

The Sky Love Sign

A Story Of Central Oregon

By Jer Franklin

CHAPTER I

(Continued from last week)

The homesteader made it a point to happen along that way a good deal oftener after that than was actually necessary. He also called at the ranch where the school teacher boarded, more than had been his custom. He was asked to stay for supper one night, and it didn't require any coaxing to get him to do so. It so happened that he was given a seat at the table next to the "schoolmarm," but being "old timers" of course they never thought to introduce him to the teacher. All appeared as awkward and dumb as the visitor in the presence of this well-bred girl from the city, and a painful silence prevailed throughout the meal. The Southerner had been living the rough life of a bachelor homesteader so long that he seemed to have lost all his former wits and manners. Now that he was sitting so near the winsome creature who lived in his memory by day and his dreams by night, he was, to use his own words, "scared stiff," and only risked an occasional glance in her direction.

Fortune favored the visitor, however. All ate in a hurry and left the table but Billie and the young teacher. But, being a Southerner, he was indeed in an embarrassing position now. It was very painful to sit in further silence, but— they had never been introduced! But Miss McGee, being a product of the West, showed the Southerner the superiority of Western etiquette over Southern by proving herself master of an awkward situation—and the man—as she did on occasion in times after. Leaning slightly towards the visitor, the girl rested a pretty hand on the edge of the table near his plate and looked him straight in the face, saying, "How soon will the thresher be at the main ranch?"

Now, this was the first thresher that had ever visited this section of the interior. It was a new, up-to-date gasoline machine, having the "straw blower." The new thresher had created interest in the community second only to the new teacher. Bluffing at being cool and deliberate, the man replied:

"They expect to be here next Wednesday, if nothing goes wrong."

"You know I have never seen a 'blower,' and am anxious to see it," said she.

"Do you live around here?"

"Yes," he said; "I have a homestead over by Trail Gap, about five miles from the schoolhouse. That is north and west of the schoolhouse."

I don't know why he took the "schoolhouse" as the basis of his calculations—unless the "schoolhouse" had become the center and hub of the universe to Billie. And it evidently had.

"And you live alone?"

"Yes."

"Homesteading that way must be very lonely."

"It is—at times."

"Do you know of any more homesteads to be had around here?"

"Yes, there are two or three, but none of them are very good. Had you thought of filing on one?"

"Yes; I hear so much about homesteads out here that I am beginning to get the 'fever,' you see. But I am afraid I haven't that much nerve."

"It would require a lot of nerve for a girl to try to prove up on a homestead."

"I really don't believe I would be afraid. I could learn to shoot a gun, you know. But I fear it would be too dreadfully lonesome. I am afraid I wouldn't have nerve enough for that."

"Do you think it really would be unsafe—for a girl alone? Would the coyotes really be dangerous? My! when I hear them at night I get homesick for mamma. You know there are so few young folks around here, sometimes I get real homesick."

"No, it really wouldn't be unsafe, if a girl was nifty and cool-headed and knew how to handle a gun. The coyotes are harmless—to people. They will kill lambs and chickens, but they never bother people except in very extreme cases."

"If you really would like to look at a homestead, there is an abandoned claim not far from here—only a mile and a half—with a cabin already on it, and a spring. That is a big thing, for so few of the claims have any water on them. I have to haul water three miles."

"My! that must be very hard, but I presume you are accustomed to hardships. But I would like to see this claim, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. I could go some Saturday."

"I will gladly go with you. I will get off two weeks from next Saturday. Could you go then?"

And thus they became acquainted at the table after the others had left. The girl had broken the ice, but before leaving Billie got up enough courage to give his name and ask hers.

That night Billie rode home to his lonely claim very happy. A new star had risen on the horizon of the young pioneer's lonely life.

Having been asked to help with the threshing at the ranch where the girl boarded—luck for him again—Billie had the heavenly pleasure of eating at the same table, and always next to the school teacher, at breakfast and supper for nearly three days. It was evident that the women folk were favoring the Southern man.

When he began work with the thresher, Billie found that he was not the only admirer of the young teacher. All the men, young and old, liked to talk about the subject that seemed uppermost in all minds—the new schoolmarm. The younger fellows bragged a good deal about winning the pretty teacher, as though each believed he stood an equal chance against the rest. Billie joined in the talk, too, but he kept his own counsel regarding his speaking acquaintance with the girl. However, their calculations were false, for Billie Bonham was no ordinary factor, even with an even break, to be taken into consideration.

In this case the Southerner was X, the unknown quantity.

That first night at the supper table, when it was discovered that the homesteader had stolen a march on them, trouble began. The presence of the refined girl at the table made the thresher men feel decidedly awkward and ill at ease. The women folk and the Southerner, who were seated at one end of the large table, did most of the talking, though some joking was attempted by some of the bolder ones of the thresher crew. Now that the ice had been broken, Billie was keen to see his advantage. And he was becoming daring with his gaining confidence. As usual, the most of the men ate in a hurry and soon left the table to enjoy their smoke outside. Seeing that Billie would soon be left alone with the women folk, one of the older men proposed, on leaving the table, "that the last man to leave the table help the cooks wash the dishes." This brought forth a laugh all around. The women quickly seconded the suggestion and the teacher "added fuel to the fire" by daring the victim with, "I don't believe you're game to help us with the dishes!"

"You don't believe I'm 'game'?" promptly replied the Southerner, a big smile on his face and mischief alight in his keen brown eyes.

"I'll call that dare!"

"You don't think I'm 'game'?"

He looked straight into her eyes. He saw that he had scored this time, for she flushed crimson and dropped her eyes. She didn't answer his repeated question.

While the thresher hands were outside smoking Billie was standing in front of a big, steaming dishpan washing dishes. The girl was standing by him drying them. The young teacher was still blushing in her embarrassment. The bachelor was plainly master of this situation. He was very happy and talked more to the girl than she did to him, but he little realized to what extent he had roused the jealousy of the other men.

[To be continued]

IMPORTANT TELEGRAM FROM THE GOVERNOR

Oregon Executive Urges Agricultural Preparedness in Anticipation of A Food Shortage

"At this time when the mobilization of all the resources of our country is the paramount national problem, it is the patriotic duty of all of us to co-operate in every possible way. It seems to me Oregon's great opportunity lies in the organized encouragement and development of agricultural production. With this in view, I suggest that the Portland Chamber of Commerce take the lead in organizing the commercial bodies of the state in an Oregon League of Agricultural Preparedness, whose objects shall be the maximum production of staple crops chiefly useful in feeding the nation and protecting our citizenship from the hardships of increased living cost. Every community should be organized so that its vacant lots and unused fields, so far as possible, shall be placed under cultivation. An especially important work can be done with school children. Each one should become a volunteer patriotic farmer this summer. Organized purchase of seed would cut cost and should make possible free distribution to those who cannot afford this initial investment. I respectfully suggest this general plan for your consideration, believing it good economics and soundly patriotic."

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