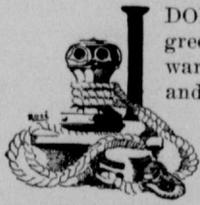


# GOD'S COUNTRY

BY JOHN FLEMING WILSON



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I DON'T KNOW WHY a dislike for green sweaters should become the outward and visible excitant of an inward and moral unity. But the woman stepped aboard the old tourist steamer *Dragon* at some out-of-the-way Alaskan port; and before her booted feet and stiff corduroy skirt had brushed the sill of the social hall, our two hundred sightseers were solidly against her. She wore a very bright, green sweater, open at the throat.

For ten days we had pushed our bows into various sounds and bays and rocky harbors, and in that length of time the passengers—I don't recall whether they belonged to some social or religious organization—had surveyed the incommunicative waters of our northern territory and taken pictures and asked questions. They had n't discovered any signs of being a compact body, or of having any unity of sentiment or belief, before the moment that this unexpected passenger came off to us one noon from an invisible shore, and demanded passage to Seattle. I recall vividly exactly what passed, while her boatmen held their plunging craft up to the landing stage.

The woman passed up a dingy, heavy leather satchel, a roll of blankets, and an oil skin coat, obviously enclosing other rough garments. Then she held out her hand to one of the three men in the boat. "Jim," she said, "you boys have been mighty good to me. I wish—"

"So do I," said Jim, holding out an enormous paw. They looked into each other's eyes with a swift, profound, explicit glance.

She turned to the other two men, one of whom clung awkwardly to the rope that dangled down the steamer's side. "You boys better come back to God's country as soon as you can," she told them, with friendliness.

"You bet!" said one of them, taking off his hat and showing to us who were looking down, an extremely youthful face. The other nodded.

"I'm sorry to quit you," the girl went on with increasing self-constraint. "But I've made my stake—thanks to you, good partners—and it's Sue Brown back to God's country."

A sudden, immense growl came from the elder man's throat. I seemed to distinguish an inarticulate threat, mingled with encouragement for her and despair for himself. She wiped the tears away with her gauntleted hand; then turned, leaped upward agilely, landed on the stage and came to us on deck without a backward glance.

The boat slipped astern on the tide, appeared as a dull speck in the mist and vanished. I stepped up to our new passenger and pointed the way to the purser's room. As she brushed in, I heard a general murmur to the effect that the understanding in Seattle had been that the *Dragon* was an excursion boat, and carried no interport passengers. One woman remarked: "They might at least be more careful about making us uncomfortable with strange women."

Not half an hour later, I heard that last phrase again. A man wandered up to me, cigar drooping from his loose lips, to say: "Wonder who the strange woman is, Doc!"

"What strange woman?" I demanded.

"That girl in the green sweater," he continued. "Good looking creature, for one of her class. But the ladies! Our wives!" And he winked at me, as much as to say that he saw an obscure joke in the matter, a joke that must n't be told aloud. He meant no harm.

As the weather was thick and nasty for the next day or so, all entertainment of the passengers fell on myself. And before I had come to my alert senses in season to put a stop to idle gossip, the damage was done; and the girl, this Sue Brown, had been quietly but firmly cast out of the ship's society. The women on board were by no means slow in shaping themselves into a formidable and compact committee, as sure of their principles, their beliefs and their inexorable code of manners as any community fifty years old. Under

By-law 17 of Law One, this Miss Brown was "unfortunate" and ineligible to being talked to or sat with or looked at by the men.

She didn't size the thing up herself. She was too breezily intent on seeing that a vast assortment of letters written home (she said) by various miners and packers and partners, got properly introduced into the mail sack; and in drying out her discarded wet weather garments on a prominent rail, to the horror of the discreet matrons. Once or twice, she dropped into my office, swung herself up on the desk and smiled at me frankly and girlishly, remarking: "Doctor, you bet it feels good to get back to God's country!" And having thus expanded, she would sit a moment, the smile fading into a tender and faraway look. Then she would drop to the deck, stamp her booted feet and pull the green sweater collar closer about her throat, before stepping out into the mist.

The third day she abruptly rose from noonday dinner, strode through the saloon and vanished up the stairway. I saw the man who sat opposite her, looking in an embarrassed fashion at his wife, who tossed her head, maternally magnificent. Miss Brown did not appear in the main saloon any more. Good excuse for me to call and find out what the matter was. I drifted up to her room in the texas, and found her seated just inside the door on a stool. She said she was perfectly well.

"But you haven't been down to eat," I protested.

"One of the boys brings me all I want," she answered, and was silent.

"I'm sorry," I said, and departed, feeling like a fool. That night, the purser visited me after the deck lights were out.

"I wish I were a passenger, instead of an officer on this packet," he growled, when he had taken a cigar. "The way these dames treat that girl in the green sweater makes my blood boil. She's as decent as milk, and she's been 'way above Taku for two years, trying to make a stake for her old dad. Old gentleman went up years ago, got hurt, was paralyzed and the boys sent him home. She took his place, as he really had a pretty good thing, and the family was broke. She's just cleaned up and sold out. And now—well, she hasn't seen a well-dressed woman or a kid or heard fresh news for two years, and right on this ship she gets the frosted glare."

"I heard her say something about God's country," I reminded the purser. He winced. "Yes. While I was making out her seat check when she first came aboard, she was grinning like a kid. 'I hope you have chicken and mashed potatoes,' she told me."

"Well," I said, "they let her alone, any way. And we'll soon be home."

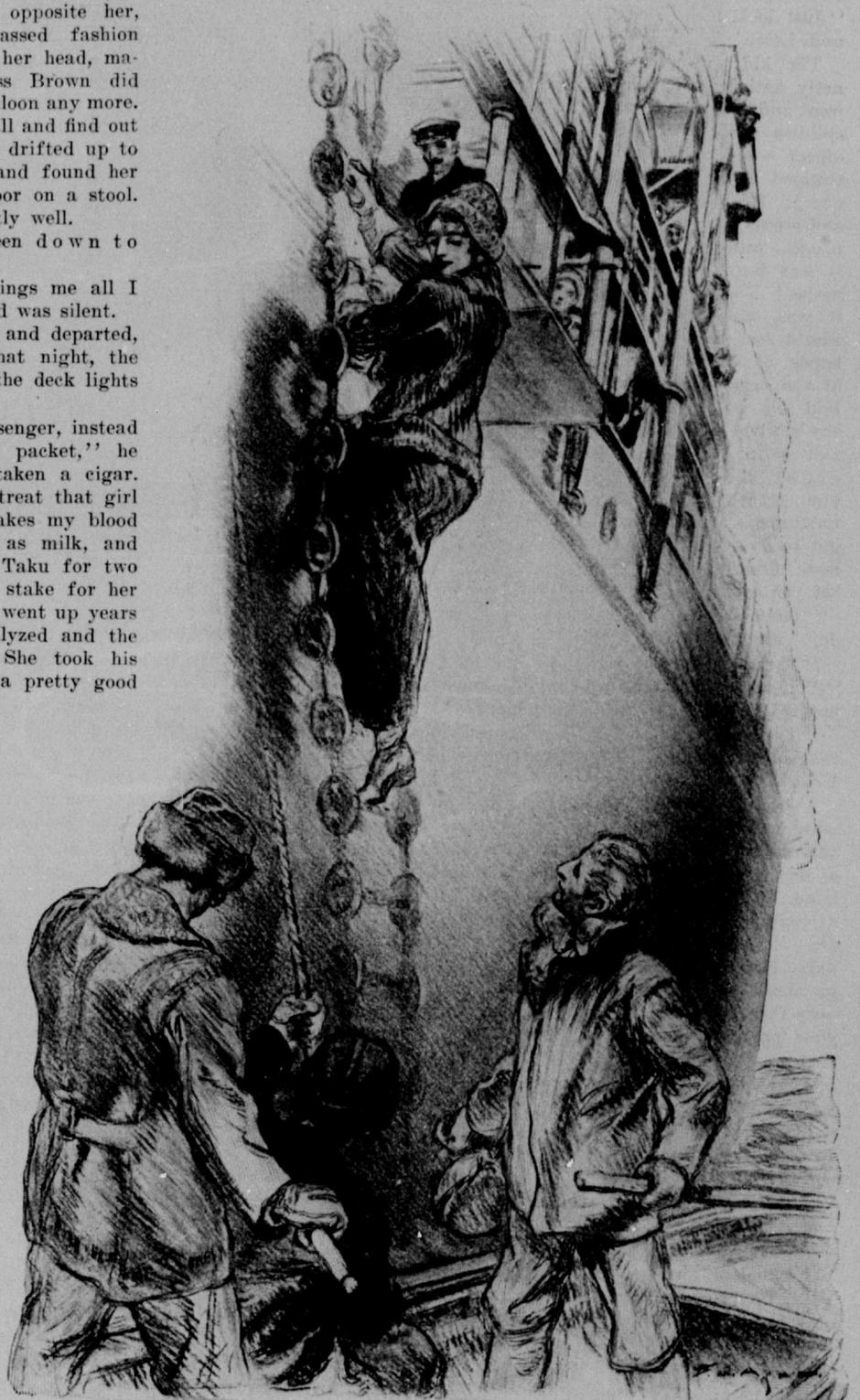
"They don't let her alone," the purser went on. "Only this morning she was

talking to that kid with the uniform on—boy scout—and a woman came along on the upper deck, gave one look and told the kid his father was waiting for him down in the room. Cold freeze-out, Doc!"

"I thought she'd been crying," I agreed. The purser got up, tossed his stub away and snarled at me with extraordinary venom: "God's country! Yah!" He slammed the door from the outside.

I have not told you yet that among all the passengers I had but one genuine acquaintance, a somber and taciturn man of middle age. He was an ex-grocer or ex-shoe merchant or something, and he came from a town in Illinois, and the boy scout was his son.

"On the trip up, this chap had fallen into the habit of coming into my room, to sit down and silently offer me a stubby domestic cigar, evidently made in his home town. This ceremony completed, he would light his own weed out of a fusee box and lean back into absolute immobility. He said almost nothing. Occa-



"I've made my stake ..... and it's Sue Brown back to God's Country"