

The Ranch at the Wolverine

By B. M. BOWER

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Marthy, low-browed, uncombed, hairy of voice and speech and nature, with her shrewish husband James, journey over desert trail, driving four oxen and two mules, the pioneers whose wagon first fords the Wolverine stream. James is ready to stop at the first green spot, but Marthy insists on plodding along another full day's journey. That night through natural instinct, two of the oxen stray into a narrow gorge and feast on the rich grasses of the "cove," where they are found by Marthy who recognizes the little, hidden Eden as the place of her dream and the pioneers at once take possession. Later they are joined by another couple who are impressed with the Wolverine and also establish a home. To them is born a daughter, christened Billy Louise.

CHAPTER II—After a visit to Marthy, Billy Louise on her horse Blue reaches home late, in a snow storm, having met a stranger riding over the same trail. He is invited to stop for the night and is welcomed by Billy Louise's mother. Introduces himself as Ward Warren who has a claim on Mill Creek.

CHAPTER III—Marthy is horrified to find that James has died during the night. Digging a grave in a level place above the main ditch, she wheels James' body on the home-made wheelbarrow and burials her dead. Charlie Fox, her nephew arrives.

CHAPTER IV—Fox rides to Billy Louise's ranch to inquire if she has seen anything of four of their oxen which disappeared. Theft is discussed, and Billy Louise starts in search.

CHAPTER V—Spring has come, but Billy Louise is not affected by the beauties of Wolverine country, for she is brooding over her disappointments and is on the brink of nervous breakdown when she finds one of her finest cows dead, and she has a machinery ride due. Two men approach on horses looking about for missing stock. She rides to Ward's cabin, but he is not there.

CHAPTER VI—Riding along a flat-bottomed canyon she sees a horseman resembling Ward disappear in the hills and later discovers a hidden corral such as she remembers being told about by her father. She is late in arriving home and finds her mother ill, and a physician is called.

CHAPTER VII.

Each in His Own Trail.

SINCE nothing in this world is also, luteally immutable—the human emotions least of all perhaps—Billy Louise did not hold changeless her broken faith in Ward. She saw it broken into fragments before the evidence of her own eyes and the fragments ground to dust beneath the weight of what she knew of his past—things he had told her himself. So she thought there was no more faith in him, and her heart went empty and aching through the next few days.

But, since Billy Louise was human and a woman not altogether because she was twenty—she stopped after awhile, gathered carefully the dust of her dead faith, and, like God, she began to create. First she fashioned doubts of her doubt. How did she know she had not made a mistake, there at that corral? Other men wore gray hats and rode dark bay horses; other men were slim and tall, and she had only had a glimpse, after all, and the light was deceptive down there in the shadows. When that first doubt was molten and she had breathed into it the breath of life so that it stood sturdily before her she took heart and created reasons, a whole company of them, to tell her why she ought to give Ward the benefit of the doubt. She remembered what Charlie Fox had said about circumstantial evidence. She would not make the mistake he had made.

So she spent other days and long, wakeful nights. And since it seemed impossible to bring her faith to life again just as it had been, with the glamor of romance and the sweetness of pity and the strength of her own innocence to make it a beautiful faith indeed, she used all her innocence and all her pity and a little of romance and created something even sweeter than her untried faith had been. She had a new element to strengthen it. She knew that she loved Ward. She had learned that from the hurt it had given her to lose her faith in him.

That was the record of the inner Billy Louise which no one ever saw. The Billy Louise which her little world knew went her way unchanged except in small details that escaped the notice of those nearest her. A look in her eyes for one thing; a hurt, questioning look that was sometimes rebellious as well; a drop of her mouth also when she was off her guard; a sad, tired little droop that told of the weight of responsibility and worry she was carrying.

Ward observed both the minute he saw her on the trail. He had come across country on the chance that she might be riding out that way, and he had come upon her unawares while she and Blue were staring out over the desert from the height they had attained in the hills.

"Lo, Bill!" he said when he was quite close and held himself ready to meet whatever mood she might present.

She turned her head quickly and looked at him, and the hurt look was still in her eyes; the droop still showed at her lips. And Ward knew they had been there before she saw him.

"What's molla, Billy?" he asked in the tone that was calculated to invite an unburdening of her troubles.

"Oh, nothing in particular! Mommie's been awfully sick, and I'm al-

ways worried when I'm away from the ranch for fear she'll have another spell while I'm gone. The doctor said she might have any time. Were you headed for our place? If you are, come on. I was just starting back. I don't dare be away any longer." If that were a real unburdening Ward was an unreasonable young man. Billy Louise looked at him again, and this time her eyes were clear and friendly.

Ward was not satisfied, for all the surface seemed smooth enough. He was too sensitive not to feel a difference, and he was too innocent of any wrongdoing or thinking to guess what was the matter. Guilt is a good barometer of personal atmosphere, and Ward had none of it. The worst of him she had known for more than a year. He had told her himself, and she had healed the hurt—almost—of the past by her firm belief in him and by her friendship. Could you expect Ward to guess that she had seen her faith in him die a violent death no longer than two weeks ago? Such a possibility never occurred to him.

For all that he felt there was a difference somewhere. He carried back with him a fit of the blues which seemed to have attacked him without cause or pretext, since he had not quarreled with Billy Louise and had been warmly welcomed by "mommie." Poor mommie was looking white and frail, and her temples were too distinctly veined with purple. Ward told himself that it was no wonder his Wilhemina acted strained and unnatural. He meant to work harder than ever and get his stake so that he could go and make her give him the right to take care of her.

He began to figure the cost of commuting his homestead right away, so that he would not have to "hold it down" for another three years. Maybe she would not want to bring her mother so far off the main road. In that case he would go down and put that Wolverine place in shape. He had no squeamishness about living on her ranch instead of his own if she wanted it that way. He meant to be better "hooked up" financially than she was and have more cattle when he put the gold ring on her finger. Then he would do whatever she wanted him to do, and he would not have to crucify his pride doing it.

You see, they could not have quarreled, since Ward carried castles as well as the blues. In fact, their parting had given Ward an uneven pulse for a mile, for Billy Louise had gone with him as usual as far as the corral when he started home. And when Ward had picked up his reins and turned to put his toe in the stirrup Billy Louise had come close to his very shoulder. Ward had turned his face toward her, and Billy Louise—Billy Louise had impulsively taken his head between her two hands, had looked deep into his eyes and then had kissed him wistfully on the lips. Then she had turned and fled up the path, waving him away up the trail. And though Ward never guessed that to her that kiss was a penitent vow of loyalty to their friendship and a slap in the face of the devil that still pursued her weaker moments, it set him planning harder than ever for that stake he must win before he dared urge her further toward matrimony.

It's a wonder that the kiss did not wipe out completely the somber mood that held him. That it did not, but served merely to tangle his thoughts in a most hopeless manner, perhaps proves how greatly the inner life of Billy Louise had changed her in those two weeks.

She changed still more in the next two months, however. There was the strain of her mother's precarious health which kept Billy Louise always on the alert and always trying to hide her fears. She must be quick to detect the first symptoms of a return attack of the illness, and she must not let her mother suspect that there was danger of a return. That much the doctor had made plain to her.

Besides that, there was an undercurrent of gossip and rumors of cattle stealing whenever a man stopped at the ranch. It worried Billy Louise in spite of her rebuilt belief in Ward. Doubt would seize her sometimes in spite of herself, and she did not see Ward often enough to let his personality fight those doubts. She saw him just once in the next two months and then only for an hour or so.

A man rode up one night and stayed with them until morning, after the open handed custom of the range land. Billy Louise did not talk with him very much. He had shifty eyes and a coarse, loose lipped mouth and a thick neck, and girl like, she took a violent dislike to him. But John Pringle told her afterward that he was Buck Olney, the new stock inspector, and that he was prowling around to see if he could find out anything.

Billy Louise worried a good deal after that. Once she rode out early with the intention of going to Ward's claim to warn him. But three miles of safer thought changed her purpose. She dared not leave her mother all day, for one thing, and for another she could scarcely warn Ward without letting him see that she felt he needed warning, and even Billy Louise shrank from what might follow.

The stock inspector stopped again on his way back to the railroad. Billy Louise was so anxious that she smothered her dislike and treated him nicely, which thawed the man to an alarming amiability. She questioned him artfully—trust Billy Louise for that—and she decided that the stock inspector was either a very poor detective or a very good actor. He did not, for instance, mention any corral hidden in a blind canyon away back in the hills, and Billy Louise did not mention it, either. He had not found any worked brands, he said. And he did not appear to know anything further about Ward than the mere fact of his existence.

"There's a fellow holdin' down a

claim away over on Mill creek," he had remarked. "I'll look him up when I come back, though Seebek says he's all right."

"Ward is all right," asserted Billy Louise rather unwisely.

"Haven't a doubt of it. I thought maybe he might have seen something that might give us a clue." Perhaps the stock inspector was wiser than she gave him credit for being. He did not at any rate pursue the subject any further until he found an opportunity to talk to Mrs. MacDonald herself. Then he artfully mentioned the fellow on Mill creek, and because she did not know any reason for caution he got all the information he wanted and more, for mommie was in one of her garrulous humors.

After that the days drifted quietly for a month and grew nipper at each end and lazier in the middle, which meant that the short summer was over and that fall was getting ready to paint the wooded slopes with her gayest colors and that one must prepare for the siege of winter.

It was some time in the latter part of September that Billy Louise got up in the middle of a frosty night because she heard her mother moaning. That was the beginning. She sent John off before daylight for the doctor, and before the next night she stood with her lips pressed together and watched the doctor count mommie's pulse and take mommie's temperature and drew in her breath hardly when she saw how long he studied the thermometer afterward.

There was a month or so of going to and fro on her toes and of watching the clock with a mind to medicine giving. There were nights and nights and nights when the cabin window winked like a star fallen into the corral from dusk to red dawn. Ward rode over once, stayed all night and went home in a silent rage because he could not do a thing.

There was a week of fluctuating hope and a time when the doctor said mommie must go to a hospital—Boise, since she had friends there. And there was a terrible, nerve croaking journey to the railroad. And when Ward rode next to the Wolverine ranch there was so Billy Louise to taunt or tempt him, boasting that he ever did, but he frequently missed. He measured the distance with his mind while the man stood there talking to some one unseen. To look at Ward's face you would have sworn that the man was doomed, but something held Ward's finger from crooking on the trigger.

The man had his back turned squarely toward the gun. Ward waited. The man did not move. He waited another minute, and then he opened his lips to shout. And when his lips parted for the call that would bring the fellow facing him Ward's tricky brain snapped before his eyes the face of Billy Louise.

He lowered the gun. He could not shoot when he knew that the bullet would split a gulf between himself and the girl—a gulf that would separate him forever from that future where stood his air castles.

He let down the hammer with his thumb, slid the gun back into its holster and dismounted, with a glance toward the place where the lookout was stationed. He was sure he had not been seen, and so he crouched behind a splinter of rock and watched. He had no plan, but his instinct impelled him to closely watch Buck Olney.

Another man came into view down there in the corral. He also stood plainly revealed, and Ward gave a little snort of contemptuous surprise when he recognized him. After that he studied the situation with scowling his conclusions or complicated his manner of dealing with Buck Olney. Ward would not have hesitated one second about putting the sheriff on the trail of Buck, but if the second man were implicated he could not betray one without betraying the other. And if the business down there in the corral were lawful, then he must think of some other means. At any rate, the thing to do now was to make sure.

The two in the corral came out and closed the gate behind them, and the first man kicked apart the embers of a small fire and afterward busied himself with the ground, either looking for tracks or covering them up. They came a little way along the side of the bluff, mounted and rode up toward where the lookout waited. And one of them rode a dark bay and was slim and tall and wore a gray hat.

Ward glanced at Rattler standing half asleep with reins dropped to the ground. He reached out, took the reins and led the horse farther down under the shelter of the ledge. Rattler pricked up his ears at the sound of those other riders, but he did not show enough interest to nicker a greeting. He was always a self centered beast and was content to go his way alone, like his master.

Ward stood up, where he could see the rim of the bluff over the ledge of lava rock. He might get a closer view and see who was the lookout, and he might be seen. For that contingency he kept his fingers close to his gun. He heard their scrambling progress. Now and then one of the horses sent a little rock bounding down into the canyon, whereat the cattle in the corral moved restlessly around the small inclosure.

They came closer after they had gained the top. Ward, leaning against the dull gray rock before him, heard the murmur of their voices. Once he caught the unmistakable tones of the man he would like to kill. "I'll keep cases and get him." Plotting against some poor devil, as usual, Ward thought and wondered if the man knew he lived in this part of the country. If he did, it might easily be—

"I'll keep cases some myself, you reptile," he muttered under his breath. "You won't get me again, if that's

what you've got in mind."

They went on, and presently Ward was looking at their backs as they rode over the ridge. He stood for some time staring after them with what Billy Louise called his gimlet look. He was breathing shortly from the pressure he had put upon his self control, and he was thinking, thinking.

The silence came creeping in on the heels of the faint, interrupted sound of their voices. Ward took a long breath, discovered that he was gripping his gun as though his life depended on hanging to it and rubbed his numbed fingers absently. After a minute or so he mounted and rode down to the corral.

Five dry cows and two steers snorted at his approach and crowded against the farther rails. Ward gave Rattler a touch of the spurs, rode close to the John Pringle and Phoebe told him in brief, stolid sentences of the later developments and gave him a meal and offered him a bed, which he declined.

When the suspense became maddening after that he would ride down to the Wolverine for news. And the news was monotonously scant. Phoebe could read and write after a fashion, and Billy Louise sent her a letter now and then, saying that mommie was about the same and that she wanted John to do certain things about the ranch. She could not leave mommie, she said. Ward gathered that she would not.

Once when he was at the ranch he wrote a letter to Billy Louise and told her that he would come to Boise if there was anything he could do and begged her to let him know if she needed any money. Beyond that he worked and worked and tried to crowd the loneliness out of his days and the hunger from his dreams with complete bone weariness. He did not expect an answer to his letter—at least he told himself that he did not—but one day Phoebe gave him a thin little letter.

Billy Louise did not write much. She explained that she could only scribble a line or two while mommie slept. Mommie was about the same. She did not think there was anything Ward could do, and she thanked him for offering to help. There was nothing, she said pathetically, that anybody could do. Even the doctors did not seem able to do much except tell her lies and charge her for them. No; she did not need any money. "Thank you just the same, Ward." That was about all. It did not sound in the least like Billy Louise.

Ward answered the note then and there and called her Wilhemina-minnie, which was an awkward name to write and cost him five minutes of cogitation over the spelling. But he wanted it down on paper where she could see it and remember how it sounded when he said it, even if it did look queer. Farther along he started to call her Bill Lou, but rubbed it out and substituted Lady Girl (with capitals). Altogether he did better than he knew, for he made Billy Louise cry when she read it, and he made her say "Dear Ward" under her breath and remember how his hair waved over his left temple and how he looked when that smile hid just behind his lips and his eyes, and he made her forget that she had lost faith in him. She needed to cry, and she needed to remember and also to forget some things, for life was a hard, dull drab in Boise, with nothing to lighten it save a vicarious hope that did not comfort.

Billy Louise was not stupid. She saw through the vagueness of the doctors, and, besides, she was so hungry for her hills that she felt like beating the doctors with her fists because they did nothing to make her mommie well enough to go home. She grew to hate the nurse and her neutral cheerfulness.

That is how the fall passed for Billy Louise and the early part of the winter.

(Continued next week)

NOTICE FOR PUBLICATION.

Department of the Interior, U. S. Land Office at Roseburg, Oregon, February 4, 1918.

Notice is hereby given that James Albert Haynie, of Blakelyville, Oregon, who, on March 8, 1915, made Homestead Entry Serial No. 010028 for Lot 2 of Sec. 7, Tp. 20 S., R. 2 E., W. M., and on August 30, 1916, made Additional Homestead Entry Serial No. 010798 for the SW¹ of SE¹ of NW¹ of Section 7, Township 20 S., Range 2 E., Willamette Meridian, has filed notice of intention to make final three-year proof to establish claim to the land above described, before E. O. Immel, U. S. Commissioner, at his office at Eugene, Oregon, on the 18th day of March, 1918.

Claimant names as witnesses: Harley O. Cain, of Blakelyville, Oregon; John M. Cain, of Blakelyville, Oregon; Joe Blakely, of Blakelyville, Oregon; Thomas C. May, of Landax, Oregon.
W. H. CANON, Register.

NOTICE FOR PUBLICATION.

Department of the Interior, U. S. Land Office at Roseburg, Ore., February 4, 1918.

Notice is hereby given that Harley O. Cain, of Blakelyville, Oregon, who, on March 8, 1915, made Adjoining Farm Homestead Entry, Serial No. 010029, for the Lot 7 of Section 7, Township 20 S., Range 2 E., Willamette Meridian, has filed notice of intention to make final three-year proof to establish claim to the land above described, before E. O. Immel, U. S. Commissioner, at his office at Eugene, Oregon, on the 18th day of March, 1918.

Claimant names as witnesses: Albert Haynie, of Blakelyville, Oregon; John M. Cain, of Blakelyville, Oregon; Thomas C. May, of Landax, Oregon; Joseph A. Blakely, of Blakelyville, Oregon.
W. H. CANON, Register.

18-m14

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London Organizes Auxiliary.

Mr. and Mrs. J. E. Banton were in the city from London Monday and brought the news that a Red Cross auxiliary was organized at that place Friday. The organization was effected at the close of a patriotic program given by the school children, with officers as follows: Mrs. J. E. Banton, president; Mrs. G. A. Small, secretary, and Mrs. W. G. Massey, treasurer. Following the organization Levi Geer spoke at some length on thrift and war savings stamps and called another meeting on the subject for Friday night.

Everyman's Pledge.

American shall win this war! Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight—heartfully, and to my utmost—as if the whole outcome of the struggle depended upon me alone.

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NOTICE TO CREDITORS.

Notice is hereby given that Alf Jury has been appointed executor of the last will and testament of Robert Griffin, deceased, by the county court of Lane county, Oregon, on the 19th day of February, A. D. 1918; that all persons having claims against said estate are hereby notified to present the same, duly verified, to said Alf Jury at Bank of Cottage Grove in Cottage Grove, Oregon, within six months from date of first publication of this notice.

Date of first publication the 22nd day of February, 1918.
ALF JURY, Executor.
H. J. SHINN, Attorney for estate. f22 m22

ADMINISTRATOR'S NOTICE OF FINAL SETTLEMENT.

Notice is hereby given that the undersigned administrator of the estate of Emery L. Goodridge, deceased, has filed in the county court of Lane county, Oregon, his final account as such administrator of said estate and that Saturday, the 16th day of March, 1917, at the hour of 11 o'clock a. m. of said day has been set by said court for hearing objections to said report and the settlement thereof.

NELSON DURHAM, Administrator of the Estate of f15m15 Emery L. Goodridge, deceased.



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ALF JURY, Executor.
H. J. SHINN, Attorney for estate. f22 m22

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