellar with gurls. He shore had you crazy about him."

"He did not," said Molly, hotly.

"Wal, you acted orful queer then. Danced all the time with him. An' three times walked out under the pines. Aw, I watched you. An' come Saturday night he was drinkin' heah, an' accordin' to his talk he could have had a lot more than huggin' an' kissin' from you, if he only got you alone."

"Andy Stoneham!—You let him talk that way about me?"

"Wal, why should I care? You've shore been mean to me."

"Why should you, indeed?" replied Molly, coldly, and turned away.

At that juncture a horseman rode up and his advent not only interrupted Molly's argument with her loquacious admirer, but had a decided quieting effect upon the other occupants of the porch. He was a lean range-rider, neither young nor old, and he fitted the hard country. His horse showed the dust and strain of long travel.

"Howdy, Seth," said old Enoch Summers, rubbing his bristled chin and stepping out. "'Pears like you been humpin' it along. Whar you come from?"

"Me an' Arch Dunn just rode over from the Diamond," replied the other.

Molly's attention quickened to interest at the mention of her brother. Seth Haverly was his boon companion and they had been up to something.

"Wal, thar's news stickin' out all over you," drawled Summers.

"Reckon so."

"Git down an' come in. Mebbe a drink wouldn't go bad."

"Nope. I'm goin' home an' get a snack of grub."

One by one the men on the porch joined Summers. The fact that Seth Haverly did not want a drink, as much as his arrival, interested them.

Haverly had a still brown face and intent light eyes.

"Enoch, you know thet drift fence we been hearin' about for the last year?" he asked.

"Reckon I heerd the talk."

"Wal, it's more'n talk now."

"You don't say?"

"Yep. Me an' Arch rode along it, for ten miles, I figger. Straight as a bee-line. New three-wire fence, an' barbed at thet!"

"What you say? Barbed!"

"You bet."

Silence greeted Seth's nonchalant affirmative.

"Arch had a hunch about this fence goin' up," went on Haverly. "An' in Flag we found it was a fact."

"Wal, who's buildin' it?"

"Traft."

"Ahuh. He could afford it. Wal, what's his idee?"

"It ain't very flatterin' to West Fork," drawled Seth, with a grin. "We heerd some things thet'd be hard for you old

cattle-nesters to swaller, if they're true. But me an' Arch only had the word of some idle cowpunchers. We couldn't get any satisfaction from Traft's outfit. New foreman. Nephew from Missourie, we heerd. Tenderfoot, but I agree with Arch, who said he was no fool. Anyway, we asked him polite like: 'Say, mister, what's the idee of this drift fence?'—An he looked me an' Arch over an' said, 'What do you suppose the idee is?'"

"Short an' sweet!" ejaculated a man standing beside Summers. "Wal, you two-bit free-range cattlemen can put thet in your pipes an' smoke it."

Whereupon he strode off the porch and down the road, erect and forceful, his departure expressive of much.

"Me an' Arch was sure curious about this fence," continued Seth. "We rode out of Flag an' started in where the fence begins. It strikes south into the timber at Traft's line, an' closes up every draw clear to the Diamond. At Limestone we hit into Traft's outfit. They've got the job half done an' by the time the snow flies thet drift fence will run clear from Flag to Black Butte."

"Ha! A hundred miles of drift fence!" exclaimed some one.

"Ahuh," nodded Summers, sagely. "An' all the cattle will drift along to Black Butte an' then drift back again."

Haverly swung his spurred boot back to his stirrup and without another word rode away.

Molly watched the departing rider as thoughtfully as any of the others on Summers' porch. This drift fence must be going to have a profound significance for the few inhabitants along the West Fork of the Cibeque.

Then down the road from the other direction appeared the See buckboard, sight of which brought Molly bouncing to her feet. To her relief young John See was not in the vehicle with his parents. John had more prospects than any of the young men Molly knew, but he also had more than his share of their demerits. The buckboard rolled to a stop.

"Hop up, Molly," called See, gayly. "We're late an' it ain't no fault of yours."

"Good mawnin'," returned Molly, brightly, as she climbed to the seat beside Mrs. See.

"Mornin' lass," replied the rancher's wife. "You look like you could fly as well as hop."

"Oh, I'm on pins," cried Molly. "I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"Howdy, Caleb," spoke up Summers. "Reckon you've got time to come inside a minute."

"Mawnin', Enoch," replied See, which greeting included the others present. "I'm in a hurry."

"Wal, come in anyhow," returned Summers, bluntly, and went into the store.

See grumbled a little, as he wound the reins around the brake-handle, and laboriously got down. He was a heavy man, no longer young. All the loungers on the porch followed him into the store, but Andy Stoneham remained in the door, watching Molly.

"That lout's makin' sheep eyes at you, Molly," said Mrs. See.

Molly did not look. "He just said some nasty things to me," she confided. "Then the fool asked me to go to a dance at Hall's Mill."

"Molly, you're growin' up an' it's time you got some sensible notions," said Mrs. See, seriously.

"I'm goin' to Flag," trilled Molly, as if that momentous adventure was all that mattered.

"Lass, you're a bad combination. You're too pretty an' too crazy. I reckon it's time to get you a husband."

Molly laughed and blushed. "That's what ma says. But it's funny. I have to work hard enough now."

Caleb See came stamping out of the store, wiping his beard, sober of face where he had been merry. Without a word he stepped into the buckboard, making it lurch, and drove away. Molly was reminded of the news about the drift fence.

"Mrs. See, while I was waitin' for you Seth Haverly rode up," said Molly. "He'd just come in from the Diamond with my brother Arch. They'd been to Flag. An' he was tellin' old Enoch Summers about a fence that was bein' built, down across the country. A drift fence, he called it. What's a drift fence?"

While Mrs. See pondered over the query Caleb answered.

"Wal, lass, it's no wonder you ask, seein' we don't have no fences in this country. On a free range cattle travel all over, accordin' to water an' grass. Now a drift fence is somethin' that changes a free range. It ain't free no more. It's a rough country this side of the Diamond. All the draws head up on top an' run down into the West Fork, an' into the Cibeque. Water runs down these draws, an' feed is good. Wal, a drift fence built on top an' runnin' from Flag down country will keep the cattle on top. They'll drift along an' water down on the other side. Then they'll drift back."

"Why were they so serious about it?" asked Molly, curiously. "Isn't a drift fence a good thing?"

"Reckon it is, for Traft an' Blodgett, an' the big cattlemen up Flag way. But for us folks, who live off the Diamond, it ain't so good."

"Most of us couldn't live much worse," replied Molly, thoughtfully.

"You bet you could, lass. Haven't you always had milk an' beefsteak, an' shoes to wear?"

"Most always, but not always. Just now I'm walkin' in my bare toes," said Molly, with giggle. "If I hadn't saved up money enough to buy stockings an' shoes I'd never come."

"Molly, you goin' to have a new dress, too," declared Mrs. See. "I didn't tell you we are goin' to a picnic. Goin' to be a big time in Flag on Saturday, most like the Fourth."

"Oh, heavenly!" exclaimed Molly, rapturously. "An' to think I almost didn't come! ... Mrs. See, you're awfully kind."

Mr. See went on with something in his mind. "No Molly, we've been fair to middlin' prosperous down here in the valley. But this drift fence will make a difference."

"Caleb, isn't the land owned by the government? Couldn't any man homestead it?"

"Shore. An' there's the rub. Traft has no right to fence this free range. But he's a rich, powerful old duffer an' bull-headed as one of his steers. Who're we down here to go to law? An' where'd we go? Fairfield, the county seat, is farther away than Flag. It takes time an' money to travel."

"Oh, dear!" sighed the good woman. "Then it'll mean hard times."

“Wal, Susan, we can stand hard times, an’ I reckon come out ahead. But this drift fence means trouble. It’s a slap in the face to every free ranger in this section. They’ll all take it Traft accuses them of stealin’ unbranded stock that drifts down into the draws on the West Fork.”

“What kind of trouble, Uncle Caleb?” queried Molly, soberly.

“Lass, do you remember the Pleasant Valley war over across the mountains in the Tonto? Let’s see, you must have been about six years old. Ten years ago.”

“Yes, I remember, mamma wouldn’t let me play out of the yard. We lived at Lunden then. But if I hadn’t remembered I’d sure know what that war was. Papa talks about it yet.”

“Ahuh. Lass, some people say your dad was crippled for sympathy to one faction in that fight.”

“Pa denies it. But he was on the side of the sheepmen. An’ that riles my brother Arch somethin’ funny. They never get along. Arch isn’t much good, Uncle Caleb.”

“Humph! I’d not say that, for Arch has good parts. But he’s much bad, an’ that’s no joke.... Wal, if Traft’s outfit ever finishes their fence—at least down in the Diamond, it’ll be cut. An’ as Traft runs a lot of hard-ridin’ an’ shootin’ cowpunchers, there’s shore goin’ to be blood spilled. It takes years sometimes to wear out these feuds. An’ we’ve a lot of thick-headed hombres in our neck of the woods.”

His ominous reasoning had a silencing effect upon his hearers. The women of that country were pioneers in suffering, and there were many widows and orphans. Molly thought of her brother Arch. He was only twenty-two, yet he

had killed more than one man, and through many fights, but few of them bloodless, he had earned a reputation that was no source of pride to his family. Arch not so long ago had been a nice boy. Lack of work, and drinking, and roaming the woods with fellows like Seth Haverly, had ruined him. Now it would grow worse, and that would make it harder for Molly's crippled father, who had to sit at home and brood.

Molly conceived a resentment against the rich cattleman who could impose such restrictions and embitter the lives of poor people. And as for Traft's tenderfoot relative, who had come out from Missouri to run a hard outfit and build barbed-wire fences, Molly certainly hated him. Funny if she should meet him! What would he be like? A change from long-legged, unshaved, ragged boys who smelled of horses would be a relief, even if he was an enemy. It was unlikely, however, that she should have the luck to encounter Mr. Traft's nephew from Missouri, which fact would be good luck for him, at least. Molly would certainly let him know what she thought of him.

It occurred to her presently that Arch had seen this new foreman of Traft's and could tell her all about him. How was Arch going to take this newcomer? Seth Haverly was as easy-going a boy as Arch, but dangerous when crossed. Molly was prone to spells of depression and she felt the imminence of one here.

Wherefore, in order to shake off the insidious shadow, she devoted herself to the ride and to her companion, who needed a little cheering also.

It had been years since Molly had been so many miles from the village. She did not remember the road. From her

own porch she always had a wonderful view down the valley and across to the grand upheaval of earth and rock locally called the Diamond, and at the rugged black hills to the south. But now she was riding at a fast trot of a spirited team through a winding timbered canyon, along the banks of the West Fork. As there was a gradual down grade, the gray cliff walls grew higher until they were far above. Only a lone horseman was encountered in all the fifteen miles down to where the West Fork poured its white torrent into the Cibique. Here Mr. See took the main road, which climbed and wound and zigzagged up the long slope. Molly looked down and back at the wilderness which was her home. All green and gray, and so big! She could not hate it, somehow. All her life she had known that kind of country. She had played among the ferns and the rock, and in the amber water, and under the brown-barked pines and spruces, where deer and elk and wild turkeys were as common as the cows she drove from pasture in the dusk. She felt that it would take a terrible break to sever her from this home of forest and gorge.

CHAPTER II

[Table of Contents](#)

FROM the head of the Cibeque the road wound through undulating forest land, heading the deep draws and glens, and gradually ascending to the zone of cedar and piñon, which marked the edge of the cattle-range.

There had been snow on the ground all winter, which accounted for the abundance of gramma grass, now beginning to bleach in the early summer sun. Cattle dotted all the glades and flats and wide silvery meadows; and toward afternoon, from a ridge top the vast gray-green range spread like a billowy ocean far as eye could see.

Several ranches were passed at any one of which See would have been welcome to spend the night, but he kept going all of daylight, and by night had covered more than half the journey to Flagerstown.

“Wal, wife, we’ve made Keech’s, an’ that’s good, considerin’ our late start,” remarked See, with satisfaction, as he drove into a wide clearing, the hideousness of which attested to the presence of an old sawmill. Rude clapboard cabins and fences, not to note the barking dogs, gave evidence of habitation.

The cabins, however, were more inviting inside, Molly was to learn, and that the widow Keech was a most kindly and loquacious hostess. She had two grown daughters, and a son about fourteen years old, an enormously tall boy who straightway became victim to Molly, a conspicuous fact soon broadly hinted by his elders.

"So this hyar is John Dunn's girl growed up," said Mrs. Keech. "I knowed your father well, an' I seen you when you was a big-eyed kid. Now you're a woman ridin' to Flag."

Molly, however, was not to be led into conversation. This adventure seemed to her too grand to be joked about. She was keen to listen, and during the dinner hour heard much about Flagerstown and the fair to begin there on the morrow, and to end on Saturday with a rodeo. Mrs. See had not imparted all this marvelous news to Molly and she laughed at the girl's excitement.

"What you know about this drift fence?" finally asked See.

"Caleb, it's a downright fact," replied the widow, forcefully. "Harry has seen it. Traft's outfit are camped ten miles north of us. They'll pass here this summer an' be down on your Diamond by the time snow flies."

"Ahuh. So we heerd. But what's your idee about it?"

"Wal, Caleb, all things considered, it'll be good for the range. For no matter what folks say, cattle-rustlin' is not a thing of the past. Two-bit stealin' of calves is what it really is. But rustlin', for all that. An' up this way, anyhow, it'll help."

"Are you runnin' any stock?" asked See, thoughtfully.

"Cows, mostly. I send a good deal of butter in to town. Really am gettin' on better than when we tried to ranch it. I don't have to hire no-good punchers. People travel the road a lot these days. An' they all stop hyar. I've run up some little cabins."

"An' that's a good idee," said See.

Molly listened to hear everything, and particularly wanted to learn more about the young Missouri tenderfoot who had come out West to build fences for Traft. He would certainly have a miserable existence. And it was most liable to be short. To Molly's disappointment, no more was said about the drift fence.

"Wal, we'll rustle off to bed," concluded See. "Mrs. Keech, I'll want to leave early in the mornin'."

Molly shared one of the new cabins with Mrs. See. It was small, clean, and smelled fragrantly of dry pine. It had three windows, and that to Molly was an innovation. She vowed she would have one like it, where she could have light in the daytime and air at night. She was tired, but not sleepy. Perhaps the bed was too comfortable. Anyway, Molly lay wide awake in the dark, wondering what was going to happen to her. This trip to Flagerstown might be a calamity for her. But she must have it. She must enjoy every moment of it, no matter what discontent it might engender.

The hounds bayed the wolves and made her shudder. Wolves and coyotes seldom ranged down in the brakes of the Cibeque. Bears and lions were plentiful, but Molly had never feared them. Wolves had such a mournful, blood-curdling howl. And when the hounds answered it they imitated that note, or else imparted to it something of hunger for the free life their wild brothers enjoyed.

When at last Molly fell asleep it seemed only a moment until she was rudely awakened. Mrs. See was up, dressing by lamplight. A gray darkness showed outside the open window, and the air that blew in on Molly was cold enough for early fall, down on the West Fork.

But the great day was at hand. She found her voice, and even had a friendly word for the boy Harry, who certainly made the most of it. When she came out from breakfast, a clear cold morning, with rosy flush in the east, greeted her triumphantly, as if to impart that it had some magic in store.

Harry squeezed Molly's arm, as he helped her into the buckboard, and said, confidently, "I'll see you at the *rodeo*."

"Hope so," replied Molly.

Then they were off behind fresh horses and soon into the cedars. Jack rabbits bounded away, with their ridiculously long ears bobbing erect; lean gray coyotes watched them roll along; deer trotted out of sight into thick clumps of brush.

Soon they came to the open top of a ridge and Molly saw a gray, dim, speckled world of range, so immense as to dwarf her sight. The scent from that vast gulf was intoxicating.

"What's the sweet smell?" she asked.

"Sage, you Cibeque Valley backwoods girl," replied Mrs. See. "Anyone would think you'd never been out of the timber."

"I haven't, much," laughed Molly. "I've seen an' smelled sage, but it's so long ago I'd forgotten. Reckon I'd better be pretty careful up at Flag, Auntie See?"

"Shore you had. But what about?"

"Talkin'. I'm so ignorant," sighed Molly.

"You don't need to be dumb. You just think before you speak. You're such a pretty little mouse that it'll become you. I don't care for gabby girls, myself. An' I never seen a man who did, if he was in earnest."

Molly was silent enough for the next long stretch. She watched a sunrise that made her think how beautiful the world was and how little she had seen, hidden down there in the green brakes. But she reproved herself for that. From her porch she could see the sun set in the great valley when the Diamond sheered abruptly down into the Cibique, and nothing could have excelled that. And what could be better than the wooded canyons, deep and gray and green, with their rushing streams? But this open range took her breath. Here was the cattle country—what Mr. See had called the free range, and which riders like her brother Arch and Seth Haverly regarded as their own. Yet was it not a shame to fence that magnificent rolling land of green? For a moment Molly understood what it meant to be a range-rider, to have been born on a horse. She sympathized with Arch and Seth. A barbed-wire fence, no matter how far away, spoiled the freedom of that cedared grassy land.

“Wal, lass, thar’s the smoke of Flag,” said Mrs. See. “Way down in the corner. Long ways yet. But we’re shore gettin’ there.”

“Smoke,” said Molly, dreamily. “Are they burnin’ brush?”

“Haw! Haw! That smoke comes from the railroad an’ the sawmill.”

From there on the miles were long, yet interesting, almost every one of them, with herds of cattle wearing different brands, with ranches along the road, with the country appearing to spread and grow less cedared. Ten miles out of Flagerstown Mr. See pointed to a distant ridgetop, across which a new fence strung, startlingly clear against the sky. It gave Molly a pang.

“Traft’s drift fence, I reckon,” said See. “An’ I’d almost rather have this a sheep range!”

For all her poor memory, Molly remembered Flagerstown—the black timbered mountain above it, the sawmill with its pile of yellow lumber, the gray cottages on the outskirts, and at last the thrilling long main street, with buildings that looked wonderful to her. Mr. See remarked with satisfaction that the time was not much past four o’clock. He drove straight down this busy thoroughfare. Molly was all eyes.

“Hyar we are,” said Mr. See, halting before a pretentious brick building. “This is the new hotel, Molly. Now, wife, make the best of our good trip in. Take Molly in the stores. I’ll look after the horses, get our rooms, an’ meet you hyar at six o’clock.”

Molly leaped out of the buckboard with a grim yet happy realization that she would not need much longer to be ashamed of her shoes and stockings.

Three hours later, Molly, radiant and laden with bundles, tagged into the hotel behind Mrs. See, likewise laden, to be greeted vociferously by Mr. See.

“For the land’s sake! Have you robbed a store or been to a fire?—An’ hyar me waitin’ for supper!”

“Caleb, it happens seldom in a lifetime,” replied his beaming wife. “Help us pack this outfit to our rooms. Then we’ll have supper.”

Molly had a room of her own. She had never even seen one like it. Loath to leave her precious purchases, she lingered until they called her from the hall. It struck her again how warmly these old people looked at her. Molly

guessed she was a circus and ruefully admitted reason for it.

The dining-room might have been only “fair to middlin’,” as Mr. See put it, but it was the most sumptuous place Molly had ever entered. Sight of it added to the excitement of the few hours’ shopping effectually robbed her of appetite.

“Wal, I reckon Molly wants a biscuit an’ a hunk of venison,” remarked Mr. See.

Molly did not know quite how to take that remark. She became aware, too, of being noticed by two young men at a near-by table. They were certainly not cowboys or timber-rangers. Molly was glad to get out and upstairs to the privacy of her room.

There she unpacked the numerous bundles and parcels, and laid out her newly acquired possessions upon the bed. How quickly her little hoard of money had vanished! Still, it had gone farther than she had anticipated. Mrs. See had been incredibly generous. A blue print dress, a white dress with slippers and stockings to match, the prettiest little hat Molly had ever seen in her life, ribbons and gloves and what not—these had been the expansion of the good woman’s promise.

But not only the pleasure of looking and buying had Molly to think of. She had met more people than she had ever met before. She had been asked to serve in one of the booths at the fair. One of the storekeepers had offered her a position as clerk in his dry-goods department. And altogether the summing up of this day left Molly staggered with happiness.

“Oh, dear!” she said. “If it’s true it’ll spoil me.” And she cried a little before she went to sleep.

Another morning probed deeper into Molly's faculties for enjoyment and wonder. Mrs. See had relatives and friends in Flagerstown, and they made much of Molly. Not the least of that morning's interest was a look at Jim Traft, cattle king of the range. It was in the bank, where Molly and Mrs. See had visited with Mr. See.

"Thar's the old reprobate," whispered See to Molly. "Jim Traft, who's fencin' off West Fork from the range!"

Molly stared. She saw a big man in his shirt sleeves and dusty top boots. He had a shrewd weather-beaten face, hard round the mouth and chin, but softened somewhat by bright blue eyes that certainly did not miss Molly. If he had not been Jim Traft it would have been quite possible to like him.

As they turned to go out he hailed See.

"Hey, don't I know you?"

"Well, I reckon I know you, Traft," returned See, not over-civilly. "I'm Caleb See."

"Shore. I never forget faces. You live down in the Cibeque. Glad to meet you again. If you're not in a hurry I'd like to ask you some questions about your neck of the woods."

"Glad to accommodate you, Traft," returned See, and then he indicated his companions. "Meet my wife.... An' this is our little friend, Molly Dunn. Her first visit to Flag since she was a kid."

Traft shook hands with Mrs. See, and likewise Molly. He was quaint and genial, and his keen eyes approved of Molly.

"Wal, wal! I'm shore glad to meet you, young lady," he said. "Molly Dunn of the Cibeque. I think I used to know your father. An' this is your first visit to Flag in a long time?"

“Yes, sir. It seems a whole lifetime,” replied Molly.

When Molly got outside again she exclaimed, breathlessly: “Oh, Mrs. See, he looked right through me! ... I don’t want his pity.... But I’m afraid the Dunns of the Cibique have a bad name.”

“Reckon they have, Molly dear,” rejoined Mrs. See, practically. “But so far as you are concerned it can be lived down.”

“But, Mrs. See—I’d have to stick to dad an’ Arch,” said Molly, suddenly confronted with a lamentable fact.

“Shore. In a way you’ve got to. I wouldn’t think much of anyone who couldn’t stand by her own kin.”

Not until afternoon on the ride out to the fairgrounds did Molly quite forget Jim Traft’s look and the ignominy of the Dunns. But once arrived there she quite lost her own identity. This girl in blue at whom everybody stared was some other person. Crowds of people, girls in gay apparel, cowboys in full regalia, Indians in picturesque attire, horses, horses, horses, and prize cattle, and every kind of a vehicle Molly had ever heard of, appeared to move before her eyes.

Quite by magic, it seemed, she found herself separated from the smiling Mrs. See and conducted to a gayly decorated booth. There she was introduced to a girl about her own age, with whom she was to share the fascinating work of serving the public with sandwiches and coffee. Fortunately for Molly, her partner was nice and friendly, and certainly gave no indication that she had ever heard of the Dunns of West Fork.

Under her amiable instruction Molly, who was nothing if not expert at waiting at table, acquitted herself creditably.

But she could not get used to the marvelous gown she had on, and was in a panic for fear she might get a stain upon it. She did not, however, have so much work that she could not see what was going on, and presently she was having a perfectly wonderful time.

Once she served three cowboys. They were hardly a new species to Molly. Nevertheless, she had not seen such brilliant scarves and fancy belts. She noticed, too, that these young men, like Arch and Seth, packed guns in their belts, a custom she had hardly expected to find at a fair. One of them made eyes at Molly.

After a while they came back, when Molly's partner had left, and if ever Molly had seen the devil in the eyes of a youth she saw it in one of these customers. Still, he was not bad-looking and Molly could not help liking him.

"Miss—Miss—What'd you say your name was?" he asked as he straddled the bench before the counter.

"I didn't say," replied Molly.

"Oh, ex—cuse me. My mistake," he returned, crestfallen at the subdued glee of his comrades. "Have you any pop?"

"No," replied Molly.

"Or ginger ale?"

Molly shook her head.

"Not any pink lemonade?"

"Only coffee an' sandwiches an' cake."

"Cake? Well, give us cake an' coffee," ordered the cowboy.

She served them swiftly and discreetly, deftly avoiding the bold hand that sought to include her fingers as she passed a cup.

“Do you live here?” he asked, presently.

“You know quite well I’m a stranger in Flag, else you wouldn’t be so impertinent,” returned Molly, severely.

“Aw!” He subsided with that exclamation. And his comrades proceeded to enjoy themselves at his expense. Molly’s keen ears lost nothing of the banter. They were just brimful of fun. Evidently the bold one enjoyed something of a reputation as a lady-killer, and had at last met defeat. Presently, as he could not get Molly to notice him, and grew tired of listening to his friends, he threw some silver on the counter and said, loftily, “Keep the change, Little Snowflake.” Then he strode away, and after a few moments the others followed.

From this time Molly was kept busy, and only gradually did it dawn upon her that a string of cowboys kept coming and going, for the very obvious reason of getting a look at her. More than once she heard the name Snowflake. Still, none of them were rude. Manifestly they had taken her for a guest of some prominent family in town, and a lady of quality. Molly enjoyed it hugely, though she had more than one melancholy reservation that it might have been different if they had guessed she was only one of the Dunns of the Cibeque.

Soon she was relieved by the young lady, Miss Price, who shared the booth with her.

“You’ve got the boys guessing,” said this smiling worthy. “They’ve nagged me to death. I don’t know them all, though. Just keep it up.”

“I—I don’t do anythin’ but wait on them,” gasped Molly.

“That’s it. Guess they think you’re cold when you’re only shy,” went on Miss Price. “But you can have a heap of fun. Keep on freezing them. Tomorrow night you’ll have the time of your life.”

“Tomorrow night?” faltered Molly.

“Sure. Big dance after the *rodeo*. Didn’t my mother tell you? Anyway, you’re going with us.”

“I—I hadn’t heard. It’s terrible kind of you. But I really couldn’t go. I’m such a stranger. An’ if they—they think——”

“You dear kid! You are going. Mrs. See promised mother.”

Molly thrillingly resigned herself to the unknown. The afternoon ended all too soon, and she rode back to town, babbling to the pleased Mrs. See about the adventure she was having. That night they were out to dine with relatives of Mrs. See. No other young person was present and Molly had the relief of being comparatively unnoticed. These serious older people talked about the affairs of the town and the range, all of which found lodgment in Molly’s mind.

CHAPTER III

[Table of Contents](#)

IT WAS Saturday afternoon and the *rodeo* had just begun, which accounted for the deserted appearance of the grounds adjacent. Molly had remained longer than was really necessary. Mrs. See would be waiting for her at the stand. She was about to leave when she saw that she was to have a last customer.

A young man, in overalls and heavy boots, got off a dusty horse and approached the booth. He asked for something to eat and drink. Apparently he took no notice of Molly. His face wore a troubled look.

Of all the young men Molly had waited upon in two days, this was the first one who had not looked at her twice, and the only one who had not appeared gay or bold or pleasant. Molly felt a little pique and secondly more than a little curiosity.

He might have been twenty-two or -three years old and evidently was not a cowboy. Molly judged that he would have been fair-skinned if he had not been so sunburnt. His nose had begun to peel, but these demerits did not exactly keep him from being handsome. Presently he laid his sombrero on the counter, which act disclosed light wavy hair, and a broad brow marred by deep furrows.

He struck Molly just about right, and considering her vast experience during these two days, she imagined she was a connoisseur in young men. He slowly drank the last of his coffee, and looking up, met Molly's glance. Then she knew

he had not seen her before. He had gray eyes full of shadows.

"What'd you do if you were just about licked?" he queried, suddenly.

"Sir?" exclaimed Molly.

He repeated the question, this time more deliberately, as if now he weighed it.

"I—I'd get up an' fight some more," declared Molly, surprised into genuine sincerity.

He smiled. Then something beside surprise happened to Molly.

"You would? Suppose then you got licked sure?"

"It wouldn't make no difference," replied Molly, at last forgetting to watch her speech. And she smiled back at him.

He saw her really then as a girl, and not as any individual who might propound a personal point of view. Leaning his elbows on the counter, he regarded her with interest verging upon admiration.

"Very well. I'll take your hunch. I'll not quit. If they lick me—I should say *when* they lick me, I'll get up and fight some more."

His words were severe, his purpose almost grim, yet Molly realized the best compliment she ever had received was being paid her.

"I never saw you before," he went on.

"That isn't my fault," replied Molly, demurely, with level gaze on him. What a nice face he had!

"But you don't live in Flag," he protested.

"No indeed."

"Where then?"

"I'm from the Cibeque."

"Cibeque. Is that a town or a ranch or what?"

"It's a valley."

"Never heard of it. How far?"

"Two days' ride."

"Just here on a visit?" continued the young man, and it was manifest that every word carried him farther into interest.

"Yes. We leave in the mawnin'," said Molly, and sighed. Would she ever come back to Flagerstown? And if so, could it ever be so wonderful?

"That's a long while yet," he returned, and smiled again, with a meaning which made Molly's heart jump. "I haven't heard, but of course there'll be a dance tonight. And you'll be going?"

Molly nodded. She had begun to be conscious of confusing sensations.

"I'll bet every blame cowboy at this *rodeo* has a dance with you," he declared, jealously.

"Not quite."

He gave her a long gaze that began in doubt and ended with trust. Molly felt that he knew every last thing in the world about her and she wanted the earth to open and swallow her.

"I don't care for these town dances," he said. "But I'm going to this one—if it's true you're not engaged for every dance."

"To tell the truth I—I haven't one single dance yet," she replied.

"Well! Then your best fellow isn't here?"

"He doesn't happen to exist," said Molly, wistfully. Like all the others, he had taken her for somebody, and if he knew she was only Molly Dunn of West Fork he would not be so nice.

"Listen. This is a serious matter," he rejoined, gravely. "Young ladies aren't always to be believed."

"I wouldn't lie to anyone," retorted Molly.

"Honest! You haven't a best fellow?"

"I haven't *any* fellow," replied Molly, blushing rosily. "I'm only sixteen. Did you think me as old as Methuselah?"

"Your age hadn't occurred to me. But I'd have taken you for eighteen, anyhow. It really doesn't matter.... Have you been in Flag lately?"

"Not for years. I was a little girl."

"Will you dance with me tonight?" he asked, without any pretense.

"Yes," replied Molly, equally sincerely.

"How many times?"

"I—I don't know about that. You see, I'm not used to city dances."

"Oh, it'd be quite proper, if that worries you. You see I might be taken for your best fellow. I'd sure like that.... Would you?"

"It'd not be terribly disagreeable to me," said Molly, archly, and after a roguish glance she looked away.

But he responded to that differently from what she might have expected. "Thank you," he rejoined, and stood up, with his gray eyes alight. "Save some dances for me. Good-by, Miss Cibeque."