

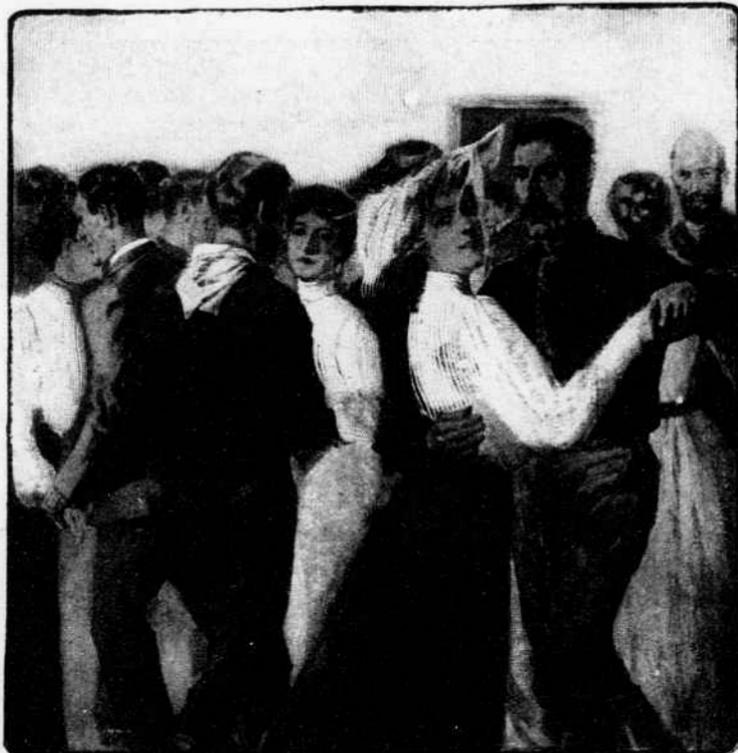
THE RANCHERS' BALL

Introduction of a Belle Who Nearly Disrupted the Society of the Settlements

By AGNES C. LAUT



It Was Plain Dolly's Gallant Hadn't Danced in Thirty Years.



Somebody Feed the Fiddlers to Play Faster.



BOBBIE had asked for three dances, and had been refused four. Three refusals came point-blank. The fourth drove him back with a scowl before he could speak; so he retired to the wall with his hands under the tails of a coat not worn since he left England for the ranching country. Nevertheless, Bobbie laughed. He had reached the stage where he could laugh; and that meant something for the youngest brother of adoring sisters, who wrote weekly letters of advice on the preservation of his sacred person from wild animals, savages and matrimonially designing mamas.

His sisters didn't know that the balance of trade in the West had wiped out the matrimonial deficit, and that the real difficulty was to find a partner with a matrimonial design. But Bobbie could laugh; and that meant that he had quit cherishing sentiments of profound sorrow for himself; so he backed to the wall with other disconsolate bachelors, and wondered what his estimable English friends would think if they could see the dance.

There was Hal, his ranching partner, now waltzing with Mrs. Marchmont, who had come out to the West to straighten a dissipated brother, and remained in the West as the wife of a retired army man. There was the Vassar girl, who lived in a two-roomed shanty with a piano and a husband who had come West to harvest the wild oats sown in the East. There was the quondam governess of Mrs. Marchmont's children, who had married the village banker and now carried herself with an air second only to Mrs. O'Shay, lady-in-waiting of meat-pies and ham-sandwiches behind the railroad lunch-counter. From all of which it was evident that the ranching-country was still in that state when everybody was as good as everybody else; and a little more so. For the most part, the guests appeared in the same costumes as they had galloped across the prairie in.

To this were two exceptions: the banker's wife and the woman of the ham-sandwiches. Though the banker's wife had come in a tweed riding-suit, she swept to the dance-room resplendent in low-cut silk. As for Mrs. O'Shay, Bobbie inquired if she didn't feel cold.

"Charity ball for the ranchers' hospital, heh?" grumbled a range-rider. "Guess before they sell tickets, they'd better guarantee partners."

"Try a rag doll," laughed Bobbie.

The rancher hitched astride a chair and sat down with his chin resting on the back. "I might do worse and fare no better," he drawled, twiddling his thumbs.

"Don't you think—um—" questioned Bobbie, "considering the scarcity of ladies here, you'd find some difficulty dressing your rag partner in—um—anything but divided skirts?"

"Heh? What are you driving at?" The range-rider sat up. Then he emitted a roar of laughter and smote Bobbie squarely on the back. "You're the very size and figure with your yellow locks, my boy! There's Mrs. Banker's tweed skirt—won't show in the poor light—and Mrs. Ham Sandwiches came here in a tog of some kind, that's somewhere in the dressing-room, and—"

Just then they were joined by Bobbie's ranching partner Hal, and the three left the dance-room.

The ball had originated with the cabinet minister's wife. Elections were coming on. Therefore, the Government announced the appropriation

of money for a ranch hospital, if the ranchers themselves would contribute an equal amount. Being in fairly good health, the ranchers were not stirred up by the announcement, though some cherished secret hope that there might be a large staff of unmarried nurses. The cabinet minister's coup falling flat, the cabinet minister's wife came on the scene. She said not a word about politics. It was quietly announced—no one knew exactly how—that a charity ball would be held to raise funds for the ranchers' hospital. The cabinet minister's wife was named patroness; and the woman patron must see that tickets were sold; and when she drove over the prairie to sell tickets the cabinet minister accompanied her; and of course elections were never mentioned. Hal and Bobbie will give their word of honor that elections were never mentioned; but they were both induced to come to the ball.

Hal had boiled the blue-flannel shirts for twenty-four successive hours. This was not the occupation which his fond English mother pictured for her son in the West. She saw him under a broad-brimmed hat riding over vast prairies on all sorts of wild horses. And this he was doing daily; but between his mother's mental picture and the actual facts existed slight differences. Knowing how many thousand pounds he took from England, his mother always imagined him the dignified owner of broad estates, with a fine manor-house in the center of a park. Not knowing how many pounds he had sunk in mines without any minerals and companies without any capital and real estate without any reality, she never suspected that her son was living on a small ranch in a two-roomed shanty with another young poverty-stricken Englishman called Bobbie. *

Bobbie was an uncoroneted marquis. He did not confide that fact to the public, because he had come West as a cook. About that episode, he never was entirely frank. He had written home that he was traveling with a survey party; and that he hoped it would be an experience. The parental reply concurred that it certainly should be a most excellent experience. Bobbie could learn so much about the country! When Hal recognized him, Bobbie, in the words of his letter home, was "practising at the bar." His family thought that the American laws must be the most obliging laws in all the world to permit a man to practise without qualifications. But it was behind, not at, the bar that Hal found him; and the bar was Bridget O'Shay's meal-house.

The two young expatriates shook hands with a smile, didn't curse the country, asked no questions, and that night pooled the shattered remnants of two fortunes in one ranch. The ranch afforded new experiences. Bobbie, who was cook, having been with the survey party, learned that bran

made mash, not porridge; that canned pumpkin swelled after eating; that dishes could be used for two weeks, instead of one, without washing, by turning the plates and saucers upside down; that the soda used to scour things clean wasn't the same soda used for soda biscuits; that while lime and flour resembled each other, they didn't produce the same results in a baking; and that the distracted man who first called "bachelor's bread" by the expressive name of "Rocky Mountain Dead-Shot," knew what he was talking about. Hal had prided himself on hiring squaws to do the accumulated washing of six months, but he discovered that just as soon as the whole wash was under soap-suds, squaws were likely to roll down their sleeves and refuse to go on without an advance in wages. After that, the ranchers vowed they would do their own washing.

"Simplest thing in the world, Bobbie," declared Hal, who was the optimist: "Build a fire under the bran-mash boiler; fill her full of water; pitch in every rag; stir up couple of bars of soap; keep stirring her around with the hay-fork; let her boil for a couple of days; sit there; wash; smoke your pipe—thing's done!"

"How is your washing, Hal?" Bobbie had called to the back of the shanty the second morning of this experiment.

Hal muttered something that sounded as if he contemplated transferring the boilerful of wet clothes to the river dam where stock was watered.

"Something all wrong!" roared a voice from the rear of the shanty. "Bobbie, somebody's been at this washing—your shirt's all shrunk so it wouldn't go over the neck of—of a hen! Soap's turned these flannels to—dough! You never saw such—such—such dough!" It was here that Hal took to threats of transferring the washing from the boiler to the river dam.

"Dough? What's this I hear about dough?" inquired the soft voice of a woman. There in a buckboard drawn by a span of broncos sat the cabinet minister and his wife selling tickets for the ranchers' ball. Hal threw the hay-fork under the wash-tub. Bobbie dropped the porridge spoon behind the stove.

"Good-morning!" The woman smiled pleasantly.

Hal's heart went dot and carry; but he jerked off his sombrero and succeeded in executing a bow that was much calmer than his own sensations. "Such a delightful surprise!" he managed to say.

Bobbie's instincts were keener. He knew that it was election time and train time and breakfast time all in one, and that ranch houses dotted at intervals of twenty miles on the prairie must be meal houses too.

"I have a suspicion it is a surprise, all right," said the cabinet minister jovially.

"You're on the way to the Bar X ranch?" suggested Bobbie with a shade of hope in his voice.

"Why, yes." The cabinet minister had jumped from the buckboard and was preparing to help his wife to alight.

Bobbie groaned in spirit; for Bobbie was cook. "Fact is," explained the cabinet minister, landing his wife lightly on the firm prairie—"fact is, the express dropped us off at the flag station. I borrowed this buckboard. We stopped here—the politician paused to read his hosts' faces—"