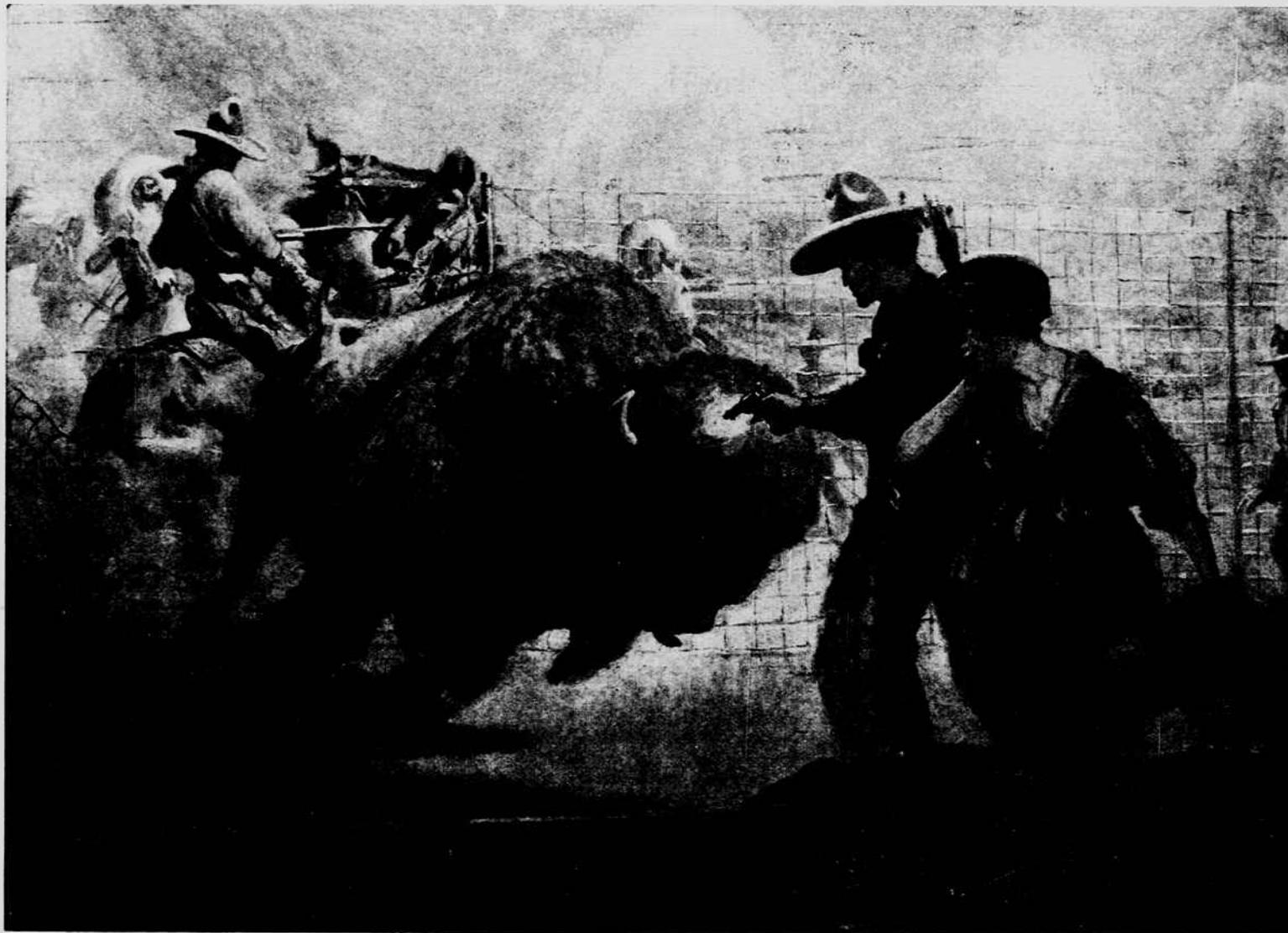


THE IDLE RICH

Drawing by W. Herbert Dunton

By EMMET F. HARTE



"Three leaps, and he was between the girl and the bull!"

THE cattle, scattered far across the brown plain, grazed in groups or stood apart, chewing their cud contentedly under the stars. The crescent moon, a silver canoe, floated in the western sky. The ponies were picketed, the supper fire sunk to white ashes, and Harve and I reposed under the chuck wagon, serene, lazy, drowsily content.

He that was called Harve was of the earth, earthy. He saw no sonnets in the stars. To him the murmuring night breeze sighed no soft nothings; but sometimes on nights like this, when the moon was bright, and from the distance came the yelping of the little lone wolf on his nightly round, Harve was moved to the telling of strange tales. This I knew, and I waited in expectancy. Presently he said:

"Down in the Red River country is the Twin Cross Ranch. The man that owns it is named Bruce Stanford. He's a Cattle King. Sometimes he grasses twenty thousand head in a season. Him and me once traveled with Doc Carson's Wild West Show."

He paused. I listened for the throat-clearing that would prelude a continuance of the tale; but Harve was in no hurry.

"Yes," I said at last, "and—"

"I was thinking about the girl he married," he said. "She was a dove. But, as for that, Bruce Stanford was no scrub."

"I was punching cows for Bruce that spring, and we had them out on the range in fine shape,—plenty of grass, good weather, and everything lovely. You'd think that a man like Bruce, with his own ranch, stock, money, and prospects, with good health, and not a bad habit to give him trouble, would have been purring with contentedness, wouldn't you? Well, he wasn't. He was as grouchy and unhappy as a cow that has misplaced a week-old calf."

"Harve," he says to me, "I'm sore on it all,—these same old level plains, the same old sun shining day after day, the same cattle out there, the same saddling of the same horse, you and Sam and the Swede cook,—Harve, it's getting on my nerves. I've got to have a change,"

he says, 'or, by the horns of the Old Scratch, I'm going to run amuck pretty soon!"

"Yours for business," I returned. "Name your distance and make your bets: I'm for you."

"We'll let Sam run the ranch this summer," he went on, "and you and me will take a trapse."

"We raced the plugs to the house at that—and, just to show you how Fortune smiles on the pure in heart, when we got there who was waiting for us but Doc Carson of the Carson Wild West Show!"

DOC was a great old boy—I can see him yet, with his silver curls, his big mustache and goatee, his wide, white hat, and the way he sat on his horse. Doc was an oldtime gentleman, and there was a good deal of the boy about him too.

"Stanford," he said, after we'd got acquainted and were all sitting around the table doing our worst to the cooking, "I'm looking for some boys to take with me this summer in the show. I want a couple of good riders and shooters and one at least that can throw the rope. You're acquainted in this part of the country, and I'd take it as a favor if you'd cite me to some such."

"How would us two do?" asked Bruce, meaning himself and me.

"The Doc thought he was joking, and laughed good-naturedly. 'You'd do all right,' he said; 'only you'd hold me up on the salary, I'm afraid. You're too rich for my blood, Son!'"

"No!" said Bruce, serious. "Regular salary suits us. We're going for the fun of it. Honest, if you'll take us, we'll go. Harve here can ride anything on legs, and throw a rope second to none in this section. As for me, I ain't much—I can shoot a little. I'll show you—' He had just lit a cigarette, and he flipped it up in the air as he spoke; then, with a motion you couldn't hardly see, he slipped his gun out and shot from the hip. The cigarette splattered into pieces in the air."

"The Doc gaped in pleased wonderment. 'Fire!' he said enthusiastically. 'That's shooting all right and no mistake! If you are in earnest about going, you two, the rest is easy. When can you start?'"

"Tomorrow morning," Bruce told him.

THE show was starting from Wichita. There were twenty Indians, including squaws and papooses; about the same number of boys gathered from here and there, all straight Western from off the range, no tenderfeet or softies among 'em, and all good fellows. There were four white women, all with their husbands. It was a good, clean, outdoor show, and the Doc was proud of 'em. We had our own train, forty-two head of horses, a few mules, two cows, and six head of real buffaloes. Bruce Stanford just simply burst into bloom. It was what he thought he needed,—a change.

"Bruce took a five-year course in one of the big Eastern education factories before his old man died, and was broke to white shirts with collars and cuffs on as gentle as anybody. But a man that has lived on a horse on the range for ten years can't help but feel freer in the open, can he? I'd say not! As for me, I'm just a cowpuncher: I don't know nothing else."

"After we got to going it was a fine, free life. We showed in all the big towns, a few days to a week in a place. We pulled off stage holdups, Indian massacres, fancy shooting, roping, bronc' busting, and buffalo hunts. Except when it rained, it was a picnic. We camped on the grounds, and wandered over the towns seeing the sights when not engaged in a performance."

"We had big crowds, and Doc was raking in the coin hand over fist. The Indians behaved themselves, and didn't get drunk only turn about, which was permissible. Everything went as smooth as a rubber-tired buggy from the time we left Wichita in April to the final pack-up in New Orleans, Christmas week."

THE particular thing that I started to tell about, though, happened when we got to the Big Town. It had nothing to do with the show. It didn't have much to do with me; only Bruce and I were chummy; so I knew more about it than anybody else. Bruce got mixed up with the Idle Rich. Then was when the trouble began.

"You know what money is when you see it, and so do I; but back East there are two kinds of people that don't know what money is,—them that never had nor never will have any, and them that always have had