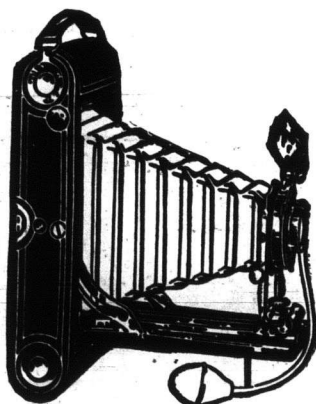


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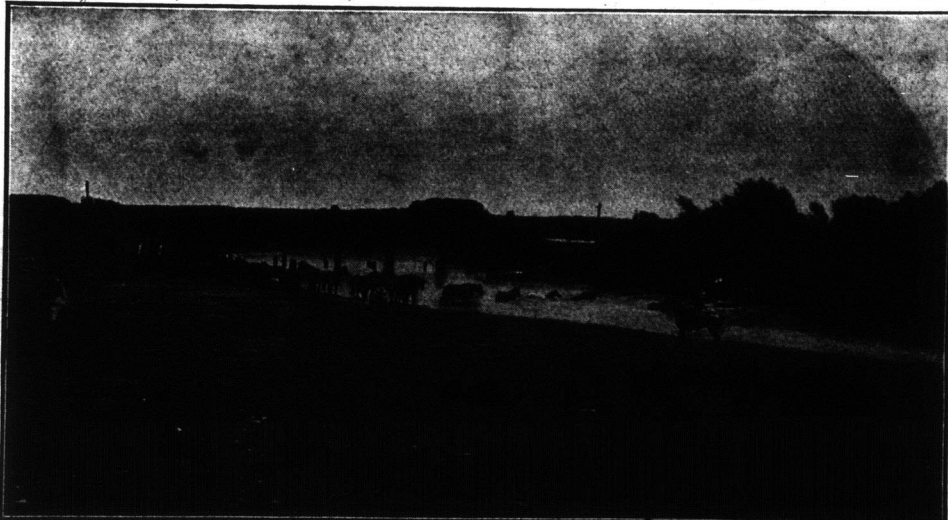
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"Jack always gave us the latest news from the scene of operations, when he seen we was all fer helpin' him, an' from what he said there was no tellin' which was the favoured one. One time he would come home lookin' quite down in the neck, an' another quite happy an' cheerful; they just about evened up. At last the two rivals got to dividin' up the week, Jack takin' three days an' Smithers three; an' Jack went visitin' too on alternate Sunday. Things worked a little better for a while, until I guess one of them calculated wrong an' turned up on the other feller's Sunday. They hadn't seen each other for a considerable time, an' had a good deal to say, mainly personal, which they put off until leaving. Anyhow, Jack turned up at the ranch with a black eye an' various bloody places on his face, which made us feel kinder disconsolate. But we cheered up when he told us how he had doctored Smithers' beauty-spots an' we set to work to fix up his eye. That week Bessie got a rest, none of them bein' in a fit state to visit, but time mustered kinder slow after havin' a cow-puncher on her hands every night for a while.

"Next Sunday, Jack's face bein' healed up pretty good, he begins to collect his joy-rags, an' we was surprised to see young Roy Gates, baby-face, sprucin' up, too, an' he tells us he is goin' along with

an' the jam streakin' down his face an' playin' hide-an'-seek in his whiskers. The tart was hot all right an' must er hurt some; anyhow he rushed outside an' stuck his head in the rain barrel. Even Bessie couldn't help laughin', an' though young baby-face said how sorry he was, he found it advisable to slip out quietly an' come home alone to the ranch.

"As the stage fellers say, exit the friend-an'-protector, an' I guessed he must er passed the word on 'cause no one else looked for nomination. Smithers was sure in for a time then. One time his saddle would turn up missing, or minus a cinch, or he would find that some one had sat on his stiff setson. He sure had one darned old time, an' bein' all alone it was kinder hard to keep track of things. But he had grit, that feller had, an' things began to come his way. Somehow girls always stick to the fellers that's under. We sized this up pretty soon, an' seen that the best thing we cud do was to put Jack in 'statue quo,' as the lawyer guys have it. So one day we soused him in the creek, an' with eyes closed an' breathin' like he was three sheets in the wind we takes him to the kitchen an' tells Bessie how he had tried to save a little frog from a non-vegetarian musk-rat. She sets up a great racket, an' gets somethin' in a flask, whick Jack refuses, mumblin' somethin' about bein' on the water-wagon



A pretty view on the farm of D. A. McAskill, Gadstone, Man. Horses fording the River

Jack to look after him. We sure laughed some, but Jack said it was all right, an' I guess most of us offered pretty well all we owned to change places with him, but there was nothin' doin'.

"Well, sir, young Gates was more of a diplomat or a secretary of war than an open-air scrapper, and from that day the most curious things uster happen at the Horseshoe Ranch; you'd er thought the place was haunted. Bob Smithers had struck the friend-an'-protector idea, too, an' had a big-whiskered feller 'long with him, that cud er swallowed young Gates an' his drug-store complexion, at a mouthful.

"At night when they come to leave, Smithers an' his pal found that their horses which they had tied to the fence had pulled out, an' young Gates havin' been outside helpin' old man Good in the barn, came in for a few choice remarks, but Bessie bein' round kinder held them down. Roy remarked as how, the moon bein' up, it was such a nice night for a walk, an' then the friend-an'-protector feller exploded an' Bessie went inside to allow him to relieve his feelin's.

"Only once more did he return to the ranch with Smithers, an' a little incident in the afternoon deterred him from any more visitin'. The four of them were havin' supper with old man Good an' Bessie; an' young Gates, like the handy kid he was, helped round with the dishes. Bessie asked him to go to the kitchen an' get a jam tart that was warmin' in the oven (Smithers, I might say, was partic'lar partial to jam tart), telling him to be very careful 'cause it's temperature was apt to be pretty high. Soon he came runnin' back, makin' the awfulest face an' lettin' on that tart was the hottest thing he ever struck. Lookin' at it now, it's kinder curious, but it was just when he was passing that tart to Bessie's pa, over the friend-an'-protector's head, that he come to the conclusion he couldn't hang on any longer, an' he dropped it. By a strange accident it must er turned, an' landed jam side down on the poll of Smithers' pal. He jumped from the chair like an outlaw with a spur in his ribs, fractured pie-crust stickin' all over him,

since his heart became afflicted. All the time Bessie was callin' him all the spoony names she ever read of, an' things was lookin' fine until that darned Smithers got nosin' round an' discovered that Jack's hair wasn't wet at all. That was a set back all right, an' we slunk out mighty mean, an' Jack dursen't go back for a few days.

"Things was gettin' to a crisis, as you might say. This courtin' was the best thing that had struck the ranch for a long time an' we uster lie awake at night thinkin' out plans for the campaign. None of them was much good an' some of them would make you chuckle. Jim Jackson, who got so all-fired dramatic after he seen a real theatre play onct, even proposed settin' fire to the house, 'cause Jack cud have er chance of rescuin' Bessie. Poor Jim's drivin' tent-pegs fer a circus now.

"It was Roy Gates, after all, that thought of the A1 plan that did the trick, an' an agent for Jimson's Pills what happened to hit the ranch about that time helped us out considerable. He was pretty well down on his luck an' his grub fer a couple of days, an' a five spot, closed the deal.

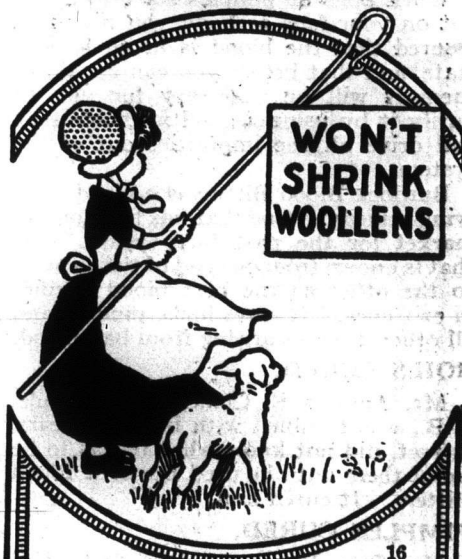
"Next Sunday he goes over to the Horseshoe ranch with Jack an' Roy, an' at dinner they gets to talkin' about his travels. Seemin'ly that feller's bin all over this little world exceptin' China an' a few cannibal islands. Then like all those travellin' fellers do, he gets talkin' about the prettiest place he'd seen. I disremember just where it was: guess it was some place in Zululand where he cured the king of appendicitis and got made some high panjanorum or other—he'd got made lots of things accordin' to his account. Anyway he describes this place an' gets Smithers goin', and he blurts out:

"'I'll bet it can't beat Lucas County, Iowa.'

"The agent looks up an' he says: "Well, I dunno. But that's some pretty spot all right. I know it well. That your home, sweet home?"

"Smithers signifies as how that strip of country was responsible for him, an'!

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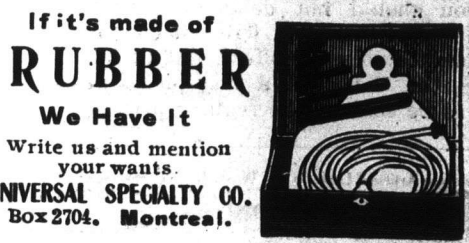
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