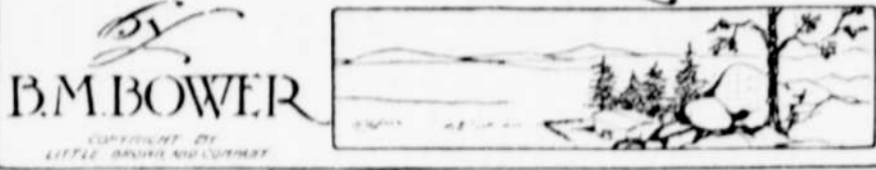


# The RANCH at the WOLVERINE



B.M. BOWER  
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## CHAPTER I.

### Let Us Start at the Beginning.

FOUR trail worn oxen, their necks bowed to the yoke of patient servitude, should really begin this story. But to follow the trail they made would take several chapters which you certainly would skip—unless you like to hear the tale of how the wilderness was tamed and can thrill at the stern history of those who did the taming while they fought to keep their stomachs fairly well filled with food and their hard muscled bodies fit for the fray.

There was a woman, low browed, uncombed, harsh of voice and speech and nature, who drove the four oxen forward over lava rock and rough prairie and the sunny sage. I might tell you a great deal about Marthy, who plodded stolidly across the desert and the low lying hills along the Black foot, and of her weak son, shiftless husband whom she called Jase when she did not call him worse.

They were the pioneers whose lurching wagon first forded the singing Wolverine stream just where it greases the thin valley and then slips between huge lava rock ledges to join the larger stream. Jase would have stopped there and called home the sheltered little green spot in the gray barrenness. But Marthy went on up the farther hill and across the upland, another full day's journey with the sweating oxen.

They camped that night on another little, singing stream in another little valley which was not so level or so green or so wholly pleasing to the eye. And that night two of the oxen, impelled by a surer instinct than their human owners, strayed away down a narrow, winding gorge and so discovered the Cove and feasted upon its rich grasses. It was Marthy who went after them and who recognized the little, hidden Eden as the place of her dreams—supposing she ever had dreams. So Marthy and Jase and the four oxen took possession, and with much labor and many hard years for the woman and with the same number of years and as little labor as he could manage on the man's part they tamed the Cove and made it a beauty spot in that wild land. A beauty spot, though their lives held nothing but treadmill toll and harsh words and a mental horizon narrowed almost to the limits of the grim, gray rock wall that surrounded them.

Another sturdy souled couple came afterward and saw the Wolverine and made for themselves a home upon its banks. And in the rough little log cabin was born the girl child I want you to meet—a girl child when she should have been a boy to meet her father's need and great desire; a girl child whose very name was a compromise between the parents. For they called her Billy for sake of the boy her father wanted and Louise for the girl her mother had longed for to lighten that terrible loneliness which the far frontier brings to the women who brave its stern emptiness.

When Billy Louise was twelve she wanted to do something big, though she was hazy as to the particular nature of that big something. She tried to talk it over with Marthy, but Marthy could not seem to think beyond the Cove.

When she was thirteen Billy Louise rode over with a loaf of bread she had baked all by herself, and she put this problem to Marthy:

"I've been thinking I'd go ahead and write poetry, Marthy a whole book of it with pictures. But I do love to make bread and people have to eat bread. Which would you be, Marthy—a poet or a cook?"

Marthy looked at her a minute, lent her attention briefly to the question and gave what she considered good advice.

"You learn how to cook, Billy Louise. Yuh don't want to go and get notions. Your maw ain't healthy, and your paw likes good grub. Poetry is all foolishness. There ain't any money in it."

"Walter Scott paid his debts writing poetry," said Billy Louise argumentatively. She had just read all about Walter Scott in a magazine which a passing cowboy had given her. Perhaps that had something to do with her new ambition.

"Mebby he did and mebby he didn't. I'd like to see our debts paid off with poetry. It'd have to be worth a hull lot more'n what I'd give for it."

"Oh! Have you got debts, too, Marthy?" Billy Louise at thirteen was still ready with sympathy. "Daddy's got lots and ples of 'em. He bought some cattle and now he talks to maw all the time about debts. Mawmie wants me to go to Boise to school next winter to Aunt Sarah's. And daddy says there's debts to pay. I didn't know you had any, Marthy."

"Well, I have got. We bought some cattle, too, and they ain't done 'a well's they might. If I had a man that was any good on earth I could put up more hay. But I can't get nothing outa Jase

but whines. Your paw oughta send you to school, Billy Louise, even if he has got debts."

"He says he wishes he could, but he don't know where the money's comin' from."

"How much 's it goin' to take?" asked Marthy heavily.

"Oh, ples," Billy Louise spoke airily to hide her pride in the importance of the subject. "Fifty dollars, I guess. I've got to have some new clothes mawmie says. I'd like a blue dress."

"And your paw can't raise fifty dollars?" Marthy's tone was plainly belittling.

"Got to pay interest," said Billy Louise importantly.

Marthy said not another word about debts or the duties of parents. What she did was more to the point, however, for she hitched the mules to a rattly old buckboard next day and drove over to the MacDonald ranch on the Wolverine. She carried \$50 in her pocket, and that was practically all the money Marthy possessed and had been saved for the debts that harassed her. She gave the money to Billy Louise's mother and said that it was a present for Billy Louise and meant for "school money." She said that she hadn't any girl of her own to spend the money on and that Billy Louise was a good girl and a smart girl, and she wanted to do a little something toward her schooling.

A woman will sacrifice more pride than you would believe if she sees a way toward helping her children to an education. Mrs. MacDonald took the money, and she promised secrecy—with a feeling of relief that Marthy wished it. She was astonished to find that Marthy had any feelings not directly connected with work or the shortcomings of Jase, but she never suspected that Marthy had made any sacrifice for Billy Louise.

So Billy Louise went away to school and never knew whose money had made it possible to go, and Marthy worked harder and drove Jase more relentlessly to make up that \$50. She never mentioned the matter to any one. The next year it was the same. When in August she questioned Billy Louise clumsily upon the subject of finances and learned that daddy still talked about debts and interest and didn't know where the money was coming from she drove over again with money for the schooling. And again she extracted a promise of silence.

She did this for four years, and not a soul knew that it cost her anything in the way of extra work and extra harassment of mind. She bought more cattle and cut more hay and went deeper into debt, for as Billy Louise grew older and prettier and more accustomed to the ways of town she needed more money, and the August gift grew proportionately larger. The mother was thankful beyond the point of questioning. An August without Marthy and Marthy's gift of money would have been a tragedy, and so selfish is mother love sometimes that she would have accepted the gift even if she had known what it cost the giver.

At eighteen, then, Billy Louise knew some things not taught by the wide plains and the wild hills around her. She was not spoiled by her little learning, which was a good thing. And when her father died tragically beneath an overturned load of poles from the mountain at the head of the canyon Billy Louise came home. The Billy of her tried to take his place and the Louise of her attempted to take care of her mother, who was unfitted both by nature and habit to take care of herself. Which was, after all, a rather big thing for any one to attempt.

Blue began to complain of having "all gone" feelings during the winter after Billy Louise came home and took up the whole burden of the Wolverine ranch. He complained to Billy Louise when she rode over one clear, sunny day in January. He said that he was getting old, which was perfectly true, and that he was not as abled-bodied as he might be and didn't expect to last much longer. Billy Louise spoke of it to Marthy, and Marthy snorted.

"He's abled-bodied enough at mealtimes, I notice," she retorted. "I've heard that time ever since I knowed him. He can't fool me!"

Jase mumbled in at that moment, and Marthy turned and glared at Jase with what Billy Louise considered a perfectly uncalled-for animosity. In reality, Marthy was covertly looking for visible symptoms of the all-gone-ness. She shut her harsh lips together tightly at what she saw. Jase certainly was puffy under his watery, pink rimmed eyes, and the withered cheeks above his thin graying beard really did have a puffy gray look.

"D'you turn them calves out into the corral?" she demanded, her voice hard, or because of her secret uneasiness.

"I was goin' to, but the wind's changed into the north, 'n' I thought mebby you wouldn't want 'em out." Jase turned back aimlessly to the door. His voice was getting cracked and husky, and the deprecating note dom-

inated pathetically all that he said. "You'll have to face the wind, girl home," he said to Billy Louise. "More'n likely you'll be facin' snow too. Looks bad off that way."

"You go on and turn them calves out!" Marthy commanded him harshly. "Billy Louise ain't goin' home if it storms. I sh'd think you'd know enough to know that."

"Oh, but I'll have to go anyway," the girl interrupted. "Mawmie can't be there alone, she'd worry herself to death if I didn't show up by dark."



"D'you Turn Them Calves Out into the Corral?"

She worries about every little thing since daddy died. I ought to have gone before or I oughtn't to have come. But she was worrying about you, Marthy. She hadn't seen or heard of you for a month, and she was afraid you might be sick or something. Why don't you get some one to stay with you? I think you ought to." She looked toward the door, which Jase had closed upon his departure. "If Jase should get sick or anything—"

"Jase ain't goin' to get sick," Marthy retorted glumly. "Yuh don't want to let him worry yuh, Billy Louise. If I'd worried every time he howled around about being sick I'd be dead or crazy by now. I dunno but maybe I'll have somebody to help with the work, though," she added after a pause, during which she had swiped the fish-rag around the sides of the pan once or twice and had opened the door and thrown the water out beyond the doorstep like the siven she was. "I got a nephew that wants to come out. He's been in a bank, but he's quit and wants to git on to a ranch. I dunno but I'll have him come in the spring."

"Do," urged Billy Louise, perfectly unconscious of the potentialities of the future. "I hate to think of you two down here alone. I don't suppose any one ever comes down here except me—and that isn't often."

"Nobody's got any call to come down," said Marthy stolidly. "They sure ain't going to come for our company, and there ain't nothing else to bring 'em."

"Well, there aren't many to come, you know," laughed Billy Louise, shaking out the dish towel and spreading it over two nails, as she did at home. "I'm your nearest neighbor, and I've got six miles to ride—against the wind at that. I think I'd better start. We've got a half breed doing chores for us, but he has to be looked after or he neglects things. I've not got another chance to come very soon, I'm afraid. Mawmie hates to have me ride around much in the winter. You said for that nephew right away, why don't you, Marthy?" It was like Billy Louise to mix command and entreaty together.

"Really, I don't think Jase looks a bit well."

"A good strong steppin' 'n' sick 'n' fix him all right, only he ain't sick, as I see. You take this shawl."

Billy Louise refused the shawl and ran down the twisted path fringed with long, reaching fingers of the bare berry bushes. At the stable she stopped for an aimless dialogue with Jase and then rode away, past the orchard whose leafless branches gave glimpses of the low, sod roofed cabin, with Marthy standing rather disconsolately on the rough doorstep watching her go.

Blue was climbing steadily out of the gorge, twitching an ear backward with flattering attention whenever his lady spoke. The horse went on, calmly stepping over this rock and around that as if it were the simplest thing in the world to find sure footing and carry his lady smoothly up that trail. He threw up his head so suddenly that Billy Louise was startled out of her aimless dreamings and pouted nose and ears toward the little creek bottom above, where Marthy had lighted her campfire long and long ago.

A few steps farther and Blue stopped short in the trail to look and listen. Billy Louise could see the nervous twitchings of his muscles under the skin of neck and shoulders, and she smiled to herself. Nothing could ever come upon her unaware when she rode alone so long as she rode Blue. A hunting dog was not more keenly alive to his surroundings.

"Go on, Blue," she commanded after a minute. "If it's a bear or anything like that you can make a run for it; if it's a wolf I'll shoot it. You needn't stand here all night, anyway."

Blue went on, out from behind the willow growth that hid the open. He returned to his calm, picking a smooth trail through the scattered rocks and thly washouts. It was the girl's turn to stare and speculate. She did not know this horseman who sat negligently in the saddle and looked up at the

cedar grown bluff beyond while his horse stood knee deep in the little stream. She did not know him, and there were not so many travelers in the land that strangers were a matter of indifference.

Blue welcomed the horse with a democratic nicker and went forward briskly. And the rider turned his head, eyed the girl sharply as she came up and nodded a cursory greeting. His horse lifted its head to look, decided that it wanted another swallow or two and lowered its muzzle again to the water.

Billy Louise could not form any opinion of the man's age or personality, for he was encased in a wolfskin coat which covered him completely from hat brim to ankles. She got an impression of a thin, dark face and a sharp glance from eyes that seemed dark also. There was a thin, high nose, and beyond that Billy Louise did not look. If she had the mouth must certainly have reassured her somewhat.

Blue stepped nonchalantly down into the stream beside the strange horse and went across without stopping to drink. The strange horse moved on also, as if that were the natural thing to do—which it was, since chance sent them traveling the same trail. Billy Louise set her teeth together with the queer little vicious click that had always been her habit when she felt thwarted and constrained to yield to circumstances and straightened herself in the saddle.

"Looks like a storm," the fur coated one observed, with a perfectly transparent attempt to lighten the awkwardness.

Billy Louise tilted her chin upward and gazed at the gray sweep of clouds moving sullenly toward the mountains at her back. She glanced at the man and caught him looking intently at her face.

He did not look away immediately, as he should have done, and Billy Louise felt a little beat wave of embarrassment, emphasized by resentment.

"Are you going far?" he queried in the same tone he had employed before. "Six miles," she answered shortly, though she tried to be decently civil.

"I've about eighteen," he said. "Looks like we'll both get caught out in a blizzard."

Certainly he had a pleasant enough voice, and, after all, it was not his fault that he happened to be at the crossing when she rode out of the gorge. Billy Louise, in common justice, laid aside her resentment and looked at him with a hint of a smile at the corners of her lips.

"That's what we have to expect when we travel in this country in the winter," she replied. "Eighteen miles will take you long after dark."

"Well, I was sort of figuring on putting up at some ranch if it got too bad. There's a ranch somewhere ahead on the Wolverine, isn't there?"

"Yes," Billy Louise bit her lip, but hospitality is an unwritten law of the West, a law not to be lightly broken. "That's where I live. We'll be glad to have you stop there of course."

The stranger must have felt and admired the unconscious dignity of her tone and words, for he thanked her simply and refrained from looking too intently at her face.

Fine siftings of snow, like meal flung down from a gigantic sieve, swept into their faces as they rode on. The man turned his face toward her after a long silence. She was riding with bowed head and face half turned from him and the wind alike.

"You'd better ride on ahead and get in out of this," he said curtly. "Your horse is fresh. It's going to be worse and more of it before long. This cause of mine has had thirty miles or so of rough going."

"I think I'd better wait for you," she said primly. "There are bad places where the trail goes close to the bluff, and the lava rock will be slippery with this snow, and it's getting dark so fast that a stranger might go over."

"If that's the case the sooner you are past the bad places the better. I'm all right. You drift along."

Billy Louise speculated briefly upon the note of calm authority in his voice. He did not know evidently that she was more accustomed to giving commands than to obeying them. Her lips gave a little quirk of amusement at his mistake.

"You go on. I don't want a guide." He tilted his head imperiously toward the blurred trail ahead.

Billy Louise laughed a little. She did not feel in the least embarrassed now. "Do you never get what you don't want?" she asked mildly. "I'd a lot

rather lead you past those places than have you go over the edge," she said, "because nobody could get you up or ever go down and bury you decently. It wouldn't be a bit nice. It's much simpler to keep you on top."

He said something, but Billy Louise could not hear what it was. She suspected him of swearing. She rode on in silence.

"Blue's a dandy horse on bad trails and in the dark," she observed companionably at last. "He simply can't lose his footing or his way."

"Yes? That's nice."

Billy Louise felt like putting out her tongue at him for the cool remoteness of his tone. It would serve him right to ride on and let him break his neck over the bluff if he wanted to. She shut her teeth together and turned her face away from him.

So, in silence and with no very good feeling between them, they went precariously down the steep hill (the hill up which Marthy and the oxen and Jase had toiled so laboriously twenty-seven years before) and across the tiny flat to where the cabin window winked a welcome at them through the storm.

Washington.—All doubt as to President Wilson's view of proposals in congress for reorganization of the government's war-making machinery was swept away by a statement in which the president said the war department had accomplished a task of unparalleled magnitude and difficulty with extraordinary promptness and efficiency, denounced the congressional war investigations and declared that reorganization by legislation was proposed after effective measures of reorganization had been perfected.

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"I am taking the sworn testimony of responsible officials and officers of the army together with the views of the best efficiency experts of the country. It has been shown plainly that we cannot expect to give the fullest measure of our energy and resources to the conduct of the war as long as we operate under our present system. That I do not have the president's support is to be regretted. But there will be no turning back on my part. I have the full approval of my conscience in this matter."

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"There is no shortage of flour and no necessity for hoarding," Mr. Hebbard said. Mr. Hoover is authority for the statement that the saving made by the people in the last five months amounts to between 25,000,000 and 50,000,000 bushels of wheat. But already this surplus has been exported, and there still must be saved for export in the next seven months 75,000,000 to 90,000,000 bushels. The home supply, however, will be safeguarded at all times.

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Washington.—Radical changes in the government's war-making machinery are proposed in bills approved by the senate military committee.

As introduced Monday in the senate by Chairman Chamberlain, one measure provides for the establishment of a war cabinet—that name having been substituted for "war council"—of three men, distinguished in business, executive, administration and public affairs and not members of the president's cabinet.

The bill proposes that the three members of the war council shall be appointed by the president, with confirmation by the senate, and be directly under the president and above the cabinet in authority, with power to "supervise, control and direct all departments, bureaus and agencies of the government in the prosecution of the war."

It specifically states that the secretaries of war and navy shall not be ex-officio members.

Another bill provides for a director of munitions, also a presidential appointee to be confirmed by the senate, who would have authority to control production, distribution and transportation of war supplies under the policies of the president and the war council.

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