

THE SIXTH SENSE

By Mae Harris Anson

Drawing by Frank Tenney Johnson

IN TWO PARTS—Part II.

IT would never have happened, had Wells not looked such a sullenly satisfied "I told you so." Had he not so thoroughly lost his patience after two blow-outs in as many hours, that he let his man's superciliousness crop out, those awful midnight hours in that house of mystery in the rolling hills of Southern Saskatchewan would never have happened.

This is not an automobile story; but I must say that I cannot understand why an inanimate thing like an automobile can always manage to choose the most inconvenient environment in which to have a case of acute indigestion or appendicitis, and of all lonely spots, of all inaccessible places, of all temper trying conditions, nothing surely ever matched those in which I found myself late one July afternoon.

Not that the land itself was dreary. Far from it. On every side rose billowing, rounded hills, richly emerald green, while the winding valley of the George showed here and there clumps of tall timber, an outlook that was ideal to one who loves land for itself, but was as inhospitable as the heart of the Sahara itself, so far as I was concerned.

Now, though I cannot hear a sound, I long ago learned the look that always accompanies the use of "language" when anything goes wrong with the insides of an automobile. So when I saw that expression settling on Wells' face, even before he clambered stiffly from behind the wheel, I decided to flee his vicinity, and aimlessly headed for the highest hill, about half a mile distant.

I have seen much of Canada since then and know her inexhaustible fund of surprises; but my astonishment was complete, when I reached the crest of the hill, to see a long, low, straggling ranchhouse with huge barns, corrals, and various outbuildings, lying snugly in the lee of another hill which was, perhaps, two miles away. In the clear atmosphere of the plains distances are very deceptive. And at once it was there that I elected to pass the night, relying upon the open handed hospitality of the country, which is both truly Western as well as English.

Yet, when Wells and I were once more bowling along in the automobile, I found that, so far as reaching that particular haven, it might have sunk into the earth. There was not so much as a cowpath leading from the valley road, anywhere within six miles of where we had been halted by the blowout. There was not so much as a column of smoke nor a stray dog to indicate that human beings had their home anywhere in those hills. That comfortable ranchhouse, those huge barns, those great corrals, might have been but a hallucination or a mirage. Back and forth we ran, striving to find some faintest trail—and all the time that smug "I told you so" look grew on as much of Wells' face as was visible below his goggles.

"Run to the top of that hill over there," I said at length, when I could stand his supercilious satisfaction no longer. I did not care what happened to the machine, so long as I managed to prove that I was right. "I am sure we can see it from there; for we cannot be far beyond where it seemed to be when I saw it."

Wells grunted cynically, yanked at one of the levers, and with a slow, careful turning out into the grass we began to climb the slope.

"Well, I'll be shot into Conshohocken!" exclaimed Wells as we topped the hill; for there, lying spread out at our very feet, was the ranch that we had been so vainly seeking.

CAN you make the run down the hill?" I asked.

Wells nodded curtly, the machine gave a jerk, and bumpily and dizzily we rolled down the slope, turned in at the gate, and stopped neatly before the open door.

I knew from a word he uttered and from the expression in his eyes when he came out that we were unwelcome guests.

"This ain't a tavern," he said ungraciously, in response to an inquiry by Wells. "We don't want trippers stoppin' off. How'd you come to get along this way?" he ended suspiciously.

"I saw the ranch from the top of a hill," I said, "and we came across country hoping to find shelter overnight."

"We don't run a tavern," he insisted, a dull spark of anger growing in his eyes.

"But can't you take us in just for the night? Our machine is crippled and it is so near dark we don't want to go on."

"Of course we'll take you in!" said a woman, appearing suddenly on the threshold. And such a queer figure of a woman as she was, clad in complete cowboy costume, even to shaps, and topping it all her grizzled gray hair twisted and skewered into a hard knot on top of her head! "Of course we'll take you in," she repeated, coming forward with alacrity and a great show of welcome. "Jack, what you thinkin' of? Help the lady out, and have the man run the machine under cover. We don't have comp'ny so often that I want to turn 'em away."

And yet, in spite of her apparent warmth of welcome, I felt distinctly uneasy as I walked toward the house; for under cover of the noise of the machine as Wells

drove away toward the great carriage shed I distinctly saw the woman say, as she put her hand on Jack's arm and pushed him unwillingly along:

"You confounded fool! They've got to stay here now. They'd meet 'em on the valley road, and then where'd we—" and then I saw no more; for they turned their backs upon me.

"Now, why," I thought, as I stepped upon the porch, "now, why should one not want us at all, and the other be afraid to let us get away?"

It did not add to my comfort upon entering the great room which was kitchen, dining room, and living room combined, that the first object to catch my attention was a rifle standing beside the door, nor that in a swift glance about I should see a rifle standing close beside every window.

"We have a great deal of trouble with hawks and eagles here," the woman explained easily. "We keep loaded guns standin' handy about; so that whenever we hear the chickens a screechin' we can grab up a gun quick and run. We kill lots of hawks and coyotes. If they'd only put a bounty on sich vermin, we'd turn a pretty penny every year."

Yet, in spite of the woman's ease of manner and her glibness of explanation, I sensed a sinister turn to the situation which roused every perceptive faculty, and I wished with all my heart that I had allowed Wells to enjoy his "I told you so" superiority, and taken travelers' luck in the open.

"And you can't hear nothin'? Not a thing at all?" the woman said, when my deafness at length necessarily revealed itself. "And yet you can read people's lips? Jack, do you hear that? But can't you hear anything at all, not even a sound?" she persisted.

"Not anything at all," I said. I felt under no obligations to explain that, while no voice could reach me, I could yet hear a pistol shot, and that many sounds produced vibrations in furniture and walls which I could feel, though I could not tell what produced it.

At the time I wondered if I really did see a look of relief creep into her eyes, and a sinister light leap into those of Jack as he gazed upon Wells, placidly unconscious of everything except the stowing away of delicious fried chicken and true southern johnny cake. In the light of what happened before another dawn, I know now that my sixth sense was working truly from the moment I caught the word "damn" upon Jack's lips as he came out to greet us.

"I'll help you with that machine," said Jack at last to Wells.

"Oh, that'll keep until daylight," said Wells, fairly purring with the satisfaction that comes from good feeding. "I'll get up long before Madam will be ready to start."

"I'll be off even before then," said Jack. "Better get it done to-night and then there won't be any hitch."

Wells rose reluctantly, and that was the last I saw of him that night.

IN a few minutes I was surprised to see Jack return. Never before had repairs like that been done so expeditiously. As I looked at Jack, I noticed that he was breathing rapidly, that his flannel shirt was torn, and a long scratch across his cheek had raised in a welt and was bleeding slightly. Involuntarily I said:

"It was a hefty job, wasn't it?"

"Wha-what d'ye mean?" he said, a mad light leaping into his eyes. "You—you didn't hear nothin', did you? You told me you couldn't hear a thing!"

"Indeed, and I really can't. But I never knew that kind of repairs to be made so quickly, and I thought from the way you look you must have worked very hard and very fast. Where's Wells?"

"He's turned in. Said he guessed he'd go to bed at once, so's to be up early."

"He ought not to have done that!" Wells was hard enough to keep in order; but the one rule I strictly enforced was that he should come to me the last thing at night, for instructions as to the next day's run. "Will you please call him?" I said. "He cannot have got to bed yet."

"Aw, Wells can keep," said Jack roughly.

"Then I'll go to him," I said, vague alarm making me wish the protection of even Wells.



I Could Feel Heavy Vibrations.

"No you don't!" said Jack, grasping my arm roughly. "You stay right here!" Then, as I looked at him in astonishment, his grip loosened, and, clumsily pointing to a chair, he said with an attempt at amiability, "You needn't bother about Wells. Just break your rules for once. I'd like—like to talk to you. Sit down. Sit down, I say!" he repeated brutally, as I hesitated, and with tightened grip he almost threw me into a chair by the table.

Then he began to talk. At any other time I should have found it of absorbing interest; but things had taken such a turn that I could think of nothing but the possible danger that threatened me. Wells, I knew beyond a doubt, had been put *hors de combat*. Whether it was anything more serious, whether he was badly injured or dead, I did not know. But with a rifle meeting my eyes wherever I turned, with one standing close beside Jack's hand as he sat across the table, with a revolver boldly stuck in a holster that I knew had not been buckled round Jack's waist fifteen minutes before, it may be understood why my attention was not closely fixed upon the subjects of Jack's conversation.

Moreover, as he talked, I became aware of three facts: First, that over my shoulder, as I sat with my back to the door, he was watching something out of doors, which he did not wish me to see; next, that, through the table on which my arm rested, I could feel heavy vibrations which in a city would mean the passing of teams; and, thirdly, that whatever caused the vibrations was likewise kicking up a terrible amount of dust. And even though I was aware that I was brushing the hair line of safety, I turned suddenly and looked out of the window.

I had no idea what it was I expected to see; but I was distinctly disappointed to find it nothing more than the passing of a large bunch of horses. Yet I could see that Jack was furious. Again it was the woman who came to the rescue.

"We're bringin' in the cattle for the night," she said.

Unfortunately for my peace of mind, I already was sufficiently familiar with cattle raising in the West to know that the animals are not hiked back and forth, morning and night, like the cows in a village. Yet, even with that, I did not dream of the truth.

IT was a relief when at last I found myself in the little room under the roof that had been turned over to me for the night, and as I shot the bolt I noted with satisfaction that both door and casing were unusually staunch. I carried no jewelry. My watch was the cheapest nickel, wind-forever style; my ready cash was less than one hundred dollars, it being my policy never to carry large sums of money in a country where travelers' checks are known and honored. But everything I had, nickel plated watch, heirloom seal ring, cash, and fat wad of travelers' checks, I laid together in a pile on top of the pine packing box tricked out to do duty as a bureau.

The only possession I did not lay upon this improvised altar of safety was my little .38 Colt. Of course, a woman, even a crack shot, has little show when it comes