

BOYS AND GIRLS

Prairie Neighbors

(Presbyterian Banner.)

Patty Tone stood with her back to the door-casing stirring something in the big yellow bowl which she held against her side and listening to what was being said by her father and the man who had just come up on horseback. It was early morning, so early that the ranch-house still cast its shadow sharply with some suggestion of coolness in it, though the night had been hot and the sun afloat like a ruddy bubble just over the rim of the horizon foretold a scorching day. Ol' Man Tone sat with his chair tipped back against the wall, placid in a thin haze of tobacco smoke. His gaze had strayed from under the low, vine-fringed eaves of the veranda to a generous rectangle of fresh-springing corn and rested there with the quiet self-satisfaction of one who has sowed with prudence and is not afraid for his harvest. The old dog at his side that had started up at the first sound of hoofs, now sunk heavily to the floor again and lay wrinkling his yellow-tufted brows ungraciously at the early comer.

The man on horseback was a cowboy. He had turned half round in his saddle and wrapped his left arm about one of the veranda posts. His vicious-eyed little broncho fretted and danced under tension of reins in such wise as set the conchas jingling at the man's spurs and tossed the tarnished tassels of his weather-worn sombrero. But the face that showed under the grey brim was such as none need fear to trust for all its half-savage leanness and brownness, its criss-crosses of lines and scars, for Posy Jim had been young as far back as the days when Abilene was the very edge of the world for the Texas cowboy and Chisholm was a name to conjure by.

'Crops air a-lookin' right peart this spring, Jim,' the ranchman ventured, and Jim, noting the bent of his mind as well as of his gaze, answered dryly with that queer, slow smile of his:

'Some air, but I notice it makes a heap o' diffrence who put 'em in. I rode by a piece o' corn yesdy,' he went on, 'ez didn't look partic'ly forard; sort o' blarsted like ez if a norther'd been a-blowin' awn it. I hev allus heard ez how a Dutchman cyan live awn anything, but I don't consider ez corn-stalks an' no great plenty o' them air a-goin' fo' to'ds satisfyin' his stummick, not to mention fillin' it. It wouldn't be o' so much count either if it ware only his stummick, but thar's his woman an' the younguns to be took into the reck'ning. 'Pears to me like somebody ez is right handy at the business orter put a check-strap awn him.'

'You mean Schloss?' queried the ranchman, his interest waking up.

'Thet's the critter, an' ez mean a maverick ez you'll find in a week's round-up. I stopped thar fo' a bite yes'dy. I'd been in the saddle since sun-up an' ware thet empty inside me I could 'a eat a coyote an' say nothin' ez to the cookin'. The Dutchman wan't home but his wife was—natchly. She brought out some pone that looked like it had been baked a week an' a piece o' bacon ez wouldn't 'a greased the skillet 'twas fried in. Thet was all she had besides a couple o' fistfuls o'

meal, but I was welcome to it. Her man had gone fo' grub but likely it would be a day or so afoah he'd git back. Wa'al, I was hungry, but I reckon I'd 'a had to been a right smart bit hungrier to take them vittels out'n the mouths o' thet woman an' her younguns ez looked like they needed it a powerful sight worsen I did.' Jim pushed back his sombrero and swept a long lock of iron-grey hair out of his eyes. 'Some mo'nin' thet Dutchman 'll wake up to find a passel o' motherless young-uns awn his hands. I hain't much used to the signs when folks takes their time fo' ryin', but I consider ez how too much prairie is as bad fo' some critters ez cold lead is fo' others.'

Patty took in every word. After Jim had ridden away and she had gone in to put her cake a-baking behind the bulging oven doors of the little old cook stove, the uneasy remembrance of what she had heard went with her and would not be got rid of. It had set something within her to aching as once a tooth of hers had ached, dully and continuously, until her father slipped a bit of string about it and brought it out of her mouth at one jerk. He had called the string a lariat and the tooth an ugly white steer that couldn't be made to mind in any other way, and had laughed so much that ever after Patty held to the idea that tooth-pulling was rather nice since it cured the pain and occasioned such playfulness on her sober father's part. But a troublesome conscience is not to be plucked out like a troublesome tooth and Patty's conscience bade fair to become very troublesome, indeed, by reason of what Jim had said and some private remembrances of her own.

She recalled Schloss perfectly from the two or three times he had been at the ranch to see her father. The first time he came on horseback and carried off a bag of seed-barley across the highommel of his old Mexican saddle. The next time he drove an outfit and took away a load of corn for the February planting. That was last fall.

'You come see mine wife,' he said to Patty in his difficult English, 'she be very lonesome—she haf Heimweh so very bad already, ach, I know not what to do mit her. You come and make her to laugh, jah?' And Patty had promised. It is so easy to promise. She was just a girl with many daily cares of her own the possibility of which had overtaken her when her mother went to live on the other side of the blue sky and left her to be her father's only helper. And though she had really meant to keep her word, day after day of her full life had risen and set until all the grey winter was gone and spring was again on the prairie. It was not far she had to go, only a matter of some twenty straight miles and her pony was fleet as she could wish. But Patty was shy as a child of new acquaintances; her father and her pony and the old dog had been her only companions and for playmates she had claimed the free blowing winds of the prairie, all its scant humble life of birds and rabbits and insects, and the clouds that came stealing up timidly over the horizon, white for most of the year as the bleached sails of ships set adrift on the wonderful, unimpeded blue. Her mother had died too long ago for her to

be able to form anything like a definite personality from the few dim, childish memories which were all that was left to her of that sweetest, tenderest presence in her life, and she had never known any other woman well. If Schloss had brought his wife to see her Patty would have made her right welcome and baked a loaf of her best egg-bread in her honor, but the idea of being left to make the first advances herself filled her with shrinking dread. Now, however, the dread gave way to sudden, keen pity. That poor, heart-sick woman, dying maybe, alone, and misunderstood! Patty sat by the stove, forgetting her cake and letting her face get pink and moist from the heat, until the smell of burning molasses aroused her. Then she jerked open the oven door and pulled out the flat, over-done mass, tipping the tin this way and that while a curious expression gathered in her eyes.

'Flat's if it had been smashed twixt two bo'ds,' she said, disgustedly. 'I reckon I clean fo'got the salratus. An' Paw jes' dotes own molasses stirred-up.' The thought of her father set other thoughts into activity. She stuffed the cake into a dark corner of the cupboard, slammed the door upon it and went to find her father. He was still on the veranda, drooping over a broken strap he held in his hands and pondering the mending of it while he whistled gently through his shut teeth.

'Paw,' said Patty, 'I recyon yo' an' Murphy 'll hev to eat dinner alone today. I'm a-goin' to see thet Schloss woman ez Jim ware a-tellin' us of.'

Her father stopped his whistling. The old dog rolled a bleared eye up at her as his name was mentioned and thumped his tail twice upon the floor courteously. Patty rubbed his head with the toe of her stout little shoe.

'Yo' do' cyare, Paw?' She had made her voice very sweet with coaxing. 'There's plenty o' pone an' Chileconarni an' molasses-butter. I baked a cake fo' yo', too, but it turned out to be jus' no account. I f'got to put in the risin' stuff. Yo' cyan give it to Murphy if yo' want an' he'll eat it. Murphy assented expressively. 'I reckon I'll start right away,' she ended.

'Wa'al, now, honey, what give yo' thet notion? It's bound to be powerful close to-day,' her father drawled, demurringly. 'Pears like to me yo'd a heap better stay under cover. Yo'll git all het up, besides givin' Lightning a passel o' saddle-gauls.' He squinted at the sky. 'I don't know, but seems like I smell cyclone.'

Patty laughed.

'No, yo' don't. You're only afeared y'll git lonesome.' She ruffled his hair into his eyes by way of caress and ran round the house toward the corral. A soft whinny disturbed the silence as she let fall the heavy wooden bar that secured the door, but she had to put her fingers in her mouth and blow upon them twice before the brown pony that stood dreaming at the farther side of the stockade would venture near her.

'Yo're gittin' mighty contrary, Lightning,' Patty said. 'Yo' need a good tannin', thet's what yo' do.' She wound her fingers in his plentiful brown mane and led him to the house. He waited meekly for her to get saddle and bridle from their