

Coolidge Dane

Bat Wing Bowles



Dane Coolidge
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CHAPTER I

MR. BOWLES

It was a fine windy morning in March and Dixie Lee, of Chula Vista, Arizona, was leaving staid New York at the gate marked "Western Limited." A slight difference with the gatekeeper, who seemed to doubt every word she said, cast no cloud upon her spirits, and she was cheerfully searching for her ticket when a gentleman came up from behind. At sight of the trim figure at the wicket, he too became suddenly happy, and it looked as if the effete East was losing two of its merriest citizens.

"Oh, good-morning, Miss Lee!" he said, bowing and smiling radiantly as she glanced in his direction. "Are you going out on this train?"

"Why – yes," she replied, gazing into her handbag with a preoccupied frown. "That is, if I can find my ticket!"

She found it on the instant, but the frown did not depart. She had forgotten the young man's name. It was queer how those New York names slipped her memory – but she remembered his face distinctly. She had met him at some highbrow affair – it was a reception or some such social maelstrom – and, yes, his name was Bowles!

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Bowles," she exclaimed as he gallantly took her bag; but a furtive glance at his face left her suddenly transfixed with doubts. Not that his expression changed – far from that – but a fleeting twinkle in his eyes suggested some hidden joke.

"Oh, isn't your name Bowles?" she stammered. "I met you at the Wordsworth Club, you know, and –"

"Oh, yes – quite right!" he assured her politely. "You have a wonderful memory for names, Miss Lee. Shall we go on down to your car?"

Dixie Lee regarded the young man questioningly and with a certain Western disfavor. He was one of those trim and proper creatures that seemed to haunt Wordsworth societies, welfare meetings, and other culture areas known only to the cognoscente and stern-eyed Eastern aunts. In fact, he seemed to personify all those qualities of breeding and education which a long winter of compulsory "finishing" had taught her to despise; and yet – well, if it were not for his clothes and manners and the way he dropped his "r's" he might almost pass for human. But she knew his name wasn't Bowles.

There had been a person there by the name of Bowles, but the hostess had mumbled when she presented this one – and they had talked quite a little, too. She glanced at him again and a question trembled on her lips; but names were nothing out where she came from, and she let it go for Bowles.

The hypothetical Mr. Bowles was a tall and slender young man, of a type that ordinarily maddened her beyond all reason and prompted her to say cruel things which she was never sorry for afterward. He had a clear complexion, a Cupid's bow mouth, and eyes as innocent as a girl's. They were of a deep violet hue, very soft and soulful, and had a truly cultured way of changing – when he talked – to mirror a thousand shades of interest, courtesy and concern; but the way they had flickered when he took over the name of Bowles suggested a real man behind the veil. His manners, of course, were irreproachable; and not even a haberdasher could take exception to his clothes. He was, in fact, attired strictly according to the mode, in a close-fitting suit of striped gray, with four-inch cuffs above his box-toed shoes, narrow shoulders, and a low-crowned derby hat, now all the rage but affected for many years only by Dutch comedians.

When he removed this hat, which he did whenever he stood in her presence, he revealed a very fine head of hair which had been brushed straight back from his forehead until each strand knew its separate place; and yet, far from being pleased at this final evidence of conscientious endeavor, Dixie May received him almost with a sniff.

"And are you really on your way to Arizona, Miss Lee?" he inquired, carefully leaving the "r" out of "are" and putting the English on "really." "Why, how fortunate! I am going West myself! Perhaps we can renew our acquaintance on the way. Those were jolly stories you were telling me at the Wordsworth Club – very improperly, to be sure, but all the more interesting on that account. About the round-up cook, you know, and the man who couldn't say 'No.' Nothing like that in California, I suppose. I'm off for Los Angeles, myself."

"All right," answered Dixie Lee, waving California airily aside; "Arizona is good enough for me! Say, I'm going to ask this man where my section is."

She fished out her Pullman ticket and showed it to a waiting porter, who motioned her down the train.

"The fourth car, lady," he said. "Car Number Four!"

"Car Four!" cried Bowles, setting down the suitcase with quite a dramatic start. "Why – why, isn't this remarkable, Miss Lee? To think that we should take the same train – on the same day – and then have the very same car! But, don't you know, you never finished that last story you were telling me – about the cowboy who went to the picnic – and now I shall demand the end of it. Really, Miss Lee, I enjoyed your tales immensely – but don't let me keep you waiting!"

He hurried on, still commenting upon the remarkable coincidence; and as a memory of the reception came back to her and she recalled the avid way in which this same young man had hung upon her words, a sudden doubt, a shrewd questioning, came over the mind of Dixie Lee. Back in Arizona, now, a man with any git-up-and-git to him might – but, pshaw, this was not Arizona! And he was not that kind of man! No, indeed! The idea of one of these New York Willies doing the sleuth act and tagging her to the train!

At the same time Dixie Lee had her misgivings about this correct young man, because she *knew* his name was not Bowles. More than that, his language displeased her, reminding her as it did of her long winter's penance among the culturines. Three days more of highbrow conversation would just about finish her off – she must be stern, very stern, if she would avert the impending disaster! So she stabbed her neatly-trimmed little sombrero with a hatpin and waited for Mr. Bowles.

"Lovely weather we've been having, isn't it?" he purred as he made bold to sit down beside her.

"Yes, indeed," she answered, showing her white teeth in a simpering smile. "Simply heavenly. Don't you know, it reminds me of those lines in Wordsworth – you remember – I think it was in his 'Idiot Boy.' Oh, how do they go?"

She knitted her brows and Mr. Bowles regarded her thoughtfully.

"Perhaps it was in his 'Lines Written in Early Spring,'" he suggested guardedly.

"No," she insisted. "It was in 'The Idiot Boy' – either that or in 'Lines Written to the Same Dog.' I forget which. Anyway, it told all about the rain, you know, and the clouds – and all that. Don't you remember? I thought you were full of Wordsworth."

This last, was thrown out for a bait, to get Mr. Bowles to extend himself, but it failed of its effect. A somber smile took the place of the expected frenzy and he muttered half to himself as he gazed out of the window.

"What's that you say?" she questioned sharply.

"Oh, pardon me," he exclaimed, recovering himself with a sudden access of manner; "I was talking to myself, don't you know? But, really, I *am* pretty full of Wordsworth; so, if you don't mind, we'll talk about something else. My aunt, you know, is a great devotee of all the nature poets, and I attend the meetings to please her. It's an awful bore sometimes, too, I assure you; that's why your face was so welcome to me when I chanced to see you at the club-rooms. That lecturer was such

a conceited ass and those women were so besotted in their admiration of him that I looked around to see if there was a single sane and reasonable creature in the room – and there you were, as stern and uncompromising as an angel and – oh, well, I formed a different conception of angels, right there. You were so delightfully humorous too, when Mrs. Melvine introduced us – and, well, really, Miss Lee, you are partly responsible for my leaving New York. I never fully realized before what our Western country must be like; I never dreamed that there was a place to flee to when the conventions of society grew irksome; but when you told me of your ranch, and the cowboys, and all the wonderful happenings of that wild and carefree life I – I made up my mind to chuck the whole thing, don't you know, and strike out for myself."

"Oho!" breathed Dixie Lee, squinting down her eyes and regarding him with a shrewd smile. "So you're running away to be a cowboy, eh? Going West to fight the Indians! Well, well! But let me ask you one question, Mr. Bowles – if that's your name – I trust you don't plan to begin your depredations in my part of the country; because if you do –"

"Oh, my dear Miss Lee," protested Mr. Bowles, "you have quite a mistaken idea, I assure you. Really, now, I hope you give me credit for more discretion than that. The fact is, I have an old college friend on a ranch in California and, though I have not taken my aunt entirely into confidence, I am really going out to make him a visit. It's all very well, you know, to read about sunsets in Wordsworth, but why not go out into the Far West and see the sun set indeed? That's what I say, but of course I would not offend her – she simply thinks my health is failing and I need a Western trip."

"Oh!" said Dixie Lee quietly. "So *you've* got an aunt, too, eh? What did you say her name was?"

"Why, Mrs. – er – Bowles!"

"But why Mrs. *Er*-Bowles?" queried Dixie May, relentlessly. "Why not Mrs. Bowles straight? Now, you know, Mr. Bowles, it looks very much to me as if –"

"Her former name was Earl," interposed Mr. Bowles suavely, and carefully leaving out the "r." "My father's brother married a very dear friend of ours, a Mrs. Earl, and I sometimes call her so still – inadvertently, you know. I am an orphan now and Mrs. Earl – ah, Bowles – has taken me as a son. But you can readily understand how a young man of my age and disposition might not always fall in with a somewhat elderly lady's views of life, especially in regard to cultural influences, and while I love her very dearly and wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world –"

"Yes, it's too bad about you!" observed Dixie Lee heartlessly; and then for quite a while she looked out of the car window as drab and dirty tenements slipped by and the train plunged into a tunnel.

"How far West are you going?" she inquired, waking up suddenly from her reverie. "Lemme see your ticket. Um-m! Well, we travel together as far as Albuquerque, New Mex, and there we say 'Good-by.' I reckon California is about your size, Mr. Bowles, but don't you make any mistake and drop off in Arizona or the cowboys will scare you up some. As for the rest of it, I don't care what name a man goes by, but I see you are down on your ticket here as 'Houghton.'"

There was a challenge in her voice; but Bowles was not dismayed.

"Now, really, Miss Lee," he began, "why quibble over the accident of a name? Whether my name is Houghton, as I have signed it here, or Bowles, has nothing to do with the case. The fact is, I am suffering from an excess of aunts and Wordsworth, much in the same way that you are, perhaps, and my heart has gone out to the West. Be a good fellow now and help me out. Tell me about the country and what I would better do; and, though it is a small return, you shall have one more devoted slave to worship at your feet."

A fleeting smile came into his eyes as he delivered himself of this last, and the queen of the Bat Wing Ranch paused suddenly to make sure there was no mistake. It would be hard indeed to find oneself laughed at by a suède New Yorker, and yet – well, he seemed to mean it, too.

"Rise up, then, Sir Knight," she said, tapping him lightly with her sombrero; "and be mighty particular to change cars when we get to Albuquerque – otherwise the Chula Vista cowboys will make you hard to catch."

CHAPTER II

THE FAR WEST

Three days is a short time in which to post a man on the Far West, but if you don't care what you say, and say it quick, you can give him a pretty good fill. Dixie Lee was almost sorry when the Limited rolled into Albuquerque, and Mr. Bowles was fairly tearful in his adieus.

"Really, Miss Lee," he said, holding her hand with just a shade more than the proper pressure, "really, I shall never forget your kindness. The days have passed like a dream and I feel myself quite a Westerner already. Yes, I am sure I shall love the West – it is so big, and free – but what I like about it most is its splendid spirit of equality, its camaraderie. I can feel it everywhere – it is in the air – these great, rough-looking men, greeting perfect strangers in the smokers and on the platforms and saying: 'Say, pardner, gimme a match' – or a smoke, even! Oh, it is glorious! I – but, really, I must be going! So sorry our ways should part here. Well, good-by, Miss Lee – so glad we should happen to meet. I hope you have a pleasant journey. Thank you! Oh, don't mention it – good-by!"

He raised his Dutch comedian hat once more, a trace of romantic mistiness came into his violet eyes, and then he hurried back to his luxurious quarters on the Limited while Dixie May sat and waited for the southbound to take her to Deming. It was not a cheerful journey to contemplate, for New Mexico and Arizona way trains are slow and dusty, and given to making poor connections and unseemly arrivals; but by ten o'clock that evening Dixie Lee hoped to get as far as Deming and then, if the Overland happened to be late too, she could catch a westbound passenger and get to Chula Vista before the hotel closed. The Western Limited pulled out as her train still stood on its track and she glanced at the rear-end of the observation car for a fluttering handkerchief; but Mr. Bowles' emotions seemed to have overcome him, for he was lacking in this last attention. She watched for him with a broad grin; then, when she was sure he was really gone, Dixie May threw herself back in her seat and laughed until she was silly.

She was in good humor all the way to Deming, where the westbound was reported two hours late; but as she was pacing up and down the platform at midnight her face came suddenly straight. The westbound was standing on the track waiting for orders and she was walking along up toward the front when suddenly, through the smoking-car window, she beheld Sir Knight Bowles in eager converse with a grizzled old-timer! If it wasn't he, it was his twin brother – for there was the hard-boiled hat as large as life. The window was a little murky and the air was thick inside, but Dixie May was sure she had seen him – or was she having dreams?

It seemed, somehow, as if she couldn't get that droll creature out of her mind. All the way down from Albuquerque she had been hearing his talk in her ears and laughing at the way he broadened his "a's" and purred and purled over his "r's." At times she had burst into inextinguishable laughter, insomuch that several of the male passengers had regarded her with curious glances and the train boy had tried to get gay with her; but Dixie Lee knew how to settle that kind of folks. A peanut butcher was a peanut butcher to her, and nothing more; and if he neglected to hawk his wares in order to drape himself over the back of her seat she could put him in his place. It was Mr. Bowles that she was thinking of —*Mr.* Bowles – and when she remembered the innocent look on his face as she filled him up with Indian atrocities and cattle-war stories she just simply had to laugh. But now to find him following her – to discover him on the same train when he was ticketed west out of Albuquerque – well, that was a different thing entirely!

Dixie Lee retired to the sleeper to snatch a few hours of repose and when the dead-eyed porter set her down at Chula Vista she had entirely forgotten her knight. It was five o'clock on a cold March morning and the wind came in from across the prairie with a sweep that chilled the blood. It was so cold that the ticket-agent had ducked back into his inner sanctum before she could so much as hail

him – and it was a quarter of a mile up to the hotel! Dixie May took a long look about her; she tried the waiting-room door; then, with a deep-drawn shudder, she turned to go it alone, when lo, a tall and masculine figure stepped out from behind the warehouse and she recognized Mr. Bowles!

"Pardon me, madam," he said, doffing his comedian hat and addressing her as if she were a stranger; "I see you are all alone – can I be of any service to you?"

It was dark, all right, but the idea of Mr. Bowles expecting to conceal his identity by mere starlight! She knew him, of course, the minute she saw his hat, but – well, what was the use of getting haughty about it? Why not do a little play-acting, too, until they got up to the hotel?

"Why – why, yes," she faltered, simulating an appealing weakness. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure. I – I expected my father to meet me here, but –"

"Ah, yes – very unfortunate," put in Bowles promptly. "Is there any hotel near? Just lead the way then, and I'll follow with your luggage. You might put on my overcoat if you're suffering from the cold. Rather not? Very well, then; let's hurry along to the hotel."

They hurried, Bowles struggling with the baggage, of which he had three pieces, and Dixie Lee preparing her valedictory. Yes, much as she regretted it, she would have to bid him farewell – otherwise he might come tagging after her out to the ranch and set the whole country to talking. It was all very well back in New York, or on the train, but in the Tortugas – never! She would have to make her final effort cutting, but she hoped he would not take it too hard – and meanwhile, as a penance for his presumption, he could break his back packing her suitcases up from the station.

"Ah, just a moment!" entreated Mr. Bowles, setting down the suitcases and working his tortured hands. "Oh, no, not heavy at all – perhaps I can fasten them together with this strap."

He unbuckled the shoulder-strap from his alligator-skin bag and looped it through the handles of the suitcases.

"Hah! Just the thing!" he exclaimed, slinging the two suitcases over his shoulder; and then, with a long, free stride, he swung along beside her, as tireless as an Indian – and as silent.

A sudden sense of respect, almost of awe, came over Dixie Lee as she contemplated his masterful repose, but the hotel door was near and she nerved herself for the assault.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" she snapped. "Following along after me this way! Just because I happened to be a little friendly –"

"Now, really, Miss Lee," broke in Bowles with admirable calm, "I hope you will not be too hard on me. I assure you, if it had not been for your distressing situation – which no gentleman could overlook – you would never have been aware of my presence. But you have known me long enough, I am sure, to know that I would never presume to force my society upon any lady, more particularly upon one for whom –"

"Well, what are you tagging along for then?" demanded Dixie Lee wrathfully. "When I said good-by to you up at Albuquerque you had a through ticket to California. Now here you are down at Chula Vista. What are you up to – that's what I want to know!"

"To be sure!" agreed Mr. Bowles. "Under the circumstances, you have a perfect right to an explanation. I may as well confess then, Miss Lee, that your stories told on the train have fired me with a desire to see the real West, not the pseudo or imitation article, but the real thing with the hair on, as you so aptly phrased it. But here was my difficulty – I had no one to direct me. The hotel-keepers, the ticket-agents, even my Eastern friends in the West, might send me astray and I be none the wiser. I admit it was hardly a gentlemanly thing to do, but rather than lose my last chance to see the great West of which you spoke I followed after you; but without the slightest intention, I assure you, of making myself obnoxious. Is this the hotel ahead?"

"Yes," said Dixie Lee, "it is. And while I wish to congratulate you upon your explanation I want to inform you, Mr. Bowles, that right here is where we part. You're looking for the Wild West, and here she is with her hair down. If you are hunting experiences these Chula Vista boys will certainly accommodate you; but from this time on, Mr. Bowles, we are strangers. We don't know each other,

do you understand? If what you say is true, you followed me simply to find the Far West. This is it. We're quits, then; and I shall have to ask you, as a gentleman, not to annoy me further. You may be all right – back in New York – but out here it's different and I don't want to have the folks joshing me about you. So I'll bid you farewell, Mr. Bowles, and thank you kindly for carrying up my baggage – but don't you dare come around the Bat Wing Ranch, or I'll tell the boys to kill you!"

She grabbed up her baggage as she spoke and hurried ahead, and when Mr. Bowles stepped into the hotel some minutes later she was as distant as an ivory goddess. Or a bronze goddess, to be exact, for the sun and wind had caressed the fair cheeks of Dixie May until they were as brown and ruddy as a berry, and even the steam heat of a New York apartment could only reduce their coloring. She seemed a goddess indeed to Bowles as she lingered beside the stove, her smooth, capable hands bared to the glow of the flames, and her body buoyant with the grace of youth; but the laughing brown eyes which had become the mirrors of his life were turned away now and all the world was changed.

The bottle-nosed proprietor came shuffling in from the bar and silently handed him a pen; then, without looking at the name that was signed, he wrote a number after it and handed his guest a key.

"Baggage?" he inquired as Mr. Bowles stood helplessly to one side.

"Oh, yes!" said Bowles, recovering himself with an effort. "Here are the checks. My trunks will be in on a later train. Have them sent up, won't you?"

"Sample room?" queried the hotel-keeper brusquely.

"Beg pardon?"

"D'ye want 'em put in the sample room?" snarled the proprietor, outraged at having to bandy words with the despised Easterner.

"The sample room?" repeated Mr. Bowles, now thoroughly mystified. "Why, no – why should I?"

At this final evidence of imbecility a mighty spasm of rage came over the proprietor, and as he struggled to regain his calm Dixie Lee suddenly clapped a handkerchief to her mouth and made a dash for the dining-room. The paroxysm passed and with an air of wearied indulgence the proprietor explained and disappeared.

"All right!" he grumbled. "Guess you know your own business. Thought you was a travelin' man."

He stepped back through the door marked "Bar" and Mr. Bowles was left to gasp alone. A traveling man! They took him for a traveling man! It was quite a shock, and Bowles was still brooding over it by the stove when the door from the bar was thrust open and a tall cowboy, booted and spurred and shapped and pistoled, came stalking into the room. His broad sombrero was shoved far back on his head, showing a tremendous stand of tumbled hair, and his keen hazel eyes roved about with the steady intentness of a hunting animal's; but only for the fraction of a second did he condescend to notice Bowles. He swayed a little as he walked and the aroma of whisky came with him, but otherwise he seemed perfectly sober.

"Say!" he called, turning and kicking the bar door open again, "did Dix come in on that train? She did? Well, here's where I git hell – I was supposed to go down and meet 'er!"

He came over and stood by the stove, apparently oblivious of the man before him, and while he waited he cursed himself in a cynical, impersonal sort of way that made a great impression on Bowles.

"Well, where is she?" he demanded, as the proprietor hurried in behind him. "I ain't had a wink of sleep, but we'll have to hit the road anyway."

"Dixie's in getting a cup of coffee," answered the proprietor. "Better have a seltzer first," he wheedled, taking him by the arm and drawing him toward the barroom.

"You're dead right there too, old sport!" responded the cowboy heartily. "My head is as big as a balloon, and them grays will shore drag me over the dashboard if I don't kill some of this whisky."

He tottered out as he spoke and Mr. Bowles half rose from his chair. Dixie Lee was in danger; she was in imminent peril of death! He must warn her – he must help her – he must try to save her

life! He was in a fever of excitement when the dining-room door finally swept open and Dixie May entered the room; but she was calm, very calm, and something about her bade him hold his hand. Then the barroom door swung in again and the cowboy appeared, walking head up with a masterful stride – and a look in his eyes that Bowles knew all too well.

"Why, hello, Dix!" he cried, hurrying over and striking hands with her. "Well, well, how're you comin'? What, don't I draw nothin'?"

"No, you don't!" responded Dixie Lee, stepping back as he impudently offered to kiss her. "Not unless it's a good slap for not meeting me down at the train! How's Maw and Paw and all the boys? Have you gentled that colt for me yet?"

And so, with many laughing sallies, they passed out into the cold dawn, leaving Bowles to sit by the fire and stare. But in her last glance he had read a challenge, and he did not let it pass.

CHAPTER III

THE BAT WING RANCH

A week passed by while Mr. Bowles prepared for his great emprise, and then one evening as the sun set behind the purple peaks of the Tortugas and lighted up the white walls of the big house on the hill a stranger might have been seen riding up toward the Bat Wing gate. In fact, he was seen, and the round-up cook, who was washing supper dishes at the rear of the chuck-wagon, delivered himself of a heartfelt curse.

"What's the matter, Gus?" inquired a lounging cowboy who was hovering over the fire. "Drop yore dishrag?"

"No; and I don't need to around this ranch!" commented Gus with bitter emphasis. "It's a common remark or sayin' that when you drop yore dishrag it means a visitor is comin' – or, as some say, it means bad luck. Now jest look at that ornery feller comin' up the road! Can't let his hawse out none – can't whip up a little and git in by supper-time – has to come draggin' in jest as I'm finishin' my work!"

The cowboy raised himself up slowly from crouching on his heels and regarded the stranger intently.

"Say, who is that?" he said at last. "Looks like he was ridin' that little bald-faced sorrel that Lon Morrell traded to Jim Scrimsher last summer. Yes, sir, it's the very same hawse – that's somebody from down Chula Vista way!"

"Well, I don't care where he comes from," grumbled the cook, "as long as he comes a-runnin'! I sure will be one happy man when the wagon gits away from this ranch and I git shut of these no-'count, worthless chuck-riders. Well, biscuits and coffee is all he gits now, I don't care if he's a cattle-buyer!"

He wiped his hands carefully on a clean towel he kept hid for that purpose, pulled out his long gray mustaches and regarded the stranger with a baleful stare.

"Hoo!" he sneered. "Look at them shaps, will you? Ain't them the fancy pants though! Right new, too – and git on to that great big six-shooter! Must be a forest ranger!"

"Shut up!" said the cowboy as the stranger dropped off at the gate. "He might hear ye!"

"Don't give a rip if he did!" snorted Gus, to whom Uncle Sam's gay young forest-savers were intimately associated with an extra plate; and, grumbling and slamming down dishes, he returned to his manifold duties.

But the stranger was evidently not a common chuck-rider; in fact, so gloriously was he appareled that the moment his rigging became apparent the idling cowboy made a swift sneak to the bunk-house, where the boys were wrangling over a pitch game, and turned in a general alarm.

"Come out, fellers," he whispered hoarsely, "and see the new tenderfoot! Hurry up, he's goin' over to the big house! Say, he's a forest ranger all right!"

"Nothin' of the kind!" asserted a burly cow-puncher, thrusting his head out the door. "Movin' picture cowboy, I'll bet a hat!"

The stranger remounted gracefully as they gazed out at him; then he touched his jaded sorrel with the spur and trotted over to the big house gate – and as he trotted he rose rhythmically in his stirrups, while all cowboy-land stood aghast!

"English!" they gasped in a chorus, and burst into fervid curses as they stared at the uncouth sight. A grown man, a white man, and hopping up and down like that! Holy, jumping Jerusalem! They beat each other on the back in an agony of despair – and yet it was no more than Mr. Bowles, dropping back into his old Central Park habits. To be sure, the man who coached him at Chula Vista had warned him against it repeatedly, but the customs of a lifetime are not wiped out in a minute, and to that extent Mr. Bowles was still an Easterner.

The big white house in which Henry Lee made his home was a landmark in southeast Arizona. Some people merely referred to it as "The White House," and though it was forty miles from the railroad it was as well known in its way as the abiding place of Presidents in Washington. The White House was a big, square, adobe building, set boldly on the top of a low hill and surrounded by a broad wooden gallery, from behind whose clambering honeysuckles and gnarled rose-bushes Mrs. Lee and Dixie May looked down upon the envious world below. To be invited up to the big house, to sit on the flower-scented porch and listen to the soft voices of the women – that was a dream to which every cow-puncher's heart aspired, although in the realization many a bold, adventurous man lost face and weakened. But to Bowles the big house was the natural place to go, and he unlatched the gate and mounted to the gallery without a tremor.

Upon the edge of the porch, smoking his pipe and gazing out over his domain, sat Henry Lee, the pioneer cattleman of the Tortugas Valley, and a man who had fought Indians to get his start. He was a great man – old Henry Lee – but to Bowles chiefly distinguished by being the father of Dixie May.

"Ah, good-evening!" he began, bringing his heels together and bowing. "Are you Mr. Lee?"

The cattleman looked at him a moment with a calm, appraising eye. He was a small, rather slight man, but square-shouldered and far from decrepit – also, he had seen the procession go by for quite a while, and he could judge most men by their faces.

"That's my name," he said, rising quietly from his place. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Bowles," said that gentleman, following the procedure he thought most fitting in one seeking employment. "Mr. Scrimsher, of Chula Vista, has referred me to you in regard to a position as cowboy. I should like very much to get such a place."

"Sorry, Mr. Bowles," answered Mr. Lee, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, "but I'm not taking on any hands at present."

"Oh, indeed!" murmured the would-be cowboy, not at all dismayed. "Perhaps there will be an opening for me later?"

"No; I'm afraid not. I generally take on about the same boys every year, or men that know the country, and there won't be any place for you."

There was something very final about the way that this was said, and Bowles paused to meditate.

"Turn your horse into the pasture and git some supper at the wagon," added the old man, with a friendly gesture; but supper was not what Bowles had come for. He had come to get a job where he could be near the queen of his heart, and perhaps win her by some deed of prowess and daring. So he ignored this tacit dismissal and returned again to the charge.

"I can readily understand, Mr. Lee," he began, "why you hesitate to employ a stranger, and especially a man who has newly come from the East, but if you would give me a trial for a few days I am sure you would find me a very willing worker. I have come out here in order to learn the cattle business, and the compensation is of no importance to me at first; in fact, I should be glad to work without pay until you found my services of value. Perhaps now –"

"Nope," interposed the cattleman, shaking his head regretfully. "I've tried that before, and it don't work. Cow-punching is a business by itself, and it can't be learned in a minute; in fact, a good puncher is the scarcest thing on the range, and I either pay the top price or I don't take a man on at all. I can't stop to monkey with green hands."

Now, this was pretty direct, and it was calculated to put the ordinary tenderfoot in his place; but Mr. Bowles came from a self-selected class of people who are accustomed to having their own way, and he would not acknowledge himself beaten.

"Now, really, Mr. Lee," he protested, "I don't think you are quite fair to me in this. As I understand it, your round-up is just beginning, and I am sure I could be of some service – for a few days, at least."

The old man glanced at his fancy new outfit, and thought he saw another way out.

"Can you ride?" he inquired, asking that first fatal question before which so many punchers go down.

"Yes, sir," answered Bowles politely.

"You mean you can ride a gentle horse," corrected Lee. "I've got some pretty wild ones in my bunch, and of course a new hand couldn't expect to get the best. Can you rope?"

"No, I mean any horse," retorted Bowles, avoiding the subject of roping. "Any horse you have."

"Hmm!" observed Mr. Lee, laying down his pipe and regarding his man with interest. "Did you ever ride any bad horses?"

"Yes, sir," lied Bowles; "several of them."

"And you think you can ride any horse I've got, eh?" mused Lee. "Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Bowles," he continued, speaking very deliberately; "I've got a horse in my remuda that killed a man last fall – if you'll ride him I'll take you on for a puncher."

"Very well, sir," responded Bowles. "And thank you very much. It's very kind of you, I'm sure."

He turned to go but the cattleman stopped him in his second stride. His bluff had been called, for it would never do to go to a show-down – not unless he wanted a man's blood on his hands.

"Here! Wait a minute!" he cried impatiently. "I don't want to get you killed, so what's the use of talking? The only way for you to get to be a cow-puncher is to work up to it, the way everybody does. I'll give you a job as flunky at twenty a month and found, and if you make good I'll put you on for horse wrangler. How does that strike you?"

"Ah – what are the duties of a flunky?" inquired Bowles, cautiously and without enthusiasm. "You know, I'm quite content with your first proposal."

"Very likely," answered Mr. Lee dryly. "But wait till you see the horse. All a flunky has to do is to help the cook, wash the dishes, drag up a little wood, and drive the bed-wagon."

"It's very kind of you, I'm sure," murmured Mr. Bowles; "but I think I prefer the other."

"The other what?"

"Why, the other position – the job of cow-puncher."

"You don't think I'll let you ride that horse, do you?" demanded Mr. Lee sternly.

"Why – so I understood you."

The old cattleman snorted and muttered to himself. He had talked too much and that was all there was to it. Now he would have to make some concessions to pay for it.

"Listen to me, young man," he said, rising and tapping him on the shoulder. "The horse that killed Dunbar is the worst man-eater in the country – I ought to have shot the brute long ago – and if you try to ride him he'll throw you before you git your stirrup. More'n that, he'll kick you before you hit the ground, and jump on you before you bounce. My twister, Hardy Atkins, won't go near 'im, and he's one of the best riders in Arizona; so what's the use of talking about it? Now, you're a stranger here, and I'll make an exception of you – how about that flunky job?"

"Why – really – " Mr. Bowles hesitated a moment. "Perhaps it's only in the name, but I'd rather not accept such a menial position. Of course, it's very kind of you to offer me the alternative, but – "

"Now, here!" cried the cattleman fiercely. "I'll make you assistant horse wrangler, at thirty dollars a month, and if you don't accept I'll tell Hardy to catch up the old man-killer and put you in the hospital! I was a fool to talk to you the way I did; but don't you crowd me too far, young man, or you'll find Henry Lee a man of his word! Now, will you wrangle horses, or will we have to ship you East?"

Bowles stared at him for a moment, and then he drew himself up proudly.

"If the choice lies between a menial position – " he began; and old Henry brought his teeth together with a click.

"You poor, dam', ignorant tenderfoot!" he raved. "You don't know when you're being treated white! You ain't worth a cent to me, sir – no, not a cent! And now I'm going to learn you something! I'll ask my twister to put the saddle on old Dunbar in the morning, and you'll have to ride him, sir, or own yourself a coward!"

"Very well, sir," answered Bowles, with military stiffness. "Very well! I will see you in the morning, then."

He bowed and strode off down the path, his new shaps flapping ponderously as he walked; and the old cattleman brushed his eyes to drive the mad thought away.

CHAPTER IV

BRIGHAM

If his strategic victory over Henry Lee had given Bowles, the pseudo cowboy, any swelled-up ideas about taking the Bat Wing outfit by storm, he was promptly undeceived when he went up against Gloomy Gus, the cook. Gus had set the sour dough for men old enough to be Mr. Bowles' grandfather; men who were, so he averred, the superiors of any punchers now living and conspicuously prompt at their meals. In striking contrast to these great souls, Bowles had lingered entirely too long up at the big house; and when, after tying up his horse and feeding him some of Mr. Lee's long-treasured hay, he came dragging up to the chuck-wagon, the hour of grace had passed. Gloomy Gus was reclining beside his fire in converse with a red-headed cowboy, and neither of them looked up.

"Ah, pardon me," began Mr. Bowles, with perhaps a trace of condescension in his voice; "can you tell me where I will find the cook?"

The red-headed cowboy sat like a graven image, with his eyes fixed on the fire, and finally the cook replied.

"You'll find him right here, Mister," he said, "from four o'clock in the mornin' till sundown – and then, by grab, he quits!"

The injured emphasis with which this last was enunciated left no doubt as to the identity of the speaker, and Bowles murmured polite regrets; but, coming as he did from a land where cooks are not kings, he continued with the matter in hand.

"So sorry," he purred, "if I am a little late; but Mr. Lee told me to come down here and ask you to give me some dinner."

"Huh!" grunted the cook. "Did you hear that, Brigham?"

The cowboy nodded gravely and squinched his humorous eyes at the fire. He was a burly young man, dressed for business in overalls and jumper, but sporting a big black hat and a fine pair of alligator-topped boots; and from the way his fat cheeks wrinkled up it was evident he was expecting some fun.

The cook regarded Bowles for a minute with evident disapproval; then he raised himself on one elbow and delivered his ultimatum.

"Well, Mr. Man," he rasped, making his manner as offensive as possible, "you go back and tell Mr. Lee that I won't give you no dinner. Savvy? Ef you'd come round when you first rode in I might've throwed you out somethin', but now you can rustle yore own grub."

At these revolutionary remarks, Mr. Bowles started, and for a moment he almost forgot his breeding; then he withdrew into himself, and let the gaucherie pass with the contempt which it deserved. But it is hard to be dignified when you are hungry, and after several minutes of silence he addressed himself to the cowboy.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is there any other place nearby where I could buy a little food?"

"W'y, no, stranger," returned the cowboy amiably; "I don't reckon there is. Why don't you pick up a little around here? They's some coffee in that pot."

He nodded toward a large black coffee-pot that stood simmering by the fire, and Bowles cast a questioning glance at the cook.

"Hop to it!" exclaimed that dignitary, not a little awed by the stranger's proud reserve. "They's some bread in that can up there."

But still Bowles was helpless.

"Er – where do you eat?" he inquired, looking about for some sign of a table, or even of a plate and cup.

"Anywhere!" answered the cook, with a large motion of the hand. Then, as his guest still stood staring, he wearily rose to his feet. Without a word, he reached down into a greasy box and grabbed out a tin plate and cup; from another compartment he fished forth a knife, fork and spoon; with a pot-hook he lifted the cover of an immense Dutch oven, thumped an oil-can half-full of cooked beans, and slopped a little coffee out of the pot. Then he let down the hinged door to his chuck-box, spread a clean white flour sack on it, laid out the dishes with elaborate solicitude, and slumped down again by the fire. Nothing said – and the cowboy sat nerveless in his place – but Mr. Bowles felt rebuked. He was a tenderfoot – an Easterner masquerading as a cowboy – and every movement of the sardonic pot-tender was calculated to rub it in and leave him, as it did, in a welter of rage and shame.

From the oil-can he dipped out some beans; he poured coffee and ate in silence, not daring to ask for butter or sugar lest he should still further reveal his ignorance; and when he had finished his meal he slipped away and went out to look at his horse. A piano was tinkling up at the big house, and the stars were very bright, but neither stars nor music could soothe his wounds, and at last he went back to the fire. The cook was gone now, and the cowboy also; the big noise was in the long, low building from which so many heads had appeared when he rode in from Chula Vista. He paused at the doorway, and listened; then, bracing himself for the hazing which was his due, he knocked.

"Come in!" yelled a raucous voice in an aside to the general uproar. "Come in here – No, by thunder, you played a seven! Well, where is it, then? Show me, pardner; I'm from Missou'. If you played the jack, where is it?"

Bowles pushed open the door, that scraped and sagged as he shoved it, and stepped into a room that was exactly posed for one of those old-fashioned pictures labeled "Evil Associates; or The First Step Toward Destruction." At a long table, upon which burned a smoky lamp, a group of roughly dressed men were wrangling over a game of cards, while other evil-doers looked over their shoulders and added to the general blasphemy. A growth of beard, ranging anywhere from three days' to a week's, served to give them all a ferocious, cave-dweller appearance; and so intent were they on their quarrel that not a man looked up. If Bowles had expected to be the center of the stage, it was from an exaggerated sense of his own importance, for so lightly was he held that no one so much as glanced at him – with the single exception of the red-headed cowboy, who was playing a mouth-organ in the corner – until the missing jack was produced.

A wooden bunk, built against the wall, was weighed down with a sprawling mass of long-limbed men; on the floor the canvas-covered beds of the cowboys were either thrown flat or still doubled up in rolls; and the only other furniture in sight was the two benches by the table and a hot stove that did yeoman service as a cuspidor. The air was thick with the smoke of cigarettes, and those who did not happen to be smoking were chewing plug tobacco, but the thing which struck Bowles as most remarkable was the accuracy with which they expectorated. A half oil-can filled with ashes served as a mark on the farther side; and the big, bull-voiced puncher who had so casually bid him come in was spitting through a distant knot-hole, which was rapidly becoming the center of a "Texas Flag."

Really, it was astounding to Bowles, even after all he had read and seen enacted on the films, to observe the rude abandon of these Western characters, and particularly in their speech. Somehow the Western tales he had read had entirely failed to catch the startling imagery of their vernacular – or perhaps the editors had cut it out. The well-known tendency toward personal violence, however, was ever present, and as Bowles made bold to overlook the game a controversy sprang up which threatened to result in bloodshed.

The bull-voiced man – a burly, hook-nosed Texan, who answered to the name of Buck – was playing partners with a tall, slim, quiet-spoken puncher who centered all his thoughts on the cards; and against them were ranged a good-natured youth called Happy Jack and the presumptuous cowboy who had offered to kiss Dixie Lee. The game was fast, proceeding by signs and grunts and mysterious knocks on the table, and as it neared its close and each man threw down his cards with a greater

vehemence, Happy Jack flipped out three final cards and made a grab for the matches. But this did not suit the ideas of the bull moose and his partner, and they rose from their seats with a roar.

"What you claim?" demanded Buck, laying a firm hand on the stakes.

"High, low, and the game!" answered Happy Jack wrathfully.

"You ain't got no game," put in the quiet puncher. "Why don't you play yore hand out instead of makin' a grab?"

"Here now!" spoke up Dixie Lee's miscreant friend, leaning half-way across the table. "You-all quit jumpin' on Happy or I'll bust you on the *cabazon*!"

"Yes, you will!" sneered Buck, shoving his big head closer, as if to dare the blow. "You don't look bad to me, Hardy Atkins, and never did; and don't you never think for a moment that you can run it over me and Bill, because you cain't! Now you better pull in that ornery face of yourn while it's all together – and we're goin' to count them cards, by this-and-that, if it's the last act!"

So they raged and wrangled, apparently on the very verge of a personal conflict; but as the play wore on Bowles became increasingly aware of a contemptuous twinkle that dwelt in the eyes of the man called Hardy Atkins. Then it came over him suddenly that other eyes were upon him; and instantly the typical Western scene was wrecked, and he saw himself made the fool. No burst of ruffianly laughter gave point to the well-planned jest – it passed over as subtly as a crisis in high society – but as he turned away from the game Bowles found himself in possession of a man-sized passion. Back where he came from an open, personal hatred was considered a little *outré*; but the spirit of the wilds had touched him already, and Hardy Atkins, the green-eyed, familiar friend of Dixie Lee, was the man that he hoped would choke.

As interest in the pitch game languished and a scuffle made the bunk untenable, stray cowboys began to drift outside again, some to seek out their beds beneath the wagon-sheds and others to foregather about the fire. First among these was the red-headed man called Brigham; and when Bowles, after sitting solitary for a while, followed after them, he found Brigham the center of attraction. Perched upon an upturned box, and with one freckled hand held out to keep the firelight from his eyes, he was holding forth with a long story which had everybody listening.

"And I says to this circus feller," he was saying, "'Well, I ain't never done no bareback work, but if you cain't git no one else to jump through them hoops I'll guarantee to take the pretty outer *one* of 'em. But you be mighty p'ticular to pop that whip of yourn, pardner,' I says to the ring-master, 'or that ol' rockin'-hawse will git away from me.'"

He cocked one eye up to see if Bowles was listening, and then indulged in a reminiscent chuckle.

"Well, I climbed up on that ol' rockin'-hawse – I was dressed like a clown, of course – and after the regular people had gone round the ring I come rackin' along out of the side-tent, a-bowin' to all the ladies and whistlin' to all the dogs, until you'd think I was goin' to do wonders. But all the kids was on, and they begin to laugh and throw peanuts, because they knowed the clown was bound to git busted – that's what the rascal is paid fer. Well, we went canterin' around the ring, me and that old white hawse that had been doin' it for fifteen years, and every time we come to a hoop I'd make my jump – the ring-master would pop his whip – and when I come squanderin' out the other side the old hawse would be right there to ketch me. Trick he had – he'd slow down and kinder wait fer me – but that dogged ring-master put up a job on me – he shore did; but the scoundrel tried to lie out of it afterwards.

"You see, them people that come out to Coney they expect somethin' fer their money, and bein' as I was only the fill-in man and the other feller was comin' back anyway, the management decided to ditch me. So when I made a jump at my last hoop the ring-master forgot to pop his whip – or so he said – and I come down on my head and like to killed me. Well, sir, the way them people hollered you'd think the king had come, an' when a couple of fool clowns come runnin' out and carried me off on a shutter they laughed till they was pretty nigh sick. That's the way it is at Coney Island – unless somebody is gittin' killed, them tight-wads won't spend a cent."

The red-headed raconteur laughed a little to himself, and, seeing his audience still attentive, he launched out into another.

"Yes, sir!" he began. "That's a great place – old Coney. You boys that's never been off the range don't know what it is you've missed. There's side shows, and circuses, and shoot-the-chutes, and whirley-go-rounds, and Egyptian seeresses, and hot-dog joints, and – well, say, speakin' of hot-dog reminds me of the time I took the job of spieler fer Go-Go, the dog-faced boy. This here Go-Go was a yaller nigger that they had rigged up like a cannibal and put in a big box along with a lot of dehorned rattlesnakes, Gila monsters, and sech. It was my job to stand up over the box, while the ballyhoo man outside was pullin' 'em in, and pop a whip over this snake-eatin' cannibal, and let on like he was tryin' to escape. I had a little old pistol that I'd shoot off, and then Go-Go would rattle his chain and yell '*Owww-wah!*' like he was sure eatin' 'em alive.

"That was the barker's cue, and he'd holler out: 'Listen to the wild thing! He howls, and howls, and howls! Go-Go, the wild boy, the snake-eatin' Igorotte from the Philippines! Step right in, ladies and gentlemen! The price is ten cents, one dime, the tenth part of a dollar – ' and all that kind of stuff, until the place was filled up. Then it was my turn to spiel, and I'd git up on the box, with a blacksnake in one hand and that little old pistol in the other, and say:

"La-adies and gentle-men, before our performance begins I wish to say a few words relatin' to Echigogo Cabagan, the wild boy of Luzon. This strange creature was captured by Lieutenant Crawford, of the Seventy-ninth Heavy Artillery, in the wilds of the Igorotte country in the Philippines. At the time of his recovery he was livin' in the tropical jungles, never havin' seen a human face, an' subsistin' entirely upon poisonous reptyles, which was his only pets and companions. So frequently was he bit by these venomous reptyles that Professor Swope, of the Philadelphia Academy, after a careful analysis of his blood, figgers out that it contains seven fluid ounces of the deadly poison, or enough to kill a thousand men.

"On account of the requests of the humane society, the mayor, and several prominent ladies now present in the audience, we will do our best to prevent Go-Go from eatin' his snakes alive but – ' and right there was the nigger's cue to come in.

"*Oww-wah!*" he'd yell, shakin' his chain and tearin' around in his box, '*Ow-woo-wah!*' And then he'd grab up them pore, sufferin' rattlesnakes and sech, and quile 'em around his neck, and snap his teeth like he was bitin' heads off – and me, I'd pop my whip and shoot off my pistol, and scare them fool people most to death.

"Well, that was the kind of an outfit it was, and one day when the nigger was quieted down between acts and playin' with a rag-doll we had give him in order to make him look simple-minded-like, a big, buck Injun from the Wild West Show come in with the bunch and looked at Go-Go kinder scary-like. You know – "

A noise of scuffling feet made the story-teller pause, and then the gang of card players came tumbling out of the bunk-house.

"Let's roast some ribs," said one.

"No, I want some bread and lick," answered another.

"What's the matter with aigs?" broke in a third.

"Say, you fellers shut up, will you?" shouted a man by the fire. "Old Brig's tellin' us a story!"

"Oh, git 'im a chin-strap," retorted the bull-voiced Buck. "I want some ribs!"

"Well, keep still, can't ye?" appealed the anxious listener; but silence was not on the cards. The chuck-box was broken open and ransacked for a butcher-knife; then as Buck went off to trim away the ribs of the cook's beef, Hardy Atkins and his friends made merry with the quiet company.

"Ridin' 'em again, are you, Brigham?" inquired Happy Jack with a grin.

"No, he's divin' off'n that hundred-foot pole!" observed Poker-faced Bill sardonically.

"And never been outside the Territory!" commented Hardy Atkins *sotto voce*.

Something about this last remark seemed to touch the loquacious Brigham, for he answered it with spirit:

"Well, that's more than some folks can say," he retorted. "I sure never run no hawse race with the sheriff out of Texas!"

"No, you pore, ignorant Jack Mormon," jeered Atkins; "and you never rode no circus hawse at Coney Island, neither. I've seen fellers that knowed yore kinfolks down on the river, and they swore to Gawd you never been outside of Arizona. More'n that, they said you was a worser liar than old Tom Pepper – and he got kicked out of hell fer lyin'."

A guffaw greeted this allusion to the fate of poor old Tom; but Brigham was not to be downed by comparisons.

"Yes," he drawled; "I heerd about Tom Pepper. I heerd say he was a Texican, and the only right smart one they was; and the people down there was so dog ignorant, everything he told 'em they thought it was a lie. Built up quite a reputation that way – like me, here. Seems like every time I tell these Arizona Texicans anything, they up and say I'm lyin'."

He ran his eye over his audience and, finding no one to combat him further, he lapsed into a mellow philosophy.

"Yes," he said, cocking his eye again at Bowles; "I'm an ignorant kind of a feller, and I don't deny it; but I ain't one of these men that won't believe a thing jest because I never seen it. Now, here's a gentleman here – I don't even know his name – but the chances are, if he's ever been to Coney, he'll tell you my stories is nothin'."

"How about that hundred-foot pole?" inquired Poker Bill, as Bowles bowed and blushed.

"Yes, sure!" agreed Brigham readily. "We'll take that one now and let it go fer the bunch. If that's true, they're all true, eh?"

"That's me!" observed Bill laconically.

"All right, then, stranger," continued Brigham. "We'll jest leave the matter with you, and if what I said ain't true I'll never open my head again. I was tellin' these pore, ignorant Texas cotton-pickers that back at Coney Island they was a feller that did high divin' – ever see anything like that? All right, then, this is what I told 'em. I told 'em this divin' sport had a pole a hundred foot high, with a tank of water at the bottom six foot deep and mebbe ten foot square, and when it come time he climbed up to the top and stood on a little platform, facin' backwards and lookin' into a pocket mirror. Then he begun to lean over backwards, and finally, when everything was set, he threw a flip-flap and hit that tank a dead center without hurtin' himself a bit. Now, how about it – is that a lie?"

He looked up at Bowles with a steady gaze; and that gentleman did not fail him.

"Why, no," he said; "really, I see no reason to doubt what you say. Of course, I haven't been to Coney Island recently, but such events are quite a common occurrence there."

"Now, you see?" inquired Brigham triumphantly. "This gentleman has been around a little. Back at Coney them stunts is nothin'! They don't even charge admission."

"But how can that feller hit the water every time?" argued Bill the doubter, pressing forward to fight the matter out.

"Don't make no difference how he does it," answered Brigham; "that's *his* business. If people knowed how he done it, they wouldn't come to see 'im no more. By jicks, I'd jest like to take some of you fellers back to New York and show you some of the real sights. I ain't hardly dared to open my mouth since I took on with this ignorant outfit, but now that I got a gentleman here that's been around a little I may loosen up and tell you a few things."

"Oh, my Joe!" groaned Hardy Atkins, making a motion like fanning bees from his ears. "Hear the doggone Mormon talk – and never been outer the Territory! Been pitchin' hay and drinkin' ditch-water down on the Gila all his life and –"

"That's all right," retorted Brigham stoutly; "I reckon –"

"Well, git out of the way!" shouted the voice of Buck. "And throw down that frame so I can roast these ribs!"

That ended the controversy for the time, but before the ribs were cooked Brigham edged in another story – and he proved it by Mr. Bowles. It was a trifle improbable, perhaps, but Bowles was getting the spirit of the Great West and he vouched for it in every particular. Then when the ribs were done he cut some of the scorched meat from the bones, and ate it half-raw with a pinch of salt, for he was determined to be a true sport. Buck and Brigham devoured from one to two pounds apiece and gnawed on the bones like dogs; but Mr. Bowles was more moderate in his desires. What he really longed for was a bed or a place to sleep; but the gentleman who had coached him on cowboy life – and sold him his fancy outfit – had not mentioned the sleeping accommodations, and Bowles was too polite to inquire. So he hung around until the last story was told, and followed the gang back to the bunk-house.

Each man went to his big blanket roll and spread it out for the night without a single glance at the suppliant, for a cowboy hates to share his bed; but as they were taking off their boots Brigham Clark spoke up.

"Ain't you got no bed, stranger?" he inquired; and when Bowles shook his head he looked at Hardy Atkins, who as bronco-twister and top-hand held the job of straw-boss. A silence fell and Bowles glanced about uneasily.

"There's a bed over there in the saddle-room," observed Atkins, with a peculiar smile.

A startled look went around the room, and then Buck came in on the play.

"Yes," he said, "that feller ain't here now."

"Oh, thank you," began Bowles, starting toward it; but he was halted in his tracks by a savage oath from Brigham.

"Here!" he ordered. "You come and sleep with me – that's Dunbar's bed!"

"Dunbar's!" exclaimed Bowles with a gasp. "Ah, I see!" And with a secret shudder he turned away from the dead man's bed and crept in next to Brigham.

CHAPTER V WA-HA-LOTE

The cowboy's day begins early, no matter how he spends his night. It was four o'clock in the morning and Bowles was dead with sleep when suddenly the light of a lantern was thrown in his eyes and he heard the cook's voice rousing up the horse wranglers.

"Wranglers!" he rasped, shaking Brigham by the shoulder. "Git up, Brig; it's almost day!"

"All right, Gus!" answered Brigham, cuddling down for another nap; but Gloomy Gus had awakened too many generations of cowboys to be deceived by a play like that, and on his way out to finish breakfast he stumbled over Brigham's boots and woke him up to give them to him. So, with many a yawn and sigh, poor Brigham and his fellow wrangler stamped on their boots and went out to round up the horse pasture, and shortly afterward a shrill yell from the cook gave notice that breakfast was ready. Five minutes later he yelled again and beat harshly on a dishpan; then, as the rumble of the horse herd was heard, he came and kicked open the door.

"Hey, git up, boys!" he shouted. "Breakfast's waitin' and the remuda is in the c'rell! The old man will be down hollerin' 'Hawses!' before you git yore coffee!"

The bite of the cold morning air swept in as he stood there and roused them at last to action. Swiftly Buck and Bill and Happy Jack rolled out and hustled into their clothes; other men not yet known by name hurried forth to wash for breakfast; and at last Bowles stepped out, to find the sky full of stars. A cold wind breathed in from the east, where the deceitful radiance of the false dawn set a halo on the distant ridges; and the cowboy's life, for the moment, seemed to offer very little to an errant lover. Around the cook's fire, with their coat collars turned up to their ears, a group of punchers was hovering in a half-circle, leaving the other half for Gloomy Gus. Their teeth chattered in the frosty silence, and one by one they washed their faces in hot water from the cook's can and waited for the signal to eat. Then the wranglers came in, half frozen from their long ride in the open pasture, and as Brigham poured out a cup of coffee, regardless, old Gus raised the lid from a Dutch oven, glanced in at the nicely browned biscuits and hollered:

"Fly at it!"

A general scramble for plates and cups followed; then a raid on the ovens and coffee-pots and kettles; and inside of three minutes twenty men were crouching on the ground, each one supplied with beans, biscuits and beef – the finest the range produced. They ate and came back for more, and Bowles tried to follow their example; but breakfast at home had been served at a later hour, and it had not been served on the ground, either. However, he ate what he could and drank a pint of coffee that made him as brave as a lion. It was real range coffee, that had set on the grounds over night and been boiled for an hour in the morning. It was strong, and made him forget the cold; but just as he was beginning to feel like a man again silence fell on the crowd, and Henry Lee appeared.

In his riding boots, and with a wooden-handled old Colt's in his shaps, Mr. Lee was a different creature from the little man that Bowles had whipsawed on the previous evening. He was a dominating man, and as he stood by the fire for a minute and waited for enough light to rope by, Mr. Bowles began to have his regrets. It is one thing to bully-rag a man on his front steps, and quite another to ride bronks on a cold morning. The memory of a man named Dunbar came over him, and he wondered if he had died in the morning, when his bones were brittle and cold. He remembered other things, including Dixie Lee, but without any positive inspiration; and he took a sneaking pleasure at last in the fact that Mr. Lee appeared to have forgotten all about him.

But Henry Lee was not the man to let an Eastern tenderfoot run it over him, and just as he called for horses and started over toward the corral he said to Hardy Atkins:

"Oh, Hardy, catch up that Dunbar horse and put this gentleman's saddle on him, will you?"

He waved his hand toward Bowles, whose heart had just missed a beat, and pulled on a trim little glove.

"What – Dunbar?" gasped the bronco-twister, startled out of his calm.

"Yes," returned Lee quietly. "The gentleman claims he can ride."

"Who – him?" demanded Atkins, pointing incredulously at the willowy Bowles.

"Yes – him!" answered the cattleman firmly. "And after what he said to me last evening he's either got to ride Dunbar or own himself a coward – that's all."

"Oh," responded the twister, relieved by the alternative; and with a wink at Buck and the rest of the crowd he went rollicking out to the corral. By the usual sort of telepathy Hardy Atkins had come to hate and despise Bowles quite as heartily as Bowles had learned to hate him, and the prospect of putting the Easterner up against Dunbar made his feet bounce off the ground. First he roped out his own mount and saddled him by the gate; then, as the slower men caught their horses and prepared for the work of the day, he leaned against the bars and pointed out the man-killer to Bowles, meanwhile edging in his little talk.

"See that brown over there?" he queried, as Bowles stared breathlessly out over the sea of tossing heads. "No, here he is now – that wall-eyed devil with his hip knocked down – he got that when he rared over and killed Dunbar. Can't you see 'im? Right over that bald-faced sorrel! Yes, that hawse that limps behind!"

At that moment some impetuous cowboy roped at his mount and the round corral became a raging maelstrom of rushing horses, thundering about in a circle and throwing the dirt twenty feet high; but as a counter movement checked the charge and the wind blew the dust away, the lanky form of the horse that killed Dunbar loomed up on the edge of the herd. He was a big, raw-boned brute, colored a sunburned, dusty brown, and a limp in his off hind leg gave him a slinking, stealthy air; but what impressed Bowles the most was the sinister look in his eyes. If ever a horse was a congenital criminal, Dunbar was the animal. His head was long and bony and bulging around the ears, and his eyes were sunk deep, like a rattlesnake's, and with a rattlesnake's baleful glare. But there was more than a snaky wildness in them: the wicked creature seemed to be meditating upon his awful past, and scheming greater crimes, until his haggard, watchful eyes were set in a fixed, brooding stare. He was a bad horse, old Dunbar, and Atkins was there to play him up.

"You want to be careful not to hurt that hawse," he warned, as Bowles caught his breath and started. "The boss expects to git a thousand dollars fer him at the Cheyenne Rough-Riding Contest next summer. Now that old Steamboat is rode, and Teddy Roosevelt is busted, they's big money hangin' up fer a bad hawse. Got to have one, you know. It's fer the championship of the world, and if they don't git another man-killer they can't have no contest. I would've tried him myself, but he's too valuable. How do you ride – with yore stirrups tied? No? Well, I reckon you're right – likely to get caught and killed if he throws himself over back. You ain't down here fer a Wild West Show, are ye? Uh-huh, jest thought you might be – knowed you wasn't a puncher. Well, we'll saddle him up fer you now – if you say so!"

He lingered significantly on the last words, and Henry Lee, who was standing near, half smiled; but there must have been some sporting blood back in the Bowles family somewhere, for Mr. Bowles merely murmured:

"If you will, please!" and got his saddle.

So there was nothing for Atkins to do but go in and try to catch Dunbar. The bronco-twister shook out his rope, glanced at the boss, glanced at him again, and dropped reluctantly into the corral. Hardy Atkins would rather have taken a whipping than put a saddle on Dunbar; but he was up against it now, so he lashed his loop out on the ground and advanced to make his throw. One by one the horses that had gathered about Dunbar ran off to the right or left, and as the old man-killer made his dash to escape the long rope shot out with a lightning swiftness and settled around his neck. The twister

passed the rope behind him, sat back on it and dug his high heels into the ground; but the jerk was too much for his hand-grip, and before anyone could tail on behind he let go and turned the horse loose.

Then, as the great whirlpool of frightened horses went charging around the corral, Buck Buchanan, the man with the bull-moose voice, hopped down and rushed to the center. Some one threw an extra rope to Hardy Atkins, and once more they closed in on the outlaw. But the horse that killed Dunbar was better than the two of them, and soon he had a second rope to trail. A third and a fourth man leaped in to join the conflict; and as they roped and ran and fought with Dunbar the remuda went crazy with excitement and threatened to break down the fence.

"Put up them bars!" yelled Hardy Atkins, as a beautiful, dappled black made a balk to leap over the gate. "Now all on this rope, boys – snub him to that post – oh, hell!" The pistol-like report of a grass rope parting filled out the rest of the sentence. Then the bronco-twister came limping over to the gate where Bowles and Henry Lee were sitting, shaking the blood from a freshly barked knuckle.

"We can't hold the blinkety-blank," he announced, gazing defiantly at the boss. "And what's the use, anyhow?" he demanded, petulantly. "They ain't a bronk in the remuda that can't throw this Englishman a mile! Of course, if you want us to take a day to it – "

"Well, catch Wa-ha-lote, then!" snapped Mr. Lee. "And be quick about it! I've got something else to do, Mr. Bowles," he observed tartly, "besides saddle up man-killers for a man that can't sit a trotting-horse!"

This was evidently an allusion to Mr. Bowles' way of putting the English on a jog-trot; but Bowles was too much interested to resent it. He was watching Hardy Atkins advancing on the dappled black that had tried to jump the bars.

"Oh," he cried enthusiastically, "is that the horse you mean? Oh, isn't he a beautiful creature! It's so kind of you to make the change!"

"Ye-es!" drawled Mr. Lee; and all the cowboys smiled. Next to Dunbar, Wa-ha-lote was the champion scrapper of the Bat Wing. There had been a day when he was gentle, but ever since a drunken Texas cowboy had ridden him with the spurs his views of life had changed. He had decided that no decent, self-respecting horse would stand for such treatment and, after piling a few adventurous bronco-busters, had settled down to a life of ease and plenty. The finest looking horse in the remuda, by all odds, was old Wa-ha-lote, the Water-dog. He was fat and shiny, and carried his tail straight up, like a banner; the yellow dapples, like the spots on a salamander's black hide – whence his Mexican name, Wa-ha-lote – were bright and plain in the sunlight; and he held his head up high as he ramped around the corral.

The sun had come up over the San Ramon Mountains while Hardy Atkins was wrestling with Dunbar; it soared still higher while the boys caught Wa-ha-lote. But caught he was, and saddled, for the horse never lived that a bunch of Texas punchers cannot tie. It was hot work, with skinned knuckles and rope-burned hands to pay for it; but the hour of revenge was at hand, and they called for Bowles. A wild look was in every eye, and heaven only knows what would have happened had he refused; but the hot sun and the excitement had aroused Mr. Bowles from his calm, and he answered like a bridegroom. Perhaps a flash of white up by the big house added impetus to his feet; but, be that as it may, he slipped blithely through the bars and hurried out to his mount.

"Oh, what a beautiful horse!" he cried, standing back to admire his lines. "Do you need that blinder on his eyes?"

"What I say!" commented Atkins, ambiguously. "Now you pile on him and take this quirt, and when I push the blind up you holler and throw it into 'im. Are you ready?"

"Just a moment!" murmured Bowles, and for the space of half a minute he stood patting old Water-dog's neck where he stood there, grim and waiting, his iron legs set like posts and every muscle aquiver. Then, with unexpected quickness, he swung lightly into the saddle and settled himself in the stirrups.

"All right," he said. "Release him!"

"Release him it is!" shouted Atkins, with brutal exulting. "Let 'im go, boys; and —*yee-pah!*"

He raised the blind with a single jerk, leaped back, and warped Wa-ha-lote over the rump with a coil of rope. Other men did as much, or more; and Bowles did not forget to holler.

"Get up, old fellow!" he shouted.

As the lashes fell, Wa-ha-lote made one mighty plunge – and stopped. Then, as the crowd scattered, he shook out his mane and charged straight at the high, pole gate. A shout went up, and a cry of warning, and as the cowboys who draped the bars scrambled down to escape the crash Bowles was seen to lean forward; he struck with his quirt, and Wa-ha-lote vaulted the bars like a hunter. But even then he was not satisfied. Two panel gates stood between him and the open, and he took them both like a bird; then the dust rose up in his wake and the Bat Wing outfit stood goggle-eyed and blasphemous.

"W'y, the blankety-blank!" crooned Hardy Atkins.

"Too skeered to pitch!" lamented Buck.

"You hit 'im too hard!" shouted Happy Jack.

"But that feller kin ride!" put in Brigham stoutly.

"Aw, listen to the Mormon-faced dastard!" raved Hardy Atkins; and as the conversation rose mountain high, the white dresses up on the hill fluttered back inside the house. But when Bowles came riding back on Wa-ha-lote not even the outraged Hardy could deny that the Bat Wing had a new hand.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROUND-UP

It is an old saying that there is no combination or percentage known that can beat bull luck. Bowles was lucky; but he didn't know how lucky he was, never having seen a real bronk pitch. After Wa-ha-lote had had his run he changed his mind again and decided to be good, and when Bowles galloped him back to the ranch he was as gentle as a dog, and the top horse in the remuda. Even when Bowles started to rise to the trot the Water-dog was no more than badly puzzled.

By this time the outfit was pouring out the gate on their way to the belated round-up, and all except the principals had decided to take it as a joke. To be sure, they had lost an hour's daylight, and broken a few throw-ropes; but the time was not absolutely lost. Bowles would soon draw a bronk that *would* pitch, and then – oh, you English dude! They greeted him kindly, then, with the rough good-nature you read so much about, and as Bowles loosened up they saw he was an easy mark.

"Say, pardner," said one, "you sure can jump the fences! Where'd you learn that – back at Coney Island?"

"Coney Island nothin'!" retorted another. "W'y, Joe, you show your ignorance! This gentleman is from England – can't you see him ride?"

"Well, I knowed all along he was goin' to ride Wa-ha-lote," observed a third, oracularly. "I could tell by the way he walked up to him. How's he goin', stranger – make a pretty good buggy-horse, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, indeed!" beamed Bowles. "That is, I presume he would. He is one of the best gaited animals I ever rode. A perfect riding horse! Really, I can't remember when I've enjoyed such a glorious gallop!"

They crowded around him then, in an anxious, attentive cluster, still jabbing their horses with the spurs to keep up with Henry Lee but salting away his naive remarks for future reference.

Henry Lee was just making some little gathers near the home ranch while he waited for his neighbors to send in their stray men for the big round-up, and as the conversation rattled on in the rear he headed straight for a range of hills to the south. An hour of hard riding followed, and then, as they began to encounter cattle, he told off men by ones and twos to drive them in to the cutting ground. Hardy Atkins took another bunch of men and rode for a distant point, and soon the whole outfit was strung out in a great circle that closed in slowly upon a lonely windmill that stood at the base of the hills.

As no one gave him orders, Bowles tagged along for a while and then threw in with Brigham, hoping to imbibe some much-needed information about the cow business from him; but a slow, brooding silence had come over that son of the desert and he confined his remarks to few words.

"Don't crowd the cattle," he said; "and don't chase 'em. They's nothin' to it – jest watch the other hands."

He mugged along glumly then, spitting tobacco and looking wise whenever Bowles made effusive remarks; and soon the spirit of the wide places took hold of the impressionable Easterner and taught him to be still. The sun was shining gloriously now, and the air was like new wine; he had conquered Wa-ha-lote, and won a job on the ranch; yet, even as the hot blood coursed in his veins and his heart leaped for joy, the solemn silence of burly Brigham exhorted him to peace. Nay, more than that, it set up uneasy questionings in his mind and made him ponder upon what he had said. Perhaps he had spoken foolishly in the first flush of his victory; he might even have laid himself open to future gibes and jests, branding himself for a tenderfoot with every word he said.

Yes, indeed; perhaps he had. At any rate, the first words he heard as they neared the cutting-grounds were indicative of the fact.

"Hey, Bill!" roared Buck Buchanan, wafting his bull voice across the herd. "Release that Bar X cow!"

"Beg pahdon?" replied Bill, holding his hand behind his ear; and then there was a rumble of Homeric laughter that left Bowles hot with shame.

"Hey, Buck!" echoed Happy Jack, reining his horse out to turn back an ambling steer; and while all hands watched him eagerly he struck into a rough trot across the plain. Then, holding out his elbows in a manner that he supposed to be English, he bobbed higher and higher at every jump until he fell face forward on his horse's neck, and the cowboys whooped for joy. Bowles was able to laugh at this joke, and he tried to do it graciously; but the sudden wave of good manners and faultless grammar which swept over the crowd left him heated and mad clear through. Any dreams he might have cherished of becoming the little tin hero of the cow country were shattered beyond repair, and he saw the American cowboy as he really is – a very frail and human creature, who scorns all things new and foreign, and particularly objects to Eastern tenderfeet who try to beat him at his own game.

If Bowles had been piled in the dirt by his first mount and come limping forth with a grin, he would have won a corralful of friends by his grit; as it was, he had ridden Wa-ha-lote, a horse supposed to be a rank outlaw, and the cowboys were quick to resent it. Even the loyal Brigham had turned against him, looking on with a cynical smile as he saw him mocked; and as for Henry Lee, he could not even get near him. Scorn and anger and a patrician aloofness swept over Bowles' countenance by turns, and then he took Brigham's unspoken counsel and let the heathen rage. It was hard on his pride, but he schooled himself to endure it; and as cant phrase after cant phrase came back at him and he realized how loosely he had talked he decided in the future to keep his mouth shut. So far, at least, he had caught the great spirit of the West.

But now for the first time there was spread out before his eyes the shifting drama of the cow country, and he could not resist its appeal. On the edge of a great plain and within sight of jagged rock-ribbed mountains he beheld the herd of lowing cattle, the remuda of spare horses, the dashing cowboys, the fire with its heating irons, and all the changing scenes that go to make up a Western branding. For a spell the herd stood still while mothers sought out their calves and restless bulls plowed in and out; then when the clamor and blating had lulled, and all hands had got a drink and made a change of horses, a pair of ropers rode into the herd, marking down each cow and calf and making sure they were mother and offspring. At last, when Henry Lee and his neighbors' stray men were satisfied, the ropers shook out their loops, crowded in on some unbranded calf and flipped the noose over its head. Like automatons, the quick-stepping little cutting ponies whirled and started for the fire, dragging the calves behind them by neck or legs or feet. Any way the rope fell was good enough for the cowboys, and the ponies came in on the lope.

Behind the calf pranced its frantic mother, head down and smelling its hide, and a pair of cowboys stationed for that purpose rode in and turned her back. Then the flankers rushed out and caught the rope, and the strong member seized the calf by its neck and flank and with an upward boost of the knees raised its feet from the ground and threw it flat on its side. One held up its head, the other the hind legs, and in a flash the ear-markers and hot-iron men were upon it, to give it a brand for life.

"Bat Wing!" called the dragger-up, giving the mother's brand. There was a blat, a puff of white smoke, and the calf was turned back to his "Mammy." That was the process, very simple to the cowboy and entirely devoid of any suggestion of pain; but to Bowles it seemed rather brutal, and he went back to help hold the herd.

As one roper after the other pursued his calf through the throng, or chased it over the plain while he made wild and ineffectual throws, the great herd milled and moved and shifted like a thing of life. At a distance of a hundred feet or more apart a circle of careless punchers sat their mounts, nominally engaged in holding the herd but mostly loafing on the job or talking it over in pairs. To Bowles it seemed that they were very negligent indeed, letting cows walk out which could have been turned back by the flip of a rope, and then spurring furiously after them as they made a break for

the hills. If a calf which the ropers had failed to catch came dashing by, one guard, or even two, might leave his place to join in a mad pursuit, meanwhile leaving Bowles and Wa-ha-lote to patrol the entire flank of the herd. To be sure, he liked to do it; but their system seemed very poor to him, though he did not venture to say so.

Meanwhile, with futile pursuits and monotonous waits, the branding dragged slowly along, and suddenly Bowles realized he was hungry. He looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly noon, but he could perceive no symptoms of dinner. He regretted now the insufficient breakfast which he had eaten, remembering with a shade of envy the primitive appetite which had enabled the others to bolt beefsteaks like ravening wolves; also, he resolved to put a biscuit in his pocket the next time he rode out on the circle. But this availed him nothing in his extremity, and as the others sought to assuage their pangs with brown-paper cigarettes he almost regretted the freak of nicety which had kept him from learning to smoke. It was noon now – seven hours since breakfast – and just as he was about to make some guarded inquiries of Brigham the work of branding ceased. The branders, their faces grimed and sweaty and their hands caked with blood, pulled on their heavy shaps and came riding up to the herd; but not to cry: "Release them!"

Odious as these words had become to Bowles, they would have sounded good under the circumstances; but there was more work yet to come. Driving a bunch of old cows to one side for a "hold-up," Henry Lee and his strenuous assistants began cutting out dogie calves. Everything over a year old was fated to become a feeder and, while mothers bellowed and their offspring protested, Hardy Atkins and the best of the cowhands hazed the calves into the hold-up herd. It was a long and tedious operation, involving numerous wearisome chases after calves that wanted their mothers; and when at last it was done and the main herd was released, behold, a lot of cows and undesirables had to be cut back from the hold-up herd. Then the dogies had to be separated into yearlings and "twos"; and when Bowles was about ready to drop off his horse from weakness Henry Lee detailed a bunch of unfortunates to drive up the calves, and turned his pony toward home. To him it was just a little gather while the neighbors were sending in their men; but to Bowles it combined the extreme hardships of a round-up with the rigors of a forty days' fast.

In a way it was all Bowles' fault, too, for he had kept the whole outfit waiting while he made a bluff at riding Dunbar. His resolution to keep his mouth shut stood him in good stead now, for a hungry man is a wolf and will fight if you say a word. There were no gay quips and gags now, no English riding and classic quotations; every man threw the spurs into his horse and started on a run for camp. Wa-ha-lote pulled at the bit a time or two at this, and Bowles did not try to restrain him; he broke into a gallop, free and sweeping as the wind, and the tired cutting horses fell behind; then as the ranch showed up in the distance he settled down to a tireless lope, eating up the hurrying miles until Bowles could have hugged him for joy.

Here was a horse of a thousand – this black, named in an alien tongue Wa-ha-lote – and he longed as he rode into the ranch to give him some token of friendship – a lump of sugar, or whatever these desert horses liked best to eat – in order to hold his regard. So he trotted over to the cook's wagon, being extremely careful not to bob, and asked Gloomy Gus for a lump of sugar. Now Gus, as it happened, was in another bad humor, due to the boys' being an hour or so late, and to a second matter of which Bowles knew nothing; and he did not even so much as vouchsafe an answer to his request.

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