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LAHOMA

BY
JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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(Continued from last week.)

SYNOPSIS.

Brick Willock, highwayman, saves one Gladys and a baby girl from being murdered by his fellow outlaws on the western plains.

Willock flees to the mountains and hides to escape the wrath of the outlaws he had outwitted. He learns that some one has discovered his hiding place.

Red Feather, an Indian chief, brings Willock a little white girl, named Lahoma, and instructs him to take care of her. He says her father is living with Indians.

Willock recognizes her as the daughter of a woman who had died and was buried near by. He begins to teach Lahoma correct English.

CHAPTER VI.

A Young Man's Fancy.

"I WANT you to enjoy yourself," went on Brick, in reply to Lahoma's query. "And when I'm old and no 'count you'd need somebody to take care of you, and you'd go full equipped and ready to stand up to any civilized person that tried to run a bluff on you."

"But, oh, I want to go—I want to go out there—where there ain't no plains and alkali and buffalo grass—where they's pavements and policemen and people in beautiful clothes! I don't mean now. I mean when I've got civilized." She drew herself up proudly. "I wouldn't go till I was civilized—till I was like them." She turned impulsively to Brick: "But you've got to go with me when I go! I'm going to stay with you till I'm fit to go, and then you're going to stay with me the rest of my life."

"Am I fit to go with her?" Brick appealed to Bill Atkins.

"You ain't," Bill replied. "I ain't fit," Brick declared firmly. The tears were in Lahoma's eyes. She looked from one to the other, her little face deeply troubled. Suddenly she grabbed up her books and started toward the stove. "Then this here civilizing is going to stop!" she declared. "Lahoma," Brick cried in dismay.

"Yes, it is—unless you promise to stay with me when I go to live in the big world."

"Honey, I'll promise you this: When you are ready to live out there I'll sure go with you and stay with you—if you want me, when the time comes."

Lahoma seized his hand and jumped up and down in delight. "It's a safe promise," remarked Bill Atkins dryly.

One evening in May a tall lithe figure crept along the southern base of the mountain range, following its curves with cautious feet as if fearful of discovery. He was a young man of twenty-one or two, bronzed, free of movement, agile of step. His face was firm, handsome and open. A few yards from Brick Willock's dugout now stood a neat log cabin, and not far from the door of this cabin was a girl of about fifteen seated on the grass.

She had been reading, but her book had slipped to her feet. With hands clasped about her knee and head tilted back she was watching the lazy white clouds that stretched like wisps of scattered cotton across the blue field of the sky. The young man stretched himself where a block of granite and below it, a cedar tree effectually protected him from discovery. Thus hidden he stared at the girl unblinkingly.

For two years he had led the life of a cowboy, exiled from his kind, going with the boys from lower Texas to Kansas along the Chisholm trail, overseeing great herds of cattle, caring for them day and night, scarcely ever under a roof, even that of a dugout. Through rain and storm the ground had been his bed. During these two years of hard life, reckless companions and exacting duties he had easily slipped into the grooves of speech and thought common to his fellows. Only his face, his unconscious movements and accents distinguished him from the other boys of "Old Man Walker," the boss of the G-Bar outfit. On no other condition but that of apparent assimilation could he have retained his place with Walker's ranchmen.

For two years he had seen no one like the girl of the cove.

That was wonderful hair, its brown tresses gleaming, though untouched by the sun, as if in it were enmeshed innumerable particles of light. The face was more wonderful. There was the seal of innocence on the lips, the proof of fearlessness in the eyes, the touch of thought on the brow, the sign of purpose about the resolute little chin. The slender brown hands spoke of life in the open air, and the glow of the cheeks told of burning suns. Her form, her attitude, spoke not only of instinctive grace, but of a certain wildness in admirable harmony with the surrounding scene.

It seemed to him that in this young girl, who had the look and poise of a woman, he had found what hitherto he had vainly sought in the wilderness—the beauty and the charm of it, re-

lined and separated from its sordidness and uncouthness—in a word, from all that was base and ugly.

At last he tore himself away, retraced his steps as cautiously as he had come and flung himself upon the pony left waiting at a sheltered nook far from the cove. As he sped over the plains toward the distant herd it came to him suddenly in a way not before experienced that it was May, that the air was balmy and fragrant and that the land, softly lighted in the clear twilight, was singularly beautiful. He seemed breathing the roses back home, which recalled another face, but not for long. The last time he had seen that eastern face the dew had lain on the early morning roses. How could a face so different make him think of them?

The G-Bar headquarters was on the western bank of what was then known as Red river, but was really the North fork of Red river. "Old Man Walker," who was scarcely past middle age, had built his corral on the margin of the plain which extended to that point in an unbroken level from a great distance and which, having reached that point, dropped without warning, a sheer precipice, to an extensive lake.

The young man reached the corral after a ride of twelve or thirteen miles, most of the distance through a country of rife sand. He galloped up to the rude inclosure, surrounded by a cloud of dust through which his keen gray eyes discovered Mizoo on the eve of leaving camp. Mizoo was one of the men whose duty it was to ride the line all night—the line that the young man had guarded all day—to keep Walker's cattle from drifting.

"Come on, Miz," called the young man as the other swung upon his broncho; "I'm going back with you." The lean, leather-skinned, sandy-mustached cattlemen uttered words not meet for print, but expressive of hearty pleasure. "Ain't you had enough of it, Bill?" he added. "I'd think you'd want to lay up for tomorrow's work."

"Oh, I ain't sleepy!" the young man declared as they rode away side by side. "I couldn't close an eye tonight, and I want to talk."

Mizoo was so called from his habit of attributing his most emphatic aphorisms to "his aunt, Miss Sue of Missouri," a lady held by his companions to be a purely fictitious character, a convenient "Mrs. Harris," to give weight to sayings worn smooth from centuries of use.

"I'll talk my head off," Mizoo declared, "if that'll keep you on the move with me."

"What I want you to talk about is that little girl you met on the trail down in Texas seven years ago."

Mizoo burst out in a hearty laugh. "I reckon it suits you better to take her as a little kid," he cried, his tall form shaking convulsively. "I'll never forget how you looked, Bill, when we tried to run a bluff on her daddy last month. Yep, 'Old Man Walker' never knowed what a proposition he was handing us when he ordered us to drive the old mountain lion out of his lair! Pity you and me was at the tail end of the attacking party. Fust thing we knowed them other four galoots was falling backwards a-getting out of that trap of a cove, and the bullets was whizzing about our ears!"

He broke off to shout with laughter. "And it was all done by one old settler and his gal, them standing out open and free with their breech loaders, and us hiking out for camp like whipped curs!"

The young man was impatient, but he compelled himself to speak calmly. "As I never got around the spur of the mountain before you fellows were in full retreat, I object to being classed with the whipped curs, and you'll bear that in mind, Mizoo. You saw the girl all right, didn't you?"

"You bet I did, and as soon as I see her I knowed it was the same I'd come across on the trail seven year ago. Her daddy give it to us plain that if he ever catched one of us inside his cove he'd kill us like so many coyotes, and I reckon he would. Well, he's got as much right to his claim as anybody else. This land don't belong to nobody, and there he's been a-squatting considerable longer than we've laid out this ranch. He was in the right of it, but what I admire was his being able to hold his rights. Lots of folks has rights but they ain't man enough to hold 'em. And if you could have seen that gal, her eyes like two big burning suns, and her mouth closed like a steel trap, and her hand as steady on that trigger as the mountain rock behind her! Lord, Bill, what a trembly, knock-kneed, meaching sort of a husband she's a-going to fashion to her hand, one of these days! But pretty? None more so. And a-going all to waste out here in the desert!"

"And now about that child seven years ago," the young man said.

"Why, yes, me and the boys was bringing about 2,000 head up to Abilene when we come on to this same pardner and another man walking the trail, with a little gal coming behind 'em on

her pony. And it was this same gal, I reckon she was seven or eight year old then. Well, sir, I just thought as I looked at her that I never seen a prettier sight in this world, and I reckon I ain't, for which I looked at the same gal the other day the gun she was holding up to her eye sort of dazzled me so I couldn't take stock of all her good points. We went into camp that evening, and all of us got pretty soft and mellow, what from the unusualness of the meeting, and we asked the old codger if we could all come over to his camp and shake hands with the gal. He'd drawn back from us about a mile, he was that skeered to be sociable. So after considerable haggling and jawing he said we could, and here we come, just about sundown, all of us looking sheepish enough to be carved for mutton, but everlasting determined to take that gal by the paw."

"Well," said the young man who had often heard this story, but had never been treated to the sequel, "what happened then, Mizoo? You always stop at the same place. Didn't you shake hands with her?"

The other ruminated in deep silence for some time, then rejoined: "I don't know how it is. A fellow can talk about the worst devilment in creation with a free rein and no words hot enough to blister his tongue, but let him run up against something simple like that, and the bottom of his lungs seems to fall out. I guess they ain't no more to be told. That was all there was to it, though I might add that the next day we come along by old Whisky Simeon's joint that sets out on the sand hills, you know, and we put spurs to our bronks and went whooping by, with old Whisky Simeon staring and a-hollering after us like he thought we was crazy. I don't know as I had missed a drunk before for five year when the materials was ready found for its making. And I ain't never forgot the little kid with the brown hair and the eyes that seen to your bottom layer."

Darkness came on and the hour grew late, but few words were exchanged as they rode the weary miles that marked the limit of the range. The midnight luncheon beside a small fire, over which the coffee steamed, roused something like cheerful conversation which, however, flickered and flared uncertainly like the bonfire.

"Guess I'll leave you now," remarked the young man when the fire had died away.

"Yes, better turn in, for you're most uncommon dull, you know," Mizoo replied frankly. "T'would be just about as much company for me if you'd hike out and leave me your picture to carry along."

Instead of taking the direction toward the river the young man set out at a gallop for the distant mountain range, which in the gloom seemed not far away. After an hour's hard riding he reached it.

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CHAPTER VII.

The Flag of Truce.

EARLIEST dawn found the young man seated composedly upon one of the flattened outcroppings of the hill of stone that lay like an island between the outer plain and the sheltered cove. Both the dugout and the cabin of cedar logs within the cove were silent and as void of movement as the rocks behind them. The young man watched first one, then the other, as tireless and vigilant as if he had not been awake for twenty-four hours.

It was the dugout that first started from its night's repose. The door was thrown away from the casing, and a great uncouth man, strong as a giant and wild of aspect as a savage, strode forth, gun in hand, his eyes sweeping the landscape in quick flashing glances. Almost instantly he discovered the figure perched on the granite block overlooking his retreat. He raised his gun to his shoulder.

The young man fell sidewise behind the rocks, and a bullet clipped the edge of his barricade. Remaining supine, he fastened his handkerchief to the

(Continued next week.)

TWO DOGS

One wears a dainty collar
And a fine engraved crest
And cuddles in milady's lap
In uninterrupted rest.

The other's life is quite apart—
That's Tommy's little cur—
He struts it with the kiddies' gang
A gay philosopher.

Of course, I've never seen a dog
And Can't tell which is best
But if I were a dog, you bet,
I'd never wear a crest.

I'd rather rough it with the gang
And have a lot of fun
No woman's lap would I prefer
When Tommy gets his gun.

"When the Daisies Dot the Meadows
and the Goldenrod's in Bloom"
sings the soulful poet. All very nice
except the daisies don't dot the meadows
when the goldenrod's in bloom
says the Baltimore Sun.

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