Red Saunders

...By...

HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS

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(CHAPTER III—(Continued.)

He sat there awhile looking around him, snapping pebbles with his thumb. 'Tell you what it is, Red,' he says at last, 'we might as well go mining right here. This is likely gravel, and there's a river. If that bar in front of you had been further in the mountains it would have been punched full of holes. It's only because it's on the road that nobody's taken the trouble to see what was in it. This road was made by cattle ranchers that didn't know nothing about mining, and every feller that's gone over the trail had his mouth set to get further along as quick as possible—just like us. Do you see that little hollow running down to the river? Well, you try her back there. I give you that place, as it's the most probable, and you as a tenderfoot in the business will have all the luck. I'll make a stab where I am.'

'Well, sir, it sounds queer to tell it, and it seems queerer still to think of the doing of it, but I hadn't dug two pans before I come to bed rock, and there was some heavy black chunks.

'"Aggy," says I, 'what's these things?' throwing one over to him. He caught it and stared at it.

'"Where did you get that?' says he in almost a whisper.

'"Why, out of the hole, of course!" says I, laughing. 'Come take a look!"

'Aggy wasn't the kind of a man to make of the handle over trifles, but when he looked into that hole he turned perfectly green. His knees give out from under him, and he sat on the ground like a man in a trance, wiping the sweat off his face with a motion like a machine.

'"What the devil ails you?' says I, astonished. I thought maybe I'd done something I hadn't ought to do through ignorance of the rules and regulations of mining.

'"Red," says he, dead solemn, 'I've been for twenty year and from old Circle to Alaska, but I never saw anything that was ace high to that hole. Cold laying loose in chunks on top of the bed rock is too much for me. I wish Hy could see this.'

'"Gold!" says I. 'What you talking about! What have those black hunks got to do with gold?'

'The only answer he made was to take the one I had thrown to him on the end of a rock and hit her a crack with the pick. Then he handed it to me. Fine enough! There under the black was the yeller. Of course if I'd known more about the business I could have told it by the weight, but I'd never seen a piece of gold fresh off the farm before in my life. I hadn't the slightest idea what it looked like, and I learned afterward it all looks different. Some of it shines up yeller from the start, some of it's red, and some like ours, coated black with iron rust.

'So I looked at Ag, and Ag looked at me, neither one of us believing anything at all for awhile. I simply couldn't get hold of the thing—I ain't sure, for that matter. I expect to wake up and find it a pipe dream, and in many ways I wouldn't mind if it was. I never was so completely two men as I was on that occasion. One of 'em was hopping around and hollering with Ag, yelling 'Hooray!' and the other didn't take much interest in the proceedings at all. And it wasn't until afterwhile, 'Now I can pay that cussed coyote of a stage driver what I owe him!' that I got any good out of it. That brought it home to me. When I spoke to Ag about paying the driver, he says, 'That so.' Then he takes a quick look around. 'We can pay him in full, too, old horse!' he hollers, and there was a most joyful smile on his face.

'"Red," says he, 'don't you know this is the only ford on the river for—I don't know how many miles—perhaps the whole length of her?'

'"Well," says I.

'"Our little placer claim," says Aggy merry, rubbing his hands together, "owners that ford, and by a judicious staking up of claims for various uncles and brothers and friends of ours along the creek on the lowlands we can fix it so they can't even bridge it.'

'"Do you mean they can't cross our claims if we say they can't?'

'"Sure thing," says Aggy. "There's you and me and the law to say "No" with that. I wish I had a gun.'

'"You don't need any gun for that kind of a driver.'

'"Of course not, but there'll be passengers, and there's no telling how exasperating them passengers will be when they find they've got to go over the creek hunting.'

'"Are you going to send 'em all afoot, Ag?'

'"The whole bunch. Anybody coming back from the diggings has gold in his clothes, so it won't hurt 'em any, and I propose to give that stage line no advertising that won't do it a heap of good. Come along, Red. Let's see that lad that has the shack up there. We need something to eat, and maybe he's got a gun. If he's a decent feller, we'll let him in on a claim. Never mind about the hole. He won't run away, and there's nobody to touch anything. Come on.'

So we went up the river. The man's name was White, and he was a white man by nature too. He fed us well and was just as hot as us when we told him about the stage driver's trick. Then we told him about the find and let him in.

'"Now,' says Aggy, 'have you got a gun?'

'"I have that,' says the man. 'My dad used to be a duck hunter on Chesapeake bay. When you say "gun" I'll show you a gun.' He dove in under his bunk and fetched out what I should say was a No. 1 bore shotgun, with barrels six foot long.

'"Gentlemen,' says he, holding the gun up and patting it lovingly, 'if you ram a quarter pound of powder in each one of them barrels and a handful of buckshot on top of that you've got an argument that couldn't be upset by the supreme court. I'll guarantee that when you point her anywheres within ten feet of a man not over a hundred yards away and let her do her duty, all the talent that that man's fambly could employ couldn't gather enough of him to recognize him by, and you won't be in bed more'n long enough to heal a busted shoulder.'

'"I hope it ain't going to be my painful line of performance to pull the trigger,' says Aggy. 'I think the sight of her would have weight with most people. When's the stage due back?'

'"Day after tomorrow, about noon.'

'"That gives us lots of time to stake and to salt claims that can't show cause their own selves,' says Aggy. 'I think we're all right.'

'The next day we worked like the old Harry. We had everything fixed up right by nightfall, and there was nothing to do but dig and wait.

'Curious folks we all are, ain't we? I should have said my own self that if I'd found gold by the bucketful, I'd be more interested in that than I would be in getting even with a mut that had done me dirt, but it wasn't so. Perhaps it was because I hadn't paid much attention to money all my life, and I had paid the strictest attention to the way other people used me. Living where there's so few folks accounts for that, I suppose.

'Getting even on our esteemed friend, the stage driver, was right in your Uncle Reddy's line, and Aggy and our new pard, White, seemed to take kindly to it, also.

'If ever you saw three faces filled with innocent glee, it was when we heard the wheels of that stage coming—why, the night before I was woke up by somebody laughing. There was Aggy sound asleep, sitting up hugging himself in the moonlight.

'"Oh, my! Oh, my!" says he. 'It's the only ford for 4,000 miles!"

'We planted a sign in the middle of the road with this wording on it in big letters, made with the black end of a stick:

NOTICE!

This and adjoining claims are the property of Agamemnon G. Jones, Red Saunders, John Henry White, et al.

Trespassing done at your own risk. Owners will not be responsible for the remains.

'There was a stretch of about a mile on the level before us. When the stage come in plain sight Aggy proceeds to

"Around you go!" he hollers.

load up 'Old Moral Suasion,' as he called her, so that the folks could see there was no attempt at deception. They come pretty fairly slow after that. At fifty yards, Ag hollers 'Halt!' The team sat right down on their tails.

'"Now, Mr. Snick'umfritz,' says Aggy, 'you that drives, I mean, come here and read this little sign.'

'"Suppose I don't?' says the feller, trying to be smart before the passengers.

'"It's a horrible supposition,' says Aggy, 'and the innocent will have to suffer with the guilty.' Then he cocks the gun.

'"God sakes! Don't shoot!" yells one of the passengers. 'Man, you ought to have more sense than to try and pick him out of a crowd with a shotgun! Get down there, you fool, and make it quick!'

'So the driver walked our way and read. He never said a word. I reckon he realized it was the only ford for 4,000 miles, more or less, as Aggy had remarked. There he stood, with his mouth and eyes wide open.

'"I'd like to have you other gentlemen come up and see our first cleanup, so you won't think we're running in a windy,' says Aggy. They wanted to see bad, as you can imagine, and when they did see about fifteen pounds of gold in the bottom of my old hat they talked like people that hadn't had a Christian bringing up.

'"Oh, Lord!" groans one man. 'Brigham Young and all the prophets of the Mormon religion! This is my tenth trip over this line, and me and Pete Hendricks played a game of seven up right on the spot where that gent hit her not over a month ago, when the stage broke down! Somebody just make a guess at the way I feel and give me one small drink.' And he put his hand to his head. 'Say, boys,' he goes on, 'you don't want the whole blamed creek, do you? Let us in!'

'"How's that, fellers?' says Ag to me and White. We said we was agreeable.

'"All right, in you come!' says Aggy. 'There ain't no hog about our firm. But as for you,' says he, walking on his tiptoes up to the driver—'as for you, you cockeyed whelp, around you go! Around you go!' he hollers, jamming the end of Moral Suasion into the driver's trap. 'Oh, and won't you go round, though!' says he. 'Listen to me, now: if any one of your ancestors for twenty-four generations had ever done anything as decent as robbing a hencoop it would have conferred a kind of degree of nobility upon him. It wouldn't be possible to find an ornrier cuss than you if a man raked all hell with a fine toothed comb. Now, you stare coated, mangy, bandy legged, misbegotten, outlaw coyote, fly—fly!' whoops Aggy, jumping four foot in the air, 'before I squirt enough lead into your system to make it a paying job to melt you down!'

'The stage driver acted according to orders. Three wide steps and he was in the wagon, and with one screech like a p'izened bobcat he fairly lifted the cayuses over the first ridge. Nobody never saw him any more, and nobody wanted to.

'So that's the way I hit my stake, son, just as I'd always expected—by not knowing what I was doing any part of the time—and now, there comes my iron horse coughing up the track! I'll write you sure, boy, and you let old Reddy know what's going on—and on your life don't forget to give it to the lads straight why I sneaked off on the quiet! I've got ten years older in the last six months. Well, here we go quite fresh, and d——d if I altogether want to neither. Too late to argue though. By-by, son!"

CHAPTER IV.

MISS MATTIE sat on her little front porch, facing the setting sun. Across the road, now ankle deep in June dust, was the wreck of the Peters place—back broken roof, crumbling chimneys, shutters hanging down like broken wings, the old house had the pathetic appeal of shipwrecked gentility. A house without people in it, even when it is in repair, is as forlorn as a dog who has lost his master.

Up the road were more houses of the nondescript village pattern, made neither for comfort nor looks. God knows why they built such houses! Perhaps it was in accordance with the old Puritan idea that any kind of physical perfection is blasphemy. Some of these were kept in paint and window glass, but there were enough poor relations to spoil the effect.

Down the road between the arches of the weeping willows came first the brook, with the stone bridge—this broken as to coping and threadbare in general—then on the hither side of the way some three or four neighbors' houses and opposite the blacksmith's shop and postoffice, the latter of course in a store, where you could buy anything from stale groceries to shingles.

In short, Fairfield was an eastern village whose cause had departed, a community drained of the male principle, leaving only a few queer men, the blacksmith and some halfling boys to give tone to the background of dozens of old maids.

An unsympathetic stranger would have felt that nothing was left to the Fairfieldians but memory, and the sooner they lost that the better.

Take a wineglassful of raspberry vinegar, two tablespoonfuls of sugar, half a cup each of boneset and rhubarb, a good full cup of the milk of human kindness, dilute in a gallon of water and you have the flavor of Fairfield. There was just enough of each ingredient to spoil the taste of all the rest.

Miss Mattie rested her elbow on the railing, her chin in her hand, and gazed thoughtfully about her. As a matter of fact, she was the most inspiring thing in view. At a distance of fifty yards she was still a tall, slender girl. Her body retained the habit as well as the lines of youth, a trick of gliding into unexpected, pleasing attitudes, which would have been awkward but for the suppleness of limb to which they testified and the unconsciousness and ease of their irregularity.

Her face was a child's face in the ennobling sense of the word. The record of the years written upon it seemed a masquerade—the face of a clear eyed girl of fourteen made up to represent her own aunt at a fancy dress party; a face drawn a trifle fine, a little ascetic, but balanced by the humor of the large, shapely mouth, and really beautiful in bone and contour, the beauty of mignonette and doves and gentle things.

You could see that she was thirty-five in the blatant candor of noon, but now, blushed with the pink of the setting sun, she was still in the days of the fairy prince.

Miss Mattie's reverie idled over the year upon year of respectable stupidity that represented life in Fairfield, while her eyes and soul were in the boiling gold of the sky glory. She sighed.

A panorama of life minced before Miss Mattie's mind about as vivid and full of red corpuscles as a Greek frieze. Her affectionate nature was starved. They visited each other, the ladies of Fairfield—these women who had rolled on the floor together as babies—in their best black or green or whatever it might be, and gloves—this though the summer sun might be hammering down with all his might. And then they sat in a closed room and talked in a reserved fashion which was entirely the property of the call. Of course one could have a moment's real talk by chance meeting, and there were the natural griefs of life to break the corsets of this etiquette, although in general the griefs seemed to be long drawn out and conventional affairs, as if nature herself at last yielded to the system, conquered by the invincible conventionality and stubbornness of the ladies of Fairfield. It was the unspoken but firm belief of each of these women that a person of their circle who had no more idea of respectability than to drop dead on the public road would never go to heaven.

Poor Miss Mattie! Small wonder she dropped her hands, sat back and wondered, with another sigh, if it were for this she was born. She did not rebel—there was no violence in her—but she regretted exceedingly. In spite of her slenderness it was a wide mother lap in which her hands rested, an obvious cradle for little children. And instinctively it would come to you as you looked at her that there could be no more comfortable place for a tired man to come home to than a household presided over by this slow moving, gentle woman.

There was nothing old maidish about Miss Mattie but the tale of her years. She had had offers, such as Fairfield and vicinity could boast, and declined them with tact and the utmost gratitude to the suitor for the compliment, but her "no," though mild, was firm, for there lay within her a certain quiet valiant spirit which would rather endure the fatigue and loneliness of old age in her little house than to take a larger life from any but the man who was all—a commonplace in fiction, in real life sometimes quite a strain.

The sun distorted himself into a Rugby football and hurried down as though to be through with Fairfield as soon as possible. It was a most magnificent sunset, flaming, gorgeous, wild—beyond the management of the women of Fairfield—and Miss Mattie stared into the heart of it with a longing for something to happen. Then the thought came, "What could happen?" She sighed again, and, with eyes blinded by heaven shine, glanced down the village street.

She thought she saw—she rubbed her eyes and looked again—she did see, and surely never a stranger sight was beheld on Fairfield's street! Had a Royal Bengal tiger come slouching through the dust it could not have been more unusual. The spectacle was a man; a very large and mighty shouldered man, who looked about him with a bold, imperious, keep the change regard. There was something in the swing of him that suggested the Bengal tiger. He wore high heeled boots outside of his trousers, a flannel shirt with a yellow silk kerchief around his neck, and on his head sat a white hat which seemed to Miss Mattie to be at least a yard in diameter. Under the hat was a remarkable head of hair. It hung below the man's shoulders in a silky mass of dark scarlet flecked with brown gold. Miss Mattie had seen red hair, but she remembered no such color as this, nor could she recall ever having seen hair a foot and a half long on a man. That hair would have made a fortune on the head of an actress, but Miss Mattie was ignorant of the possibilities of the profession.

The face of the man was a fine tan, against which eyes, teeth and mustache came out in brisk relief. The mustache avoided the tropical tint of the upper hair and was content with a modest brown. The owner came right along, walking with a stiff, strong, straddling gait, like a man not used to that way of traveling.

Miss Mattie eyed him in some fear. He would be by her house directly, and it was hardly modest to sit aggressively on one's front porch while a strange man went by, particularly such a very strange man as this. Yet a thrill of curiosity held her for the moment, and then it was too late, for the man stopped and asked little Eddie Newell, who was playing placidly in the dust—all the children played placidly in Fairfield—asked Eddie in a voice which reached Miss Mattie plainly, although the owner evidently made no attempt to raise it, if he knew where Miss Mattie Saunders lived?

Eddie had not noticed the large man's approach and nearly fell over in a fright, but seeing, with a child's intuition, that there was no danger in this fierce looking person he piped up instantly.

"Y-y-yessir, I kin tell yer where she lives—yessir! She lives right down there in that little house. I kin go down with you jes' swell 's not! Why, there she is now, on the stoop!"

"Thankee, sonny," said the big voice. "Here's for miggles," and Miss Mattie caught the sparkle of a coin as it flew into the grimy fists of Eddie.

"Much obliged!" yelled Eddie and vanished up the street.

Miss Mattie sat transfixed. Her breath came in swallows, and her heart beat irregularly. Here was novelty with a vengeance! The big man turned and fastened his eyes upon her. There was no retreat. She noticed with some reassurance that his eyes were grave and kindly.

As he advanced Miss Mattie rose in agitation, unconsciously putting her hand on her throat. What could it mean?

The gate was opened and the stranger strode up the cinder walk to the porch. He stopped a whole minute and looked at her. At last!

"Well, Mattie!" he said, "don't you know me?"

A flood of the wildest hypotheses flashed through Miss Mattie's mind without enlightening her. Who was this picturesque giant who stepped out of the past with so familiar a salutation? Although the porch was a foot high, and Miss Mattie a fairly tall woman, their eyes were almost on a level as she looked at him in wonder.

Then he laughed and showed his white teeth. "No use to bother and worry you, Mattie," said he. "You couldn't call it in ten years. Well, I'm your half uncle Fred's boy Bill, and I hope you're a quarter as glad to see me as I am to see you."

"What!" she cried. "Not little Willy who ran away!"

"The same little Willy," he replied in a tone that made Miss Mattie laugh a little, nervously, "and what I want to know is, are you glad to see me?"

"Why, of course! But, Will—I suppose I should call you Will? I am so flustered—not expecting you—and it's been so warm today. Won't you come in and take a chair?" wound up Miss Mattie in desperation and fury at herself for saying things so different from what she meant to say.

There was a twinkle in the man's eyes as he replied in an injured tone:

"Why, good Lord, Mattie! I've come 2,000 miles or more to see you, and you ask me to take a chair just as if I'd stepped in from across the way! Can't you give a man a little warmer welcome than that?"

"What shall I do?" asked poor Miss Mattie.

"Well, you might kiss me for a start," said he.

Miss Mattie was all abroad. Still one's half cousin, who has come such a distance and been received so very oddly, is entitled to consideration. She raised her agitated face and for the first time in her life realized the pleasure of wearing a mustache.

Then Red Saunders, late of the Chanta Seechee ranch, North Dakota, sat him down.

"I'm obliged to you, Mattie," he said in all seriousness. "To tell you the truth, I felt in need of a little comforting—here I've come all this distance—and, of course, I heard about father and mother—but I couldn't believe it was true. Seemed as if they must be waiting at the old place for me to come back, and when I saw it all gone to ruin— Well, then I set out to find somebody, and do you know, of all the family there's only you and me left? That's all, Mattie, just us two! While I was growing up out west I kind of expected things to be standing still back here and be just the same as I left them—hum— Well, how are you, anyhow?"

"I'm well, Will, and"—laying her hand upon his, "don't think I'm not glad to see you—please don't. I'm so glad, Will, I can't tell you—but I'm all confused—so little happens here."

"I shouldn't guess it was the liveliest place in the world, by the look of it," said Red. "And as far as that's concerned, I kinder don't know what to say myself. There's such a heap to talk about it's hard to tell where to begin. But we've got to be friends, though, Mattie—we've just got to be friends. Good Lord. We're all there's left! Funny I never thought of such a thing! Well, blast it! That's enough of such talk. I've brought you a present, Mattie." He stretched out a leg that reached beyond the limits of the front porch and dove into his trousers pocket, bringing out a buckskin sack. He fumbled at the knot a minute and then passed it over, saying, "You untie it—your fingers are sooplier than mine." Miss Mattie's fingers were shaking, but the knots finally came undone, and from the sack she brought forth a chain of rich, dull yellow lumps fashioned into a necklace. It weighed a pound. She spread it out and looked at it astounded. "Gracious, Will! Is that gold?" she asked.

"That's what," he replied. "The real article, just as it came out of the ground; I dug it myself. That's the reason I'm here. I'd never got money enough to go anywhere farther than a horse could carry me if I hadn't taken a fly at placer mining and hit her to beat h—er—the very mischief."

Miss Mattie looked first at the barbaric, splendid necklace and then at the barbaric, splendid man. Things grew confused before her in trying to realize that it was real. What two planets so separated in their orbits as her world and his? She had the imagination that is usually lacking in small communities, and the feeling of a fairy story come true possessed her.

"And now, Mattie," said he, "I don't know what's manners in this part of the country, but I'll make free enough on the cousin part of it to tell you that I could look at some supper without flinching. I've walked a heap today, and I ain't used to walking."

Miss Mattie sprang up, herself again at the chance to offer hospitality.

"Why, you poor man!" said she. "Of course you're starved! It must be nearly 8 o'clock. I almost forget about eating, living here alone. You shall have supper directly. Will you come in or sit a spell outside?"

"Reckon I'll come in," said Red. "Don't want to lose sight of you now that I've found you."

It was some time since Miss Mattie had felt that any one had cared enough for her not to want to lose sight of her, and a delicate warm bloom went over her cheeks. She hurried into the little kitchen.

"Mattie!" called Red.

"What is it, Will?" she answered, coming to the door.

"Can I smoke in this little house?"

"Cer-tainly. Sit right down and make yourself comfortable. Don't you remember what a smoker father was?"

Red tried the different chairs with his hand. They were not a stalwart lot. Finally he spied the homemade rocker in the corner. "There's the lad for me," he said, drawing it out. "Got to be kinder careful how you throw 250 pounds around."

"Mercy!" cried Miss Mattie, pan in hand. "Do you weigh as much as that, Will?"

"I do," returned Red, with much satisfaction. "And there isn't over two pounds of it fat at that."

"What a great man you have grown up to be, Will!"

Red took in a deep draft of tobacco and sent the vapor clear across the little room.

"On the hay scales, yes," he answered, with a sort of joking earnestness, "but otherwise I don't know."

The return to the old home had touched the big man deeply, and as he leaned back in his chair there was a shade of melancholy on his face that became it well.

Miss Mattie took in the mass of him stretched out at his ease, his legs crossed, and the patrician cut of his face, to which the upturned mustache gave a cavalier touch. They were good stock, the Saunders, and the breed had not declined in the only two extant.

"He's my own cousin," she whispered to herself in the safety of the kitchen. "And such a splendid looking man!" She felt a pride of possession she had never known before. Nobody in Fairfield or vicinity had such a cousin as that. And Miss Mattie went on joyfully fulfilling an inherited instinct to minister to the wants of some man. She said to herself there was some satisfaction in cooking for somebody else. But alack-a-day, Miss Mattie's ideas of the wants of somebody else had suffered a Fairfield change. Nothing was done on a large scale in Fairfield. But she sat the little cakes—lucky that she had made them yesterday—and the fried mush and the small pitcher of milk and the cold ham and the cold biscuit on the table with a pride in the appearance of the feast.

"Supper's ready, Will," she said.

Red responded instanter. He took a look at the board and understood. He

"He's my own cousin," she whispered to herself.

ate the little cakes and biscuit and said they were the durned best he ever tasted. He also took some pot cheese under a misapprehension, swallowed it and said to himself that he had been through worse things than that. Then, when his appetite had just begun to develop, the inroads on the provisions warned him that it was time to stop. Meanwhile they had ranged the fields of old times at random, and as Red took in Miss Mattie, pink with excitement and sparkling as to eyes, he thought, "Blast the supper! It's a square meal just to look at her. If she ain't pretty good people, I miss my guess."

It was a merry meal. He had such a way of telling things! Miss Mattie hadn't laughed so much for years, and she felt that there was no one that she had known so long and so well as Cousin Will. There was only one jarring note—Red spoke of the vigorous celebration that had been followed by the finding of gold. It was certainly well told, but Miss Mattie asked in soft horror when he had finished, "You didn't get—intoxicated—Will?"

"Did I?" said he, lost in memory and not noticing the tone. "Well, I put my hand down the throat of that man's town and turned her inside out! It was like as if Christmas and Fourth of July had happened on the same day."

"Oh, Will," cried Miss Mattie, "I can't think of you like that—rolling in the gutter!" Her voice shook and broke off. Her knowledge of the effect of stimulants was limited to Fairfield's one drunkard—old Tommy McKee, a disreputable old Irishman—but drunkenness was the worst vice in her world.

"Rolling in the gutter!" cried Red in astonishment. "Why, girl, what for would I roll in the gutter? What's the fun in that? Jiminy Christmas! I wanted to walk [illegible] There wasn't anything in that town high enough for me. What put gutters into your head?"

"I—I supposed people did that when they were—like that."

"I wouldn't waste my money on whisky if that's all the inspiration I got out of it," replied Red.

"Well, of course I don't know about those things, but I wish you'd promise me one thing."

"Done!" cried Red. "What is it?"

"I wish you'd promise me not to touch whisky again."

"Phew! That's a pretty big order!" He stopped and thought a minute. "If you'll make that 'never touch it when it ain't needed,' leaving when it's needed to what's my idea of the square thing on a promise, I'll go you, Mattie. There's my hand."

"Oh, I shouldn't have said anything at all, Will. I have no right, but it seemed such a pity such a splendid man—I mean—I think— You mustn't promise me anything, Will," stammered Miss Mattie, shocked at her own daring.

"Here!" he cried, "I'm no little kid! When I promise I mean it! As for your not having any right, ain't we all there is? You've got to be mother and sister and aunt and everything to me. I ain't as young as I have been, Mattie, and I miss she-ways terrible at times. Now, put out your fin like a good pardner, and here goes for no more rhinecaboos for Chanta Seechee Red—time I quit drinking, anyhow," he slipped a ring off his little finger. "Here, hold out your hand," said he. "I'll put this on for luck and the sake of the promise—by the same token, I've got a noose on you now, and you're my property."

This of course was only Cousin Will's joking, but Miss Mattie noticed with a sudden hot flush that he had chosen the engagement finger—in all ignorance, she felt sure. The last thing she could do would be to call his attention to the fact or run the risk of hurting his feelings by transferring the ring; besides, it was a pretty ring, a rough ruby in a plain gold band—and looked very well where it was.

Then they settled down for what Red called a good medicine talk. Miss Mattie found herself boldly speaking of little fancies and notions that had remained in the inner shrine of her soul for years, shrinking from the matter-of-fact eye of Fairfield; yet this big, ferocious looking Cousin Will seemed to find them both sane and interesting, and as her self respect went up in the arithmetical her admiration for Cousin Will went up in the geometrical ratio. He frankly admitted weaknesses and fears that the males of Fairfield would have rejected scornfully.

Miss Mattie spoke of sleeping upstairs, because she could not rid herself of the fear of somebody coming in.

"I know just how you feel about that," said Red. "My hair used to be on its feet most of the time when we were in the hay camp at the lake beds. Gee whiz! The rattlers! We put hair ropes around—but them rattlers liked to squirm over hair ropes for exercise. One morning I woke up and there was a crawler on my chest. 'For God's sake, Pete!' says I to Antelope Pete, who was rolled up next me, 'come take my friend away!' and I didn't holler very loud neither. Pete was chain lightning in pants, and he grabs Mr. Rattler by the tail and snaps his neck, but I felt lonesome in my inside till dinner time. You bet! I know just how you feel exactly. I didn't have a man's sized night's rest while we was in that part of the country."

It struck Miss Mattie that the cases were hardly parallel. "A rattlesnake on your chest, Will!" she cried, with her hands clasped in terror.

"Oh, it wasn't as bad as it sounds. He was asleep, coiled up there to get warm—sharpish nights on the prairie in August—but darn it, Mattie," wrinkling up his nose in disgust, "I hate the sight of the brutes!"

"But you wouldn't be afraid of a man, Will!"

"Well, no," admitted he. "I've never been troubled much that way. You see, everybody has a different fear to throw a crimp in them. Mine's rattlesnakes and these little bugs with forty million pairs of legs. I pass right out when I see one of them things. They give me a feeling as if my stummick had melted."

"Weren't the Indians terrible out there, too?" asked Miss Mattie. "I'm sure they must have been."

(Continued Next Week.)

HOT WORDS USED IN COTTAGE GROVE COUNCIL

There came near being violence at the Cottage Grove council meeting last Monday. Councilman Porter wanted to remove the new sidewalk built by Messrs. Lurch and Lewis in front of their property on Fifth street while others thought the proposed action drastic. Recorder King called the attention of the council to the fact that there is not a uniformity of sidewalk on Main street, some being 12 feet wide, other stretches eight feet, and down to a few inches over the regulation five feet four inches, and that there seemed to be stubbornness and prejudice involved. This was vehemently resented by Councilman Porter, and only but for the constant, even temper of Recorder King there would have been scrapping on the spot. Mayor Jones promptly called the speaker to order. Later the dispute was compromised and good feeling verbally restored.—Western Oregon.

CASTORIA.
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