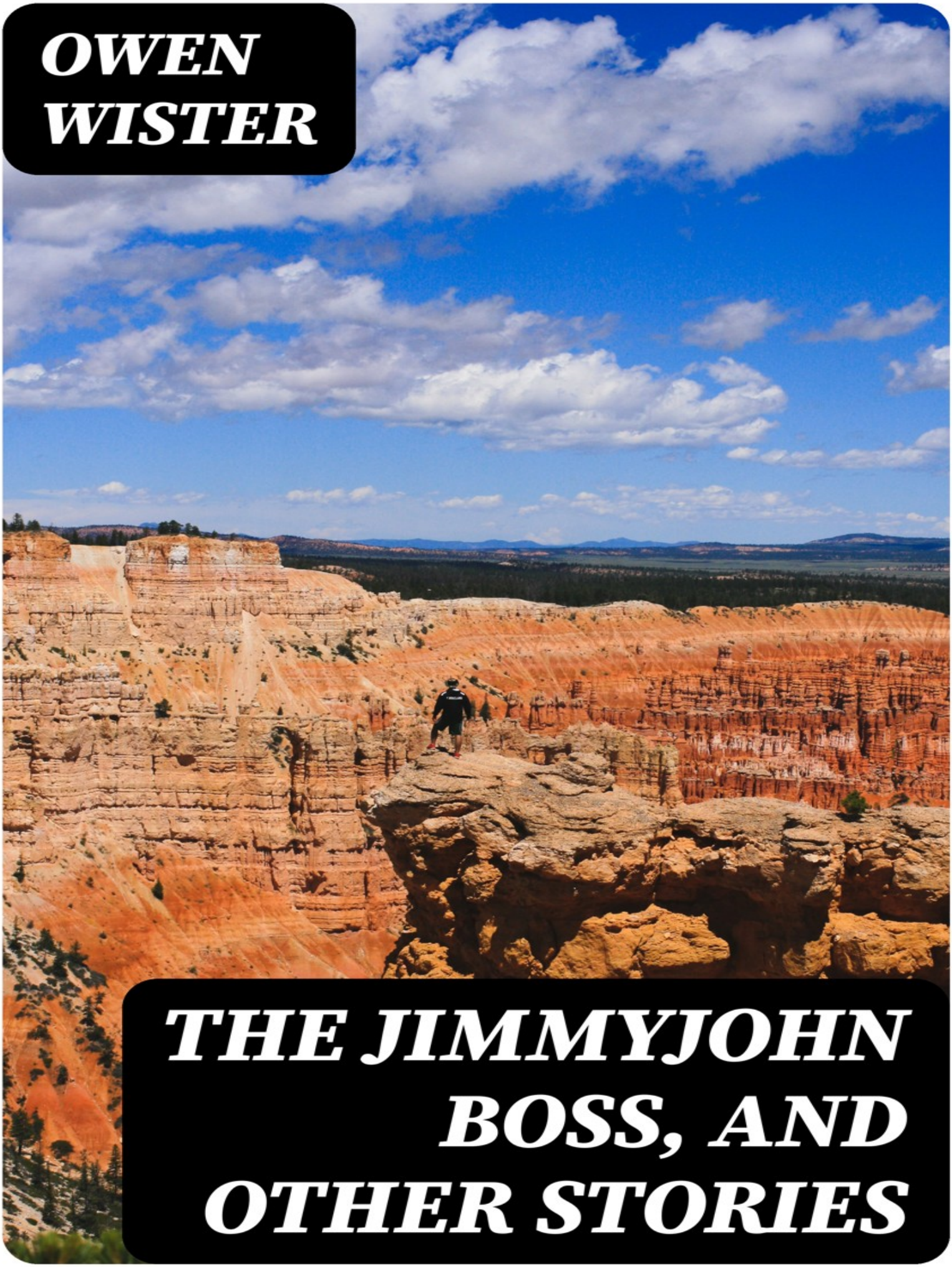
OWEN WISTER



THE JIMMYJOHN BOSS, AND OTHER STORIES

Owen Wister

The Jimmyjohn Boss, and Other Stories

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Preface

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It's very plain that if a thing's the fashion—
Too much the fashion—if the people leap
To do it, or to be it, in a passion
Of haste and crowding, like a herd of sheep,

Why then that thing becomes through imitation
Vulgar, excessive, obvious, and cheap.

No gentleman desires to be pursuing

What every Tom and Dick and Harry's doing.

Stranger, do you write books? I ask the question,
Because I'm told that everybody writes
That what with scribbling, eating, and digestion,
And proper slumber, all our days and nights

Are wholly filled. It seems an odd suggestion—
But if you do write, stop it, leave the masses,
Read me, and join the small selected classes.

The Jimmyjohn Boss

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I

One day at Nampa, which is in Idaho, a ruddy old massive jovial man stood by the Silver City stage, patting

his beard with his left hand, and with his right the shoulder of a boy who stood beside him. He had come with the boy on the branch train from Boise, because he was a careful German and liked to say everything twice—twice at least when it was a matter of business. This was a matter of very particular business, and the German had repeated himself for nineteen miles. Presently the east-bound on the main line would arrive from Portland; then the Silver City stage would take the boy south on his new mission, and the man would journey by the branch train back to Boise. From Boise no one could say where he might not go, west or east. He was a great and pervasive cattle man in Oregon, California, and other places. Vogel and Lex—even to-day you may hear the two ranch partners spoken of. So the veteran Vogel was now once more going over his notions and commands to his youthful deputy during the last precious minutes until the east-bound should arrive.

"Und if only you haf someding like dis," said the old man, as he tapped his beard and patted the boy, "it would be five hoondert more dollars salary in your liddle pants."

The boy winked up at his employer. He had a gray, humorous eye; he was slim and alert, like a sparrow-hawk—the sort of boy his father openly rejoices in and his mother is secretly in prayer over. Only, this boy had neither father nor mother. Since the age of twelve he had looked out for himself, never quite without bread, sometimes attaining champagne, getting along in his American way variously, on horse or afoot, across regions of wide plains and mountains, through towns where not a soul knew his name. He closed

one of his gray eyes at his employer, and beyond this made no remark.

“Vat you mean by dat vink, anyhow?” demanded the elder.

“Say,” said the boy, confidentially—“honest now. How about you and me? Five hundred dollars if I had your beard. You've got a record and I've got a future. And my bloom's on me rich, without a scratch. How many dollars you gif me for dat bloom?” The sparrow-hawk sailed into a freakish imitation of his master.

“You are a liddle rascal!” cried the master, shaking with entertainment. “Und if der peoples vas to hear you sass old Max Vogel in dis style they would say, 'Poor old Max, he lose his gr-rip.' But I don't lose it.” His great hand closed suddenly on the boy's shoulder, his voice cut clean and heavy as an axe, and then no more joking about him. “Haf you understand that?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“How old are you, son?”

“Nineteen, sir.”

“Oh my, that is offle young for the job I gif you. Some of dose man you go to boss might be your father. Und how much do you weigh?”

“About a hundred and thirty.”

“Too light, too light. Und I haf keep my eye on you in Boise. You are not so goot a boy as you might be.”

“Well, sir, I guess not.”

“But you was not so bad a boy as you might be, neider. You don't lie about it. Now it must be farewell to all that foolishness. Haf you understand? You go to set an example

where one is needed very bad. If those men see you drink a liddle, they drink a big lot. You forbid them, they laugh at you. You must not allow one drop of whiskey at the whole place. Haf you well understand?”

“Yes, sir. Me and whiskey are not necessary to each other's happiness.”

“It is not you, it is them. How are you mit your gun?”

Vogel took the boy's pistol from its holster and aimed at an empty bottle which was sticking in the thin Deceiver snow. “Can you do this?” he said, carelessly, and fired. The snow struck the bottle, but the unharming bullet was buried half an inch to the left.

The boy took his pistol with solemnity. “No,” he said. “Guess I can't do that.” He fired, and the glass splintered into shapelessness. “Told you I couldn't miss as close as you did,” said he.

“You are a darling,” said Mr. Vogel. “Gif me dat lofely weapon.”

A fortunate store of bottles lay, leaned, or stood about in the white snow of Nampa, and Mr. Vogel began at them.

“May I ask if anything is the matter?” inquired a mild voice from the stage.

“Stick that lily head in-doors,” shouted Vogel; and the face and eye-glasses withdrew again into the stage. “The school-teacher he will be beautifool virtuous company for you at Malheur Agency,” continued Vogel, shooting again; and presently the large old German destroyed a bottle with a crashing smack. “Ah!” said he, in unison with the smack. “Ah-ha! No von shall say der old Max lose his gr-rip. I shoot it efry time now, but the train she whistle. I hear her.”

The boy affected to listen earnestly.

“Bah! I tell you I hear de whistle coming.”

“Did you say there was a whistle?” ventured the occupant of the stage. The snow shone white on his glasses as he peered out.

“Nobody whistle for you,” returned the robust Vogel. “You listen to me,” he continued to the boy. “You are offle yoong. But I watch you plenty this long time. I see you work mit my stock on the Owyhee and the Malheur; I see you mit my oder men. My men they say always more and more, 'Yoong Drake he is a goot one,' und I think you are a goot one mine own self. I am the biggest cattle man on the Pacific slope, und I am also an old devil. I have think a lot, und I like you.”

“I'm obliged to you, sir.”

“Shut oop. I like you, und therefore I make you my new sooperintendent at my Malheur Agency r-ranch, mit a bigger salary as you don't get before. If you are a sookcess, I r-raise you some more.”

“I am satisfied now, sir.”

“Bah! Never do you tell any goot business man you are satisfied mit vat he gif you, for eider he don't believe you or else he think you are a fool. Und eider ways you go down in his estimation. You make those men at Malheur Agency behave themselves und I r-raise you. Only I do vish, I do certainly vish you had some beard on that yoong chin.”

The boy glanced at his pistol.

“No, no, no, my son,” said the sharp old German. “I don't want gunpowder in dis affair. You must act kviet und decisif und keep your liddle shirt on. What you accomplish shootin'?

You kill somebody, und then, pop! somebody kills you. What goot is all that nonsense to me?”

“It would annoy me some, too,” retorted the boy, eyeing the capitalist. “Don't leave me out of the proposition.”

“Broposition! Broposition! Now you get hot mit old Max for nothing.”

“If you didn't contemplate trouble,” pursued the boy, “what was your point just now in sampling my marksmanship?” He kicked some snow in the direction of the shattered bottle. “It's understood no whiskey comes on that ranch. But if no gunpowder goes along with me, either, let's call the deal off. Buy some other fool.”

“You haf not understand, my boy. Und you get very hot because I happen to make that liddle joke about somebody killing you. Was you thinking maybe old Max not care what happen to you?”

A moment of silence passed before the answer came: “Suppose we talk business?”

“Very well, very well. Only notice this thing. When oder peoples talk oop to me like you haf done many times, it is not they who does the getting hot. It is me—old Max. Und when old Max gets hot he slings them out of his road anywheres. Some haf been very sorry they get so slung. You invite me to buy some oder fool? Oh, my boy, I will buy no oder fool except you, for that was just like me when I was yoong Max!” Again the ruddy and grizzled magnate put his hand on the shoulder of the boy, who stood looking away at the bottles, at the railroad track, at anything save his employer.

The employer proceeded: “I was afraid of nobody und noding in those days. You are afraid of nobody and noding. But those days was different. No Pullman sleepers, no railroad at all. We come oop the Columbia in the steamboat, we travel hoonderts of miles by team, we sleep, we eat nowheres in particular mit many unexpected interooptions. There was Indians, there was offle bad white men, und if you was not offle yourself you vanished quickly. Therefore in those days was Max Vogel hell und repeat.”

The magnate smiled a broad fond smile over the past which he had kicked, driven, shot, bled, and battled through to present power; and the boy winked up at him again now.

“I don't propose to vanish, myself,” said he.

“Ah-ha! you was no longer mad mit der old Max! Of coorse I care what happens to you. I was alone in the world myself in those lofely wicked days.”

Reserve again made flinty the boy's face.

“Neider did I talk about my feelings,” continued Max Vogel, “but I nefer show them too quick. If I was injured I wait, and I strike to kill. We all paddles our own dugout, eh? We ask no favors from nobody; we must win our spurs! Not so? Now I talk business with you where you interroopt me. If cow-boys was not so offle scarce in the country, I would long ago haf bounce the lot of those drunken fellows. But they cannot be spared; we must get along so. I cannot send Brock, he is needed at Harper's. The dumb fellow at Alvord Lake is too dumb; he is not quickly courageous. They would play high jinks mit him. Therefore I send you. Brock he say to me you haf joodgement. I watch, and I say to myself also, this boy haf goot joodgement. And when you look at your

pistol so quick, I tell you quick I don't send you to kill men when they are so scarce already! My boy, it is ever the moral, the say-noding strength what gets there—mit always the liddle pistol behind, in case—joost in case. Haf you understand? I ask you to shoot. I see you know how, as Brock told me. I recommend you to let them see that aggomplishment in a friendly way. Maybe a shooting-match mit prizes—I pay for them—pretty soon after you come. Und joodgement—und joodgement. Here comes that train. Haf you well understand?”

Upon this the two shook hands, looking square friendship in each other's eyes. The east-bound, long quiet and dark beneath its flowing clots of smoke, slowed to a halt. A few valises and legs descended, ascended, herding and hurrying; a few trunks were thrown resoundingly in and out of the train; a woolly, crooked old man came with a box and a bandanna bundle from the second-class car; the travellers of a thousand miles looked torpidly at him through the dim, dusty windows of their Pullman, and settled again for a thousand miles more. Then the east-bound, shooting heavier clots of smoke laboriously into the air, drew its slow length out of Nampa, and away.

“Where's that stage?” shrilled the woolly old man. “That's what I'm after.”

“Why, hello!” shouted Vogel. “Hello, Uncle Pasco! I heard you was dead.”

Uncle Pasco blinked his small eyes to see who hailed him. “Oh!” said he, in his light, crusty voice. “Dutchy Vogel. No, I ain't dead. You guessed wrong. Not dead. Help me up, Dutchy.”

A tolerant smile broadened Vogel's face. “It was ten years since I see you,” said he, carrying the old man's box.

“Shouldn't wonder. Maybe it'll be another ten till you see me next.” He stopped by the stage step, and wheeling nimbly, surveyed his old-time acquaintance, noting the good hat, the prosperous watch-chain, the big, well-blacked boots. “Not seen me for ten years. Hee-hee! No. Usen't to have a cent more than me. Twins in poverty. That's how Dutchy and me started. If we was buried to-morrow they'd mark him 'Pecunious' and me 'Impecunious.' That's what. Twins in poverty.”

“I stick to von business at a time, Uncle,” said good-natured, successful Max.

A flicker of aberration lighted in the old man's eye. “H'm, yes,” said he, pondering. “Stuck to one business. So you did. H'm.” Then, suddenly sly, he chirped: “But I've struck it rich now.” He tapped his box. “Jewelry,” he half-whispered. “Miners and cow-boys.”

“Yes,” said Vogel. “Those poor, deluded fellows, they buy such stuff.” And he laughed at the seedy visionary who had begun frontier life with him on the bottom rung and would end it there. “Do you play that concertina yet, Uncle?” he inquired.

“Yes, yes. I always play. It's in here with my tooth-brush and socks.” Uncle Pasco held up the bandanna. “Well, he's getting ready to start. I guess I'll be climbing inside. Holy Gertrude!”

This shrill comment was at sight of the school-master, patient within the stage. “What business are you in?” demanded Uncle Pasco.

“I am in the spelling business,” replied the teacher, and smiled, faintly.

“Hell!” piped Uncle Pasco. “Take this.”

He handed in his bandanna to the traveller, who received it politely. Max Vogel lifted the box of cheap jewelry; and both he and the boy came behind to boost the old man up on the stage step. But with a nettled look he leaped up to evade them, tottered half-way, and then, light as a husk of grain, got himself to his seat and scowled at the schoolmaster.

After a brief inspection of that pale, spectacled face, “Dutchy,” he called out of the door, “this country is not what it was.”

But old Max Vogel was inattentive. He was speaking to the boy, Dean Drake, and held a flask in his hand. He reached the flask to his new superintendent. “Drink hearty,” said he. “There, son! Don't be shy. Haf you forgot it is forbidden fruit after now?”

“Kid sworn off?” inquired Uncle Pasco of the school-master.

“I understand,” replied this person, “that Mr. Vogel will not allow his cow-boys at the Malheur Agency to have any whiskey brought there. Personally, I feel gratified.” And Mr. Bolles, the new school-master, gave his faint smile.

“Oh,” muttered Uncle Pasco. “Forbidden to bring whiskey on the ranch? H'm.” His eyes wandered to the jewelry-box. “H'm,” said he again; and becoming thoughtful, he laid back his moth-eaten sly head, and spoke no further with Mr. Bolles.

Dean Drake climbed into the stage and the vehicle started.

“Goot luck, goot luck, my son!” shouted the hearty Max, and opened and waved both his big arms at the departing boy: He stood looking after the stage. “I hope he come back,” said he. “I think he come back. If he come I r-raise him fifty dollars without any beard.”

II

The stage had not trundled so far on its Silver City road but that a whistle from Nampa station reached its three occupants. This was the branch train starting back to Boise with Max Vogel aboard; and the boy looked out at the locomotive with a sigh.

“Only five days of town,” he murmured. “Six months more wilderness now.”

“My life has been too much town,” said the new school-master. “I am looking forward to a little wilderness for a change.”

Old Uncle Pasco, leaning back, said nothing; he kept his eyes shut and his ears open.

“Change is what I don't get,” sighed Dean Drake. In a few miles, however, before they had come to the ferry over Snake River, the recent leave-taking and his employer's kind but dominating repression lifted from the boy's spirit. His gray eye wakened keen again, and he began to whistle light opera tunes, looking about him alertly, like the sparrow-hawk that he was. “Ever see Jeannie Winston in 'Fatinitza'?” he inquired of Mr. Bolles.

The school-master, with a startled, thankful countenance, stated that he had never.

“Ought to,” said Drake.
“You a man? that can't be true!
Men have never eyes like you.”

“That's what the girls in the harem sing in the second act. Golly whiz!” The boy gleamed over the memory of that evening.

“You have a hard job before you,” said the school-master, changing the subject.

“Yep. Hard.” The wary Drake shook his head warningly at Mr. Bolles to keep off that subject, and he glanced in the direction of slumbering Uncle Pasco. Uncle Pasco was quite aware of all this. “I wouldn't take another lonesome job so soon,” pursued Drake, “but I want the money. I've been working eleven months along the Owyhee as a sort of junior boss, and I'd earned my vacation. Just got it started hot in Portland, when biff! old Vogel telegraphs me. Well, I'll be saving instead of squandering. But it feels so good to squander!”

“I have never had anything to squander,” said Bolles, rather sadly.

“You don't say! Well, old man, I hope you will. It gives a man a lot he'll never get out of spelling-books. Are you cold? Here.” And despite the school-master's protest, Dean Drake tucked his buffalo coat round and over him. “Some day, when I'm old,” he went on, “I mean to live respectable under my own cabin and vine. Wife and everything. But not, anyway, till I'm thirty-five.”

He dropped into his opera tunes for a while; but evidently it was not “Fatinitza” and his vanished holiday over which he

was chiefly meditating, for presently he exclaimed: “I'll give them a shooting-match in the morning. You shoot?”

Bolles hoped he was going to learn in this country, and exhibited a Smith & Wesson revolver.

Drake grieved over it. “Wrap it up warm,” said he. “I'll lend you a real one when we get to the Malheur Agency. But you can eat, anyhow. Christmas being next week, you see, my programme is, shoot all A.M. and eat all P.M. I wish you could light on a notion what prizes to give my buccaroos.”

“Buccaroos?” said Bolles.

“Yep. Cow-punchers. Vaqueros. Buccaroos in Oregon. Bastard Spanish word, you see, drifted up from Mexico. Vogel would not care to have me give 'em money as prizes.”

At this Uncle Pasco opened an eye.

“How many buccaroos will there be?” Bolles inquired.

“At the Malheur Agency? It's the headquarters of five of our ranches. There ought to be quite a crowd. A dozen, probably, at this time of year.”

Uncle Pasco opened his other eye. “Here, you!” he said, dragging at his box under the seat. “Pull it, can't you? There. Just what you're after. There's your prizes.” Querulous and watchful, like some aged, rickety ape, the old man drew out his trinkets in shallow shelves.

“Sooner give 'em nothing,” said Dean Drake.

“What's that? What's the matter with them?”

“Guess the boys have had all the brass rings and glass diamonds they want.”

“That's all you know, then. I sold that box clean empty through the Palouse country last week, 'cept the bottom drawer, and an outfit on Meacham's hill took that. Shows all

you know. I'm going clean through your country after I've quit Silver City. I'll start in by Baker City again, and I'll strike Harney, and maybe I'll go to Linkville. I know what buccaroos want. I'll go to Fort Rinehart, and I'll go to the Island Ranch, and first thing you'll be seeing your boys wearing my stuff all over their fingers and Sunday shirts, and giving their girls my stuff right in Harney City. That's what."

"All right, Uncle. It's a free country."

"Shaw! Guess it is. I was in it before you was, too. You were wet behind the ears when I was jammin' all around here. How many are they up at your place, did you say?"

"I said about twelve. If you're coming our way, stop and eat with us."

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't." Uncle Pasco crossly shoved his box back.

"All right, Uncle. It's a free country," repeated Drake.

Not much was said after this. Uncle Pasco unwrapped his concertina from the red handkerchief and played nimbly for his own benefit. At Silver City he disappeared, and, finding he had stolen nothing from them, they did not regret him. Dean Drake had some affairs to see to here before starting for Harper's ranch, and it was pleasant to Bolles to find how Drake was esteemed through this country. The school-master was to board at the Malheur Agency, and had come this way round because the new superintendent must so travel. They were scarcely birds of a feather, Drake and Bolles, yet since one remote roof was to cover them, the in-door man was glad this boy-host had won so much good-will from high and low. That the shrewd old Vogel should trust so

much in a nineteen-year-old was proof enough at least of his character; but when Brock, the foreman from Harper's, came for them at Silver City, Bolles witnessed the affection that the rougher man held for Drake. Brock shook the boy's hand with that serious quietness and absence of words which shows the Western heart is speaking. After a look at Bolles and a silent bestowing of the baggage aboard the team, he cracked his long whip and the three rattled happily away through the dips of an open country where clear streams ran blue beneath the winter air. They followed the Jordan (that Idaho Jordan) west towards Oregon and the Owyhee, Brock often turning in his driver's seat so as to speak with Drake. He had a long, gradual chapter of confidences and events; through miles he unburdened these to his favorite:

The California mare was coring well in harness. The eagle over at Whitehorse ranch had fought the cat most terrible. Gilbert had got a mule-kick in the stomach, but was eating his three meals. They had a new boy who played the guitar. He used maple-syrup an his meat, and claimed he was from Alabama. Brock guessed things were about as usual in most ways. The new well had caved in again. Then, in the midst of his gossip, the thing he had wanted to say all along came out: “We're pleased about your promotion,” said he; and, blushing, shook Drake's hand again.

Warmth kindled the boy's face, and next, with a sudden severity, he said: “You're keeping back something.”

The honest Brock looked blank, then labored in his memory.

“Has the sorrel girl in Harney married you yet?” said Drake. Brock slapped his leg, and the horses jumped at his mirth. He was mostly grave-mannered, but when his boy superintendent joked, he rejoiced with the same pride that he took in all of Drake's excellences.

“The boys in this country will back you up,” said he, next day; and Drake inquired: “What news from the Malheur Agency?”

“Since the new Chinaman has been cooking for them,” said Brock, “they have been peaceful as a man could wish.”

“They'll approve of me, then,” Drake answered. “I'm feeding 'em hyas Christmas muck-a-muck.”

“And what may that be?” asked the schoolmaster.

“You no kumtux Chinook?” inquired Drake. “Travel with me and you'll learn all sorts of languages. It means just a big feed. All whiskey is barred,” he added to Brock.

“It's the only way,” said the foreman. “They've got those Pennsylvania men up there.”

Drake had not encountered these.

“The three brothers Drinker,” said Brock. “Full, Half-past Full, and Drunk are what they call them. Them's the names; they've brought them from Klamath and Rogue River.”

“I should not think a Chinaman would enjoy such comrades,” ventured Mr. Bolles.

“Chinamen don't have comrades in this country,” said Brock, briefly. “They like his cooking. It's a lonesome section up there, and a Chinaman could hardly quit it, not if he was expected to stay. Suppose they kick about the whiskey rule?” he suggested to Drake.

“Can't help what they do. Oh, I'll give each boy his turn in Harney City when he gets anxious. It's the whole united lot I don't propose to have cut up on me.”

A look of concern for the boy came over the face of foreman Brock. Several times again before their parting did he thus look at his favorite. They paused at Harper's for a day to attend to some matters, and when Drake was leaving this place one of the men said to him: “We'll stand by you.” But from his blithe appearance and talk as the slim boy journeyed to the Malheur River and Headquarter ranch, nothing seemed to be on his mind. Oregon twinkled with sun and fine white snow. They crossed through a world of pines and creviced streams and exhilarating silence. The little waters fell tinkling through icicles in the loneliness of the woods, and snowshoe rabbits dived into the brush. East Oregon, the Owyhee and the Malheur country, the old trails of General Crook, the willows by the streams, the open swales, the high woods where once Buffalo Horn and Chief E-egante and O-its the medicine-man prospered, through this domain of war and memories went Bolles the school-master with Dean Drake and Brock. The third noon from Harper's they came leisurely down to the old Malheur Agency, where once the hostile Indians had drawn pictures on the door, and where Castle Rock frowned down unchanged.

“I wish I was going to stay here with you,” said Brock to Drake. “By Indian Creek you can send word to me quicker than we've come.”

“Why, you're an old bat!” said the boy to his foreman, and clapped him farewell on the shoulder.

Brock drove away, thoughtful. He was not a large man. His face was clean-cut, almost delicate. He had a well-trimmed, yellow mustache, and it was chiefly in his blue eye and lean cheek-bone that the frontiersman showed. He loved Dean Drake more than he would ever tell, even to himself.

The young superintendent set at work to ranch-work this afternoon of Brock's leaving, and the buccaroos made his acquaintance one by one and stared at him. Villany did not sit outwardly upon their faces; they were not villains; but they stared at the boy sent to control them, and they spoke together, laughing. Drake took the head of the table at supper, with Bolles on his right. Down the table some silence, some staring, much laughing went on—the rich brute laugh of the belly untroubled by the brain. Sam, the Chinaman, rapid and noiseless, served the dishes.

“What is it?” said a buccaroo.

“Can it bite?” said another.

“If you guess what it is, you can have it,” said a third.

“It's meat,” remarked Drake, incisively, helping himself; “and tougher than it looks.”

The brute laugh rose from the crowd and fell into surprised silence; but no rejoinder came, and they ate their supper somewhat thoughtfully. The Chinaman's quick, soft eye had glanced at Dean Drake when they laughed. He served his dinner solicitously. In his kitchen that evening he and Bolles unpacked the good things—the olives, the dried fruits, the cigars—brought by the new superintendent for Christmas; and finding Bolles harmless, like his gentle Asiatic self, Sam looked cautiously about and spoke:

“You not know why they laugh,” said he. “They not talk about my meat then. They mean new boss, Misser Dlake. He velly young boss.”

“I think,” said Bolles, “Mr. Drake understood their meaning, Sam. I have noticed that at times he expresses himself peculiarly. I also think they understood his meaning.”

The Oriental pondered. “Me like Misser Dlake,” said he. And drawing quite close, he observed, “They not nice man velly much.”

Next day and every day “Misser Dlake” went gayly about his business, at his desk or on his horse, vigilant, near and far, with no sign save a steadier keenness in his eye. For the Christmas dinner he provided still further sending to the Grande Ronde country for turkeys and other things. He won the heart of Bolles by lending him a good horse; but the buccaroos, though they were boisterous over the coming Christmas joy, did not seem especially grateful. Drake, however, kept his worries to himself.

“This thing happens anywhere,” he said one night in the office to Bolles, puffing a cigar. “I've seen a troop of cavalry demoralize itself by a sort of contagion from two or three men.”

“I think it was wicked to send you here by yourself,” blurted Bolles.

“Poppycock! It's the chance of my life, and I'll jam her through or bust.”

“I think they have decided you are getting turkeys because you are afraid of them,” said Bolles.

“Why, of course! But d' you figure I'm the man to abandon my Christmas turkey because my motives for eating it are misconstrued?”

Dean Drake smoked for a while; then a knock came at the door. Five buccaroos entered and stood close, as is the way with the guilty who feel uncertain.

“We were thinking as maybe you'd let us go over to town,” said Half-past Full, the spokesman.

“When?”

“Oh, any day along this week.”

“Can't spare you till after Christmas.”

“Maybe you'll not object to one of us goin'?”

“You'll each have your turn after this week.”

A slight pause followed. Then Half-past Full said: “What would you do if I went, anyway?”

“Can't imagine,” Drake answered, easily. “Go, and I'll be in a position to inform you.”

The buccaroo dropped his stolid bull eyes, but raised them again and grinned. “Well, I'm not particular about goin' this week, boss.”

“That's not my name,” said Drake, “but it's what I am.”

They stood a moment. Then they shuffled out. It was an orderly retreat—almost.

Drake winked over to Bolles. “That was a graze,” said he, and smoked for a while. “They'll not go this time. Question is, will they go next?”

III

Drake took a fresh cigar, and threw his legs over the chair arm.

“I think you smoke too much,” said Bolles, whom three days had made familiar and friendly.

“Yep. Have to just now. That's what! as Uncle Pasco would say. They are a half-breed lot, though,” the boy continued, returning to the buccaroos and their recent visit. “Weaken in the face of a straight bluff, you see, unless they get whiskey-courageous. And I've called 'em down on that.”

“Oh!” said Bolles, comprehending.

“Didn't you see that was their game? But he will not go after it.”

“The flesh is all they seem to understand,” murmured Bolles.

Half-past Full did not go to Harney City for the tabooed whiskey, nor did any one. Drake read his buccaroos like the children that they were. After the late encounter of grit, the atmosphere was relieved of storm. The children, the primitive, pagan, dangerous children, forgot all about whiskey, and lusted joyously for Christmas. Christmas was coming! No work! A shooting-match! A big feed! Cheerfulness bubbled at the Malheur Agency. The weather itself was in tune. Castle Rock seemed no longer to frown, but rose into the shining air, a mass of friendly strength. Except when a rare sledge or horseman passed, Mr. Bolles's journeys to the school were all to show it was not some pioneer colony in a new, white, silent world that heard only the playful shouts and songs of the buccaroos. The sun overhead and the hard-crushing snow underfoot filled every one with a crisp, tingling hilarity.

Before the sun first touched Castle Rock on the morning of the feast they were up and in high feather over at the