

The Ranch at the Wolverine

By B. M. BOWER

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Marthy, low-browed, uncounted, harsh of voice and speech and nature, with her shiftless husband, James, Journey over desert trail, driving four oxen and are the pioneers whose landing 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 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. Billy Louise herself is 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 artery, she whistles James's body on the home-made wheelbarrow and buries 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. They are discussed, and Billy Louise starts to search.

CHAPTER V—Spring has come, but Billy Louise is not affected by the beauties of Wolverine canyon, for she is brooding over her discouragements and is on the brink of nervous breakdown when she finds one of her best cows dead, and she has a machinery hole done. Two men approaching on horseback start for missing stock. She rides to Ward's cabin, but he is not there.

CHAPTER VI—Hiding along a flat-bottomed canyon she sees a hussman 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—Billy Louise does not hold chargeless her broken faith in Ward, although she has learned to love him. Ward meets her on the trail and is puzzled at her apparent goodness toward him. Ward writes her offering any assistance he can give.

CHAPTER VIII.

"You Won't Get Me Again."

ONE day late in the fall Ward was riding the hills off to the north and west of his claim, looking at the condition of the range there and keeping an eye out for Y6 cattle. He had bought another dozen head of mixed stock over toward Hardup, and they were not yet past the point of straying off their new range. So, having keen eyes and the incentive to use them, he paid attention to stock tracks in the soft places, and he saw everything within the sweep of his vision, and since the day was clear and fine, his range of vision when he reached a high point extended to the Three Buttes away out in the desert.

By sheer accident he rode up to the canyon where the little corral lay hidden at the end and looked down. And since he rode up at an angle different from the one Billy Louise had taken the corral was directly beneath him—so directly, in fact, that half of it was hidden from sight. He saw that there were cattle within it, however, and two men at work there. And by chance he lifted his eyes and saw the nose of a horse beyond a jutting ledge sixty yards or so away and the crown of a hat showing just above the ledge. A look at him, he judged instantly and pulled Rattler behind the rock he had been at some pains to ride around.

Ward was a cowpuncher. He knew the tricks of the trade so well that he did not wonder what was going on down there. He knew. He was tempted to do as Billy Louise had done—ride on and pass up knowledge which might be disagreeable, for Ward was not one to spy upon his fellows, and the man whom he would betray into the hands of a sheriff must be guilty of a most heinous crime. That was his code—to let every fellow have a chance to work out his own salvation or damnation as he might choose. I don't suppose there was anything he hated worse than an informer.

He got behind the rock, since he had no great desire to be shot, and he discovered that his view of the corral was much plainer than from where he had first seen it. He looked behind him for an easy retreat to the skyline, and then before he turned to ride away he glanced down again curiously.

A man walked out into the center of the corral and stood there in the revealing sunlight. Ward's eyes bored like gimlets through the space that divided them. Instinctively his hand went to the gun on his hip. It was a long pistol shot, and he was afraid he might miss, for Ward was not a wizard with a gun, much as I should like to misrepresent him as a dead shot. He was human, just like yourself. He could shoot pretty well, a great deal better than lots of men who do more fence and stand in his stirrups while he studied the bunch.

"Hell!" he said when the inspection was over and dropped back into the saddle while he gazed unseeing at the canyon wall. It was a very real hell that his mind saw—a hell made by men wherein other men must dwell in torment because of their sins or the sins of their fellows.

Seabuck's brand was a big V, a hind brand to own, since it favors revision at the hands of the unscrupulous. These cattle were Seabuck cattle, and their brand had been altered. For the right slant of the V had been extended a little and curled into a 6, so that in time the brand would stand casual inspection as a Y6 monogram—Ward's own brand. The work was crude, purposefully crude. The V had not been returned enough to make it look fresh, and the newly seared 6 had been added with a malevolent pressure that would make it stand out a fresh brand for a long time in case of a delay in the proceedings, as Ward knew perfectly well.

So he sat there and looked over the fence and saw himself a convicted "rustler." There was the evidence all ready to damn him utterly before a jury. They would be turned loose on the range near his claim, and they would be found before the scents had faded over. It was a good time for rustling. Roundups were over for the winter, and the weather would confine range riding to absolute necessity.

Of course the work was coarse—so coarse as to reflect against his intelligence—but when brands are worked over and the culprit has been caught the law is not too careful to give the prisoner credit for brains.

Ward stared at the altered brands and wondered what he had best do. He bethought him that perhaps it would be as well to put a little scenery between himself and that particular locality, and he started back up the hill. Once he pulled up as if he would go back, but he thought better of it. It was out of the question to turn those cattle loose. He could not kill them and dispose of the bodies, not when there were seven of them. He might go down and blotch the brands so that they would not read anything at all. He had thought of that before and decided against it. That would put those three on their guard and would probably not benefit him in the long run. They would work the brands on other cattle.

He hunched forward in the saddle and let Rattler choose his own trail up the hill. Though he did not know it, trouble had caught Billy Louise in that same place and had sent her forward with drooping shoulders and a mind so absorbed that she gave no attention to her horse. But that is merely a trifling coincidence. The thing he had to decide was far more complicated than Billy Louise's problem.

Should he go straight to Seabuck and tell him what he had found out? He did not know Seabuck, except as he had met him once or twice on the trail and exchanged trivial greetings and a few words about the weather. Besides, Seabuck would very soon find out—

There he stood at his shoulder, grinning at him malevolently his past. It tied his hands. Buck Olney he could deal with single handed, for Olney had the fear of him that is born of a guilty conscience. He could send Buck "over the road" whenever he chose to tell some things he knew. He could do it without any compunctions too. Buck Olney, the stock inspector, deserved no mercy at Ward's hands and would get none if ever they met where Ward would have a chance at him.

Olney he could deal with alone, but with the evidence of those rebranded cattle and the testimony of two men, together with the damning testimony of his past! Ward lifted his head and stared heavily at the pine slope before him. He could not go to Seabuck and tell him anything. In the black hour of that ride he could not think of anything that he could do that would save him.

And then quite suddenly in his desperation he decided upon something. He laughed hardly, turned Rattler back from the homeward trail and returned to the corral in the canyon. "They started this game, and they've put it up to me," he told himself grimly, "and they needn't squeal if they burn their own fingers."

He hurried, for he had some work ahead of him, and the sun was sliding past the noon mark already. He reached the corral and went about what he had to do as if he were working for wages and wanted to give good measure.

First he rebuilt the little fire just outside the corral where the cattle could not trample it, but where one might thrust a branding iron into its midst from between the rails. When it was going properly he searched certain likely hiding places and found an iron still warm from previous service. He thrust it into heat, led Rattler into the corral and closed the gate securely behind him. Then he mounted, took down his rope and widened the loop, while his angry eyes singled out the animal he wanted first.

Ward was not adept with a "running iron." He was honest, whatever men might say of him. But he knew how to tie down an animal, and he sacrificed part of his lariat to get the short rope he needed to tie their feet together. He worked fast—no telling what minute some one might come and catch him—and he did his work well, far better and neater than had his predecessors.

When he left that corral he smiled. Before he had ridden very far up the bluff he stopped, looked down at the long suffering cattle and smiled again sardonically. One could read their brands easily from where he sat on his horse. They were not blotched; they were very distinct. But they were not Y6s within that corral. There were other brands which might be made of a Y6 monogram by the judicious addition of a mark here and a mark there.

"There, hang yuh, chew on that awhile!" he apostrophized the absent three. He turned away and rode back once more toward home.

Rattler turned naturally into the trail

which ran up the creek to the ranch, but Ward immediately turned him out of it. "We aren't going to overlook any bets, old timer," he said grimly and crossed the creek at a point where it was too rocky to leave any hoof prints behind them. He rode up the lower point of the ridge beyond and followed the crest of it on the side away from the valley. When he reached a point nearly opposite his cabin he dismounted, unhooked his spurs and slipped their chains over the saddle horn. Then he went forward afoot to reconnoiter. He was careful to avoid rock or gravelly patches and to walk along on the soft grass, which muffled his steps.

In this wise he made his way to the top of the ridge, where he could look down upon the cabin and stable and corral and see also the creek trail for a good quarter of a mile. The little valley lay quiet. His team fed undisturbed by the creek not far from the corral, which reassured Ward more than anything. Still, he waited until he had made reasonably sure that the bluff held no watcher concealed before he went back to where Rattler waited patiently.

"I guess they didn't plan to stir things up till they got those critters planted where they wanted them," he mused while he rode down the bluff to his cabin. "But when they visit that bunch of stock again I reckon things will begin to tighten."

He was wary of exposing himself too much to view from the bluff while he did his chores that night, and he kept Rattler in the stable; also he slept very little, and before daybreak he was up and away.

CHAPTER IX.

"I'm Going to Take You Out and Hang You."

THE trouble with a man like Buck Olney is that you can never be sure of his method, except that it will be underhand and calculated to eliminate as much as possible any risk to himself. Ward, casting back into his memory—he had known Buck Olney very well once upon a time and in his unsuspecting youth had counted him a friend—tried to guess how Buck would proceed when he went down to that corral and found how those brands had been retouched.

"He'll be running around in circles for awhile, all right," he decided, with an air of certainty. "Blotched brands he'd know was my work, and he could have put it on me, too, with a good yarn about trailing me so close I got cold feet. As it is!" Ward smoked two cigarettes and scowled at the scenery. As it was, he did not know just what Buck Olney would do, except—"If he makes a guess I did that he'll know I'm wise to the whole plant. And he'll get me sure, providing I stand with my back to him long enough!" Ward had his back to a high ledge at that moment, so that he did not experience any impulse to look behind him.

"Buck don't want to drag me up before a jury," he reasoned further. "He'd a heap rather pack me in all wrapped up in a tarp and say how he'd caught me with the goods and I resisted arrest."

The assurance he felt as to what Buck Olney would do did not particularly frighten Ward even if he did neglect to go to bed in his cabin during the next few days. That was common sense born of his knowledge of the man he was dealing with. He went to the cabin warily, just often enough to give it an air of occupancy. He frequently sat upon some hilltop and watched a lazy thread of smoke weave upward from his rusty stovepipe, but he slept out under the stars rolled in his heavy blanket, and he never crossed a ridge if he could make his way through a hollow. It is not always cowardice which makes a man extremely careful not to fall into the hands of his enemy. There is a small matter of pride involved. Ward would have died almost any death rather than give Buck Olney the satisfaction of "getting" him. For a few days he was cautious as an Indian on the war trail, and then his patience frazzled out under the strain.

At sunrise one morning, after a night of shivering in his blanket, he hunched his shoulders in disgust of his caution. If Buck Olney wanted anything of him he was certainly taking his time about coming after it. Ward rubbed his fingers over his stubby jaw, and the uncomfortable-prickling was the last small detail of discomfort that decided him. He was going to have a shave and a decent cup of coffee and eat off his own table or know the reason why, he promised himself while he slapped the saddle on Rattler.

He was camped in a sheltered little hollow in the hills, where the grass was good and there was a spring. It was a mile and more to his claim, straight across the upland, and it was his habit to leave Rattler there and walk over to the ridge, where he could watch his claim. Frequently, as I have said, he stole down before daylight and lighted a fire in the stove just to make it look as if he lived there. There was a risk in that, of course, granting that the stock inspector was the kind to lie in wait for him.

Ward rode to the ridge with his blanket rolled and tied behind the cattle. His frying pan hung behind his leg, and his rifle lay across the saddle in front of him. He was going home boldly enough and recklessly enough, but he was by no means disposed to walk deliberately into a trap. He kept his eye peeled, as he would have expressed it. Also he left Rattler just under the crest of the ridge, took off his spurs and with his rifle in his hands went forward afoot, as he had done every time he had approached his cabin since the day he found the corral and the cattle in the canyon.

In this wise he looked down the steep slope with the sun throwing the shadow

of his head and shoulders before him. The cabin window blinked cheerfully in the sunlight. His span of mares were coming up from the meadow in the faint hope of getting a breakfast of oats, perhaps. The place looked peaceful enough and cozily desirable to a man who has slept out for four nights late in the fall, but a glance was all Ward gave to it.

His eyes searched the bluff below him and upon either side. Of a sudden they sharpened. He brought his rifle forward with an involuntary motion of the arms. He stood so for a breath or two, looking down the hill. Then he went forward stealthily on his toes; swiftly, too, so that presently he was close enough to see the carbuncle scar on the neck of the man crouched behind a rock and watching the cabin as a cat watches a mouse hole. A rifle lay across the rock before the man, the muzzle pointing downward. At that distance and from a dead rest it would be strange if he should miss any object he shot at. He had what gamblers call a cinch, or he would have had if the man he watched for had not been standing directly behind him with rifle sights in a line with the scar on the back of his thick neck.

"Throw up your hands!" Ward called sharply when his first flare of rage had cooled to steady purpose.

Buck Olney jumped as though a yellow jacket had stung him. He turned a startled face over his shoulder and jerked the rifle up from the rock. Ward raised his sights a little and plucked a round, black rimmed hole through Buck's hat crown.

"Throw up your hands, I told you!" he said, while the hills opposite were still flinging back the sound of the shot, and came closer.

Buck grunted an oath, dropped the rifle so suddenly that it clattered on the rock and lifted his hands high in the quiet sunlight.

"Get up from there and go on down to the shack—and keep your hands up. And remember all the reasons I've got for wanting to see you make a crooked move so I'll have an excuse to shoot." Ward came still closer as he spoke. He was wishing he had brought his rope along. He did not feel quite easy in his mind while Buck Olney's hands were free.

Buck got up awkwardly and went stumbling down the steep slope with his hands trembling in the air upon either side of his head. From their nervous quivering it was evident that his memory was good and that it was working upon the subject which Ward had suggested to him. He did not give Ward the weakest imitation of an excuse to shoot. And so the two of them came presently down upon the level and passed around the cabin to the door with no more than ten feet of space between them, so inexorably had Ward crowded close upon the other's stumbling progress.

"Hold on a minute!"

Buck stopped as still as though he had gone against a rock wall.

Ward came closer, and Buck flinched away from the feel of the rifle muzzle between his shoulder blades. Ward reached out a cautious hand and pulled the six shooter from its holster at Buck's right hip.

"Got a knife? You always used to go heeled with one. Speak up and don't lie about it."

"Inside my coat," grunted Buck, and Ward's lip curled while he reached around the man's bulky body and found the knife in its leather sheath. Evidently Buck was still remembering with disquieting exactness what reasons Ward might have for wanting to kill him.

"Take down your left hand and open the door."

Buck did so and put his hand up again without being told.

"Now go in and stand with your face to the wall." With the rifle muzzle Ward indicated which wall. He noticed how Buck's fingers groped and trembled against the wall, just under the eaves, and his lip curled again in the expression which Billy Louise so hated to see.

Ward had chosen the spot where he could reach easily a small coil of rope. He kept the rifle pressing Buck's shoulders until he had shifted the knife into one hand, banded and laid its blade against Buck's cheek.

"Feel that? I'll jab it clear through you if you give me a chance. Drop your hands down behind you." He spent a busy minute with the rope before he pushed Buck Olney roughly toward a chair.

Buck sat down, and Ward did a little more rope work.

"Say, Ward, you're making a big mistake if you—"

"Shut up!" snapped Ward. "Can't you see I'm standing all I can stand just with the sight of you? Don't pile it on too thick by letting me hear you talk. I heard you once too often as it is."

Buck Olney caught his breath and sat very still. His eyes followed Ward as the eyes of a caged animal follow its keeper.

Ward tried to ignore his presence completely while he lighted a fire and fried bacon and made coffee, but the hard set of his jaw and the cold intensity of his eyes proved how conscious he was of Buck's presence. He tried to eat just to show how calm he was, but the bread and bacon choked him. He could feel every nerve in his body quiver with the hatred he felt for the man and the bitterness which the sight of him called up out of the past. He drank four cups of coffee, black and sweetened at random, which steadied him a little. That he did not offer Buck food or drink showed how intense was his hatred. As a rule, your true range man is hospitable even to his enemies.

He rose and inspected the ropes to make sure that they were proof against twisting, straining muscles and took an extra turn or two with the loose

end just to make doubly sure of the man's helplessness.

"Where did you leave your horse?" he asked him curtly when he was through.

Buck told him, his eyes searching Ward's face for mercy or at least for some clue to his fate and dreading with disappointment because he could read nothing there but loathing.

Without speaking again Ward went out and closed the door firmly behind him. He felt relieved to be away from Buck's presence. As he climbed the bluff and mentally relived the last hour he wondered how he had kept from shooting Buck as soon as he saw him. Still, that would have defeated his main purpose, which was to make Buck suffer. He was afraid he could not make Buck suffer as Buck had made him suffer, because there were obstacles in the path of a perfect retribution.

Ward was not cruel by nature—at least he was not more cruel than the rest of us—but as he went after Rattler and Buck's horse it pleased him to know that Buck Olney was tied hand and foot in his cabin and that he was sick with dread of what the future held for him.

Ward was gone an hour. He did not hurry; there was no need. Buck could not get away, and a little suspense would do him good.

Buck's face was pasty when Ward opened the door. His eyes were a bit glassy. And from the congested appearance of his hands Ward judged that he had tested to the full his helplessness in his bonds. Ward looked at him a minute and got out the makings of a smoke. His mood had changed in his absence. He no longer wanted absolute silence between them; instead he showed symptoms of wanting to talk.

"If I turn you loose, Buck, what will you do?" he asked at last in a curious tone.

"If you—Ward, I'll prove I'm a friend to yuh in spite of the idea you've got that I ain't. I never done nothing—"

"No, of course not," Ward's lip curled. "That was my mistake, maybe. You always used to say you were my friend when—"

"And that's the God's truth, Ward!" Buck's face was becoming flushed with his earnestness. "I done everything I could for you, Ward, but the way the cards laid I couldn't—"

"Get me hanged, I know; you sure tried hard enough!" Ward puffed hard at his cigarette, and the lips that held it trembled a little. Otherwise he seemed perfectly cool and calm.

"Say, Ward, them lawyers lied to you."

"Oh, cut it out, Buck. I've seen you wriggle through a snake hole before. I believe you're my friend just the way you're always been."

"That's right, Ward, and I can prove it."

Ward snorted. "You proved it, old timer, when you laid up there behind a rock with your sights on this shack, ready to get me when I came out. I sate now how it happened Jim McGuire was found face down in the spring behind his shack with a bullet hole in his back that time. You were his friend too?"

"Ward, I—"

"Shut up! I just wanted to see if you'd changed any in the last seven years. You haven't, unless it's for the worse. You've got to the end of the trail, old timer. When you went laying for me you fixed yourself a plenty. Do you want to know what I'm going to do to you?"

"Ward, you wouldn't dare shoot me! With the record you've got you wouldn't stand—"

"Who gave it to me, huh? Oh, I heap sate; you've left word with your partners that you were coming up here to arrest me single handed. They will give the alarm if you don't show up, and I'll go on the dodge and get caught and—" Ward threw away his cigarette and took a step toward his captive, a step so ominous that Buck squirmed in his bonds.

"Well, you can rest easy on one point. I'm not going to shoot you." Ward stood still and watched the light of hope flare in the eyes of his enemy. "I'm going to wash the dishes and take a shave, and then I'm going to take you out somewhere and hang you."

"My God, Ward! You—you—"

"I told you seven years ago," went on Ward steadily, "that I'd see you hung before I was through with you. Remember? By rights you ought to hang by the heels over a slow fire. You're about as low a specimen of humanity as I ever saw or heard of. You know

what you did for me, Buck. And you know what I told you would happen. Well, it's going to come off according to the program.

"I did think of running you in and giving you a taste of hell yourself. But, as usual, you've gone and tangled up a couple of fellows that never did me any particular harm and I don't want to hand them anything if I can help it. So I'll just string you up—after awhile, when I get around to it—and leave a note saying who you are and that you're the head push in this rustling business and that you helped spend the money that Hardup bank lost awhile back and that you're one of the gazebos—"

"You can't prove it! You—"

"I don't have to prove it. The authorities will do all that when they get the tip I'll give them. And you, being hung up on a limb somewhere, can't very well give your partners the double cross. So they'll have a fighting chance to make their getaway.

"Now, I'm through talking to you. What I say goes. You can talk if you want to, Buck, but I'm going to carve a steak out of you every time you open your mouth." He pulled Buck's own knife out of its sheath and laid it convenient to his hand, and he looked as if he would do any cruel thing he threatened.

(Continued next week)

NOTICE FOR PUBLICATION.

Department of the Interior, U. S. Land Office at Roseburg, Oregon, February 26, 1918.

Notice is hereby given that Frank B. Chenoweth, of Oakridge, Oregon, who, on August 23, 1910, made Homestead Entry, Serial No. 06546, for 160 acres in unsurveyed Sec. 36, Tp. 20 S., R. 3 E., W. 4 M., described by metes and bounds as follows: Beginning at Cor. No. 1, identical with Corner of Secs. 25, 26, 35 and 36, of Tp. 20, S. R. 3 E. W. 4 M.; thence N. 89° 51' E. 59.29 chs., thence S. 20.16 chs.; thence W. 39.23 chs.; thence S. 29.45 chs.; thence N. 89° 57' W., 19.99 chs.; thence N. 0° 12' W., 40.45 chs., to place of beginning, has filed notice of intention to make final five-year proof to establish claim to the land above described, before E. O. Immel, U. S. Commissioner, at his office at Eugene, Ore., on the 20th day of April, 1918.

Claimant names as witnesses: C. M. Dunning, of Oakridge, Oregon; R. M. Holt, of Oakridge, Oregon; J. H. Chenoweth, of Oakridge, Oregon; Will Hebert, of Oakridge, Oregon.

W. H. CANON, Register.

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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 Emery L. Goodridge, deceased.



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