

The Reading of the Riddle

By WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

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"Dear, was it really you or I? To truth the shadow's ill to seek. No many are the deaths we die before we can be dead indeed."
—W. E. Henley.

THE town of Willow Creek lies at the junction of a rivulet of that name, with the Big Muddy. But the people of that community being born scoffers, have changed the name of the Big Muddy in common parlance to "Old Creek," and, transformed by the alchemy of popular appreciation, the name of the town itself has skirted into "Willow Creek." It might have been something of a town, as towns go in the West, but instead of pulling with its neighbors for the success of the town, each of its founders spent his time making fun of the pretensions of others. When there was talk on the part of "old man" Mend, the principal postmaster, of securing the government land office for Willow Creek, the Indian trader, and the saloonkeeper, and the blacksmith, made great sport of the old man's ambition. A few years later, when civilization had crowded in with a hotel, a lumber yard, a new saloon, and a barber shop, someone spoke of starting a newspaper; but the laugh that went up from Willow Creek was the only unanimity that greeted Editor McCray when his back was turned. But the newspaper came, and so did the people, and they kept coming, until, when the "boom" of the later eighties struck Kansas, it found Willow Creek with about two thousand seething inhabitants.

But, in one way or another, the "boom" seemed to bring wealth to Willow Creek. And with wealth came some attempts at the organization of polite society. There were innumerable young real estate agents, young doctors, young lawyers, and clerks, all from the East, in the village; and these, with the daughters of the early settlers and such friends as they chanced to make in the high school, constituted the aristocracy of the town. It was a vulnerable aristocracy, and the scoffers made sad havoc with it.

It was said of Flora McCray, who went to boarding school and came back, timid, retiring, and distinctly unsocial, that, "She needn't hold herself so high. If her father would only pay back the money he stole in the school land fraud she would be as common as anybody." But the girl paid no heed to these rumors, if she heard them. She quietly filled her small sphere, bounded on one side by her meek-voiced mother and her busy father, on another side by her church and her "church social," on a third side by a very brief glimpse of a very big world and her memory of it, and on the fourth side by occasional day dreams and night thoughts, pretty much the same as those which come to any young girl of good health, good spirits, and twenty-one years, who has never had a sweetheart.

As the reaction, caused by the decadence of real estate prices set in, Willow Creek became poorer. As the young men, who paid for the orchestras, and balls, and flowers, gradually left town, the young women, who formerly frequented receptions, parties, and balls, were seen more and more often at the "church socials." After a two years' ineffectual struggle Willow Creek gave it up, the town could no longer support two branches of society, and the "church crowd" and the "dancer crowd" merged into one.

When it was announced that the entire social body of Willow Creek was going out to Robinson's for a "tuffy pull" one Saturday night, the rest of Willow Creek laughed. The town people sneered at the young women who had planned the party, and intimated that the night ride out to Robinson's and back was a heroic measure; and they laughed at old man Robinson and his family for tolerating people who would snub them if they came to town, and lastly they laughed at the young men who would have to pay the heavy bills.

Saturday morning, John Howard, Mr. McCray's partner in the stock business, came up from the farm on Dry Creek, and after going over some details of business, McCray asked his partner to Sunday dinner, as was his custom, when the young man was in town, and the invitation was accepted. During the "boom" Howard had made money. He had mingled with what is known as the "swell set" of Willow Creek, and though not a favorite at the flood of the "boom," the very fact that he had the social instinct, made him a necessity in society at its ebb.

Soon after leaving his partner's office, he had learned of the plans for the "tuffy pull" that evening. He was urged to go, and finding that all the "trips" were full, and that all the girls of his "set" were provided with escorts, in a moment of despairing inspiration the young man sent a note to his partner's daughter, asking for "the pleasure of her company." His invitation was accepted, and late that afternoon, Flora McCray stepped into a buggy with the first beau she had ever had, and headed a long procession for Robinson's.

one to pass things down the way as Miss McCray was very hungry. It was a new sensation to find herself a part of the merriment. Hitherto, she had been only a spectator at such scenes. And thus, with a mind isolated from the vain world by such reflections, she started with Howard on their homeward ride.

It was a blistering, cloudy night. At first they chatted on about the commonplaces of Willow Creek. Flora McCray tried again and again to associate her recollection of the familiar face of her father's partner with the smooth-shaven face so near her in the night. Her repeated efforts were fruitless. Little by little, did the wizard of the night weave her fancies, and then herself into the woof of his uncanny spell. Not only was she with a stranger, but she was herself a stranger to herself. It may have been the utter loneliness of the night that drew her close to him, but she came, and was not afraid.

Again he reached over her, and again tucked the wraps closer than ever about her, and the fumbling touches of his hands awakened the girl's new self to a delightful realization of the fact that a new being had come to her out of the darkness. She came even closer to this new-found presence, and almost cuddled against the man's great coat, and snuggled under his arm, that rested loosely upon the cushions behind her. Their talk, which had been growing more and more serious, gradually stopped.

"Are you cold—dear?" the young man asked, when he felt her come close to him. His words and his tone startled the girl and almost broke the spell. Flora McCray struggled a moment with the Girl in the Dark, and shuddered in despair as a voice from the Girl, who felt a strong arm quiet her, answered: "A little."

As the lights of the town came in sight the young couple grew silent. A turn in the road brought the buggy under the white glare of an electric light. Flora McCray was sitting upright with her hands folded under the robe, and Howard, with the whip and the lines in his hands, was consciously clucking at the horses. Each saw the other's face clearly, and as they crossed the circle of light the man spoke:

"It must be two o'clock." The girl did not reply, and the young man leaned over to look out of the buggy, as if to scan the clouds. The prospect did not altogether satisfy him and he said:

"It's going to be a pretty gloomy Sunday, I guess." As Howard put out his arms to help her from the buggy she barely touched his outstretched hand, and her decided shyness surprised him. In a bewilderment of confusion he said:

"You have made me very happy tonight, Miss McCray. Shall I speak to your father when I come out to dinner tomorrow?" The girl did not reply, but went up the steps and into the house, while the young man climbed into the buggy, and beat time with the whip to the tune he was whistling, as he gave the horses the rein for the stable.

Flora McCray locked the door and slipped the bolt as quietly as she could. She blew out the light in the parlor and stole noiselessly upstairs. Just before going to bed she started to put away her hat. She picked it up. The velvet and the ribbon seemed crushed. She put out her hand to smooth them. A hot flush of recollection swept over her, and she put the hat down. She did not look at it again, but blew out the light and went to bed with her face turned from the guilty reminder. And all night long Flora McCray lashed herself for the folly of the Girl in the Dark. As she remembered it, she had made all the advances; he had only been kind and good to her.

The next morning, all of Willow Creek knew that John Howard had taken Flora McCray to Robinson's the night before, and that he was going to eat Sunday dinner with the McCrays that afternoon. But the town, as usual, was divided. One-half claimed that the McCrays had to have all of Howard's money, or they would fall; and the other half that John Howard was going to marry Flora McCray to keep the old man from prosecuting him for running off mortgaged cattle and reporting them as dead. And in the whole town no one could have been so thoroughly surprised as was Mr. McCray, when his daughter said to him, "Father, if Mr. Howard says anything to you about me, you will tell him—that I cannot marry him."

McCray and his daughter were walking along the narrow, rough sidewalk toward the church, when these words were spoken. The mother had dropped back, and was not in hearing distance. McCray could not find voice for a few exclamatory "whys" and "whats" before his daughter had said firmly, "You will be sure, won't you, father?" and was waiting for her mother to catch up with them. After the service, the women, Flora and her mother among them, hurried home to attend to the feast of the day.

At the dinner table the young people met for the first time that day. Flora McCray felt keenly, and with a twinge of anguish, that the young man's cordial suavity in greeting her was only inspired by gratitude for her generosity in releasing him from any obligation.

She met his eye, and thought she read there a recollection of everything that had been. Then, as she looked down and away, all the sweetness and unreality of the night's ride was made real to her.

After dinner the men went into the parlor, where they smoked and talked alone, while the women put away the best china, afraid to trust it to the "hired girl." Finally, young Howard and Mr. McCray thought that the evening meal would be in and distributed. They put on their overcoats and were in the hall, when the elder man opened the dining-room door and said:

"Mother, John thinks it's time to go, and I am going to walk down to the post office with him." When the front door closed Mrs. McCray said:

"What a nice young man John How-

ard is, isn't he?" "Oh, yes, he is nice enough, I guess," answered the daughter, rising to go to her room.

As she neared the top of the stairs, Flora McCray quickened her pace. She ran through the upper hall. Once in her room, she went straight to the dresser, where the rumpled hat was still lying. The lonely girl stood before it a moment, and then, stooping awkwardly, touched the crumpled velvet with pursed, uncertain lips, as one ashamed. It may have been the dusk in the room, or it may have been the ghost of an odor from a cigar, that transported this unschooled heart back to the darkness, and the joy of a first caress. But dusk, or ghost, or something, came to this shy girl there, and nerved her whole being, so that she was no longer awkward, no longer uncertain, nor in any wise ashamed. The pretty velvet toy she made her shrine, and in her worship she kissed it, rubbed it with her burning cheek, and buried her face in its sacred folds.

In Willow Creek where they scoff and giggle over sordid things, in Willow Creek the hard, the arid, the barren, they say—no matter what, but in and out of the narrow ways, turning the sharp corners with the rest, with tired feet, and thind, unsure hands, there goes a woman whose womanhood came to her as a dream—in the night.

White House Hopes No. 2



William Gibbs McAdoo, who showed he was still very much in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination, by an overwhelming defeat of Senator Underwood in the Georgia preferential primary.



Senator La Follette of Wisconsin, Progressive Republican, whose sensational showing of strength in the North Dakota primary has the whole country talking. He ran second to President Coolidge and ahead of Hiram Johnson despite the fact that his name was not on the ballot but had to be written in or placed on a sticker.

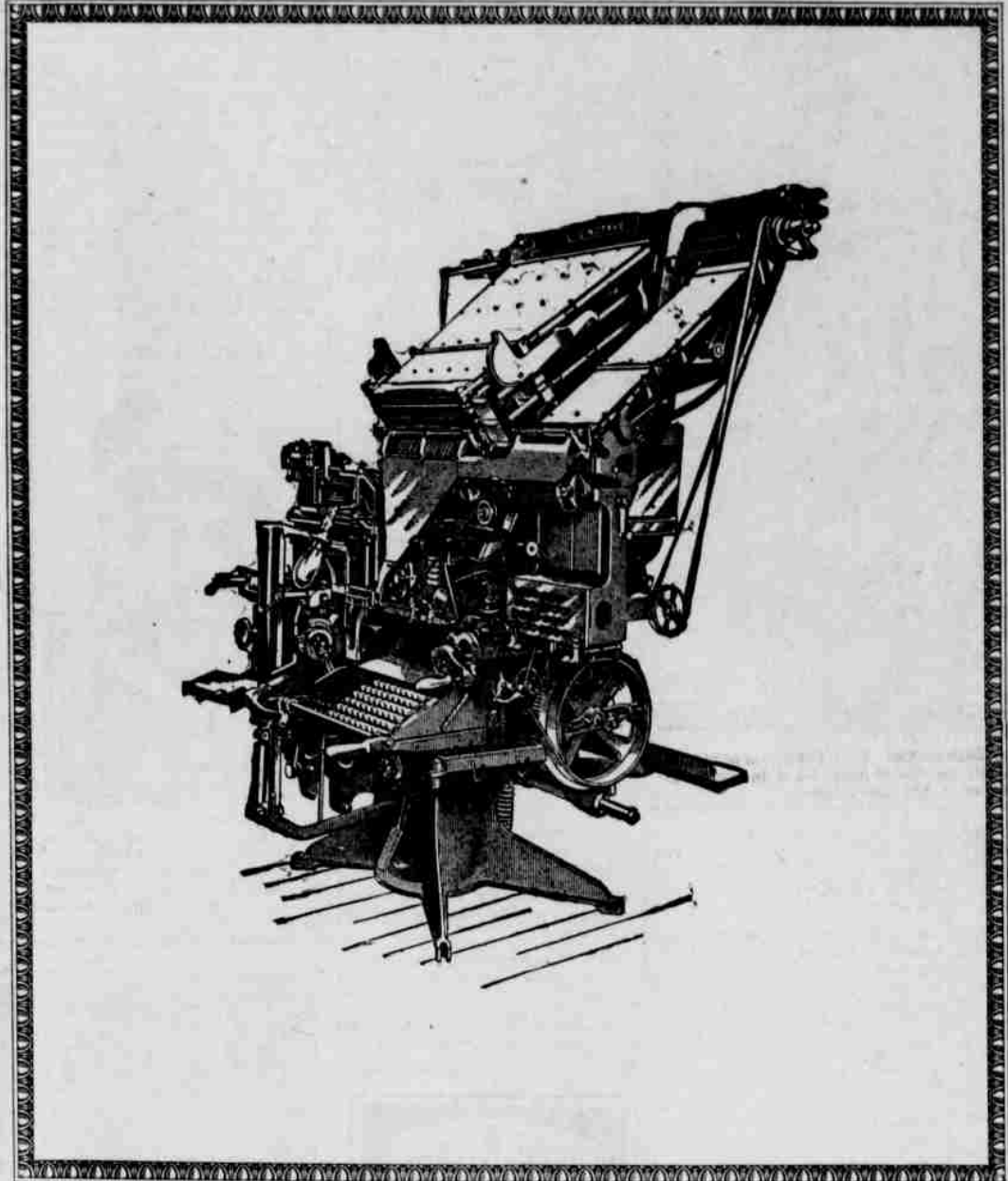


Senator Samuel Ralston of Indiana, who has been selected by "Boss" Tom Taggart as the Democratic Presidential nominee, if he can prevail upon "Bosses" Charles Murphy of New York, and William Brennan of Chicago to hand over New York and Illinois delegations. Coalition of these three delegations would prevent the nomination of any other candidate so long as the two-third rule is in effect.

Miss Roxie Stinson



Former wife of the late Jess Smith, one of the principal witnesses in the Senate Committee investigation of Atty-Gen. Daugherty administration of the Dept. of Justice.



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