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The Court Martial of Wanganui Ranch.

Written Especially for the Western Home Monthly by Margaret Fowler.



WHEN Bob Steele came to Wanganui ranch in Southern Alberta, he knew as much about cow punching as a Texas steer knows about the mechanism of a cream separator. But six months in the very thick of it to a man who has got it in him, will make, as it made of Bob, one of the best cattle trappers in Canada.

Bob was a clean sport with a heart like a well warmed flannel for the fellow in any condition of need or difficulty who played the straight game. And he was the last man to back out of any cooperative scheme, whether of business import or sheer devilment, in which the "bunch" were expected to move by acclamation.

Besides Steele and the humble historian, "the bunch" consisted of Jimmy Harrison, (English born but bred in Iowa state), the brothers Bob and Harry Withers from Ayrshire, Scotland, and Regie Dickson, with a s-s-slight st-t-tutter, from the world's great metropolis, London town.

Steele was a six foot Irishman, born in County Wicklow but like so many of his countrymen he took the wandering fever. At an early age, visited the Argentine, then a couple of years on an Australian sheep ranch, about the same time as a stevedore on the wharves of Dunedin, New Zealand, finally finding his way by the merest accident to where he was now located.

"I'll be hanged if ever I trust a woman again," thundered the immortal Bob, and the great bulk of inflammatory Irish quivered with pent up indignation that even his unflinching vocabulary failed to put into language.

"I'd have banked on that girl against the advice of an arch-angel. She floated into the camp like a seraph, with a voice like a nightingale but it's a sarphint she is, a deceiver, cuss her!"

"Hold hard, Steele, old man; keep your wool on. What in the name of heaven has happened? Who is the 'sarphint' of a woman that you were fool enough to take for a seraph? Surely at your time of life and with your experience of the sex, you ought to know a buck-jumper from a—"

"O go and boil yourself, Harrison; if it hadn't been for you I'd never have known the minx; and to cap it all, you go and bring along that swell military chap who has grabbed her. But I don't blame him. No, I'm a sportsman—I don't blame him. Fair do,—he got home before me; the best man has won, so that's all that's to it. But there! If it had been anything but that girl—I know I never 'popped' to her; but if a beggar ever tried to make a woman understand that he loved her, by jingo, I've done everything short of gittin' down on all fours to that—I was going to say 'woman,' but it's a 'snake in the grass' that she is."

"As I said before, Steele," quietly persisted Jimmy Harrison, knocking out the embers of his last pipeful on the stove-head, "who is the varmint of a woman you want to get at?"

"Git at," roared Steele, as he clenched his fists and glared like a whipped lion into the face of his tormentor. "Git at, did you say? I want to get away from her as far as I can, and if she is to hang around the ranch another twenty-four hours, I'm off to where I came from. O you know—"

"Pardon me," meekly interrupted Jimmy, "there are six likely women neighbors whom I have the privilege of reckoning among the lady friends of the camp, and I want to know which of them is the snake in the grass."

Jimmy Harrison was the smallest of the five cow-punchers whose names appeared on the recently taken census papers as the "inhabitants" of Wanganui Ranch. He was nevertheless,

morally, the strong man of the sextet, and held the rest of us in the palm of his hand; so that on practically all occasions, the remaining five quietly acquiesced in everything that Jimmy laid down for the conduct of the camp.

Wanganui Ranch held in its arms one of the finest bits of Southern Alberta, and the boys who ran it were on the eve of what they had determined to make one of the greatest "shindies" that the Province had ever witnessed, when the incident of Bob Steele and his girl unfortunately cropped up and spelt blue ruin for the fun of all connected with that little cowboy settlement.

The circumstances were these: Wanganui Ranch had prospered, thanks to the skill and steadiness of its little crowd, and the dollars had run up to a figure that nearly doubled the results of any previous year. The "Annual Meeting" had been held and the boys all but embraced each other and resolved to "let themselves go" to the last limit permitted by the prescriptions of Jimmy Harrison.

For some days the long barrack-looking but thoroughly weather-tight shack that was home to them all had been given over to the "decorators," viz: Harrison and Regie Dickson.

The great event of the season had been originally planned to come off at Christmas, but owing to severe sickness in two of the prominent families of the neighborhood, it was postponed until in March and the interval had not been early spring. It was now the first week wasted. The crisp winter air still held the snow mantle intact and from the tempestuous character of the two preceding months it was believed that the worst was over and that weather conditions would be no impediment to a record assembly.

The last few weeks had been a great time of neighborly intercourse, and long trips in all sorts of conveyances had been made chiefly by Steele and Harry Withers, who had gone far afield to invite every human creature within a radius of twenty miles to take part in the great affair that was in preparation, and had been finally stated to come off on the night of the tenth.

Let it be known that this was no barren outpost of civilization tenanted by a few forlorn men-folk, "batching" it together week in, week out all the year round without a sight of the softening influence of a woman's face.

On the contrary, the immediate neighborhood fairly teemed with eligible daughters of the best blood in Canada, but the country was young, and it was only recently that they had begun to draw together in appreciable numbers. There were the Armstrong girls Kate and Sally Henderson from West Creek, about five miles off, and the three of them—from Stillwater, and nearest neighbors of the Wanganui boys.

Kate and Sally were the belles of the country side. It was difficult to say which of them carried the palm and they were as different from each other in all essential points as two dispositions could be. Kate was sedate and while Sally was the most volatile piece the most undemonstrative of her sex, of goods that ever reached the years of womanhood.

The Wanganui Ranch "sing-songs" were "the talk of the town." "The town" consisted of just 47 people, but those forty-seven birds of freedom knew as much of the outside world as most citizens do. They got their news with astonishing regularity, and what they read they assimilated—which is more than can be said of the average city crowd.

They had lived on terms of unqualified friendliness that had never been invaded by a single note of discord, till on the eve of the party, when it seemed as if nothing short of tragedy was in the air.

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