

Going Some

Rex Beach

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GOING SOME

A ROMANCE OF STRENUOUS AFFECTION

BY

REX BEACH

SUGGESTED BY THE PLAY BY REX BEACH AND PAUL ARMSTRONG

ILLUSTRATED BY MARK FENDERSON

CHAPTER I

Four cowboys inclined their bodies over the barbed-wire fence which marked the dividing-line between the Centipede Ranch and their own, staring mournfully into a summer night such as only the far southwestern country knows. Big yellow stars hung thick and low-so low that it seemed they might almost be plucked by an upstretched hand-and a silent air blew across thousands of open miles of land lying crisp and fragrant under the velvet dark.

And as the four inclined their bodies, they inclined also their ears, after the strained manner of listeners who feel anguish at what they hear. A voice, shrill and human, pierced the night like a needle, then, with a wail of a tortured soul, died away amid discordant raspings: the voice of a phonograph. It was their own, or had been until one overconfident day, when the Flying Heart Ranch had risked it as a wager in a foot-race with the neighboring Centipede, and their own man had been too slow. As it had been their pride, it remained their disgrace. Dearly had they loved, and dearly lost it. It meant something that looked like honor, and though there were ten thousand thousand phonographs, in all the world there was not one that could take its place.

The sound ceased, there was an approving distant murmur of men's voices, and then the song began:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
Lift up your voice and sing--"

Higher and higher the voice mounted until it reached again its first thin, ear-splitting pitch.

"Still Bill" Stover stirred uneasily in the darkness. "Why 'n 'ell don't they keep her wound up?" he complained. "Gallagher's got the soul of a wart-hog. It's criminal the way he massacres that hymn."

From a rod farther down the wire fence Willie answered him, in a boy's falsetto:

"I wonder if he does it to spite me?"

"He don't know you're here," said Stover.

The other came out of the gloom, a little stoop-shouldered man with spectacles.

"I ain't no ways sure," he piped, peering up at his lanky foreman. "Why do you reckon he allus lets Mrs. Melby peter out on my favorite record? He done the same thing last night. It looks like an insult."

"It's nothing but ignorance," Stover replied. "He don't want no trouble with you. None of 'em do."

"I'd like to know for certain." The small man seemed torn by doubt. "If I only knew he done it a-purpose, I'd git him. I bet I could do it from here."

Stover's voice was gruff as he commanded: "Forget it! Ain't it bad enough for us fellers to hang around like this every night without advertising our idiocy by a gun-play?"

"They ain't got no right to that phonograph," Willie averred, darkly.

"Oh yes, they have; they won it fair and square."

"Fair and square! Do you mean to say Humpy Joe run that foot-race on the square?"

"I never said nothin' like that whatever. I mean we bet it, and we lost it. Listen! There goes Carara's piece!"

Out past the corral floated the announcement in a man's metallic syllables:

"_The Baggage Coach Ahead,_ as sung by Helena Mora for the Echo Phonograph, of New York and Pa-a-aris!"

From the dusk to the right of the two listeners now issued soft Spanish phrases.

"_Madre de Dios!_ 'The Baggage Car in Front!' T'adora Mora! God bless 'er!"

During the rendition of this affecting ballad the two cow-men remained draped uncomfortably over the barbed-wire barrier, lost in rapturous enjoyment. When the last note had died away, Stover roused himself reluctantly.

"It's time we was turnin' in." He called softly, "Hey, Mex!"

"_Si, Senor!_"

"Come on, you and Cloudy. _Vamos!_ It's ten o'clock."

He turned his back on the Centipede Ranch that housed the treasure, and in company with Willie, made his way to the ponies. Two other figures joined them, one humming in a musical baritone the strains of the song just ended.

"Cut that out, Mex! They'll hear us," Stover cautioned.

"_Caramba!_ This t'ing is brek my 'eart," said the Mexican, sadly. "It seem like the Senorita Mora is sing that song to me. Mebbe she knows I'm set out 'ere on cactus an' listen to her. Ah, I love that Senorita ver' much."

The little man with the glasses began to swear in his high falsetto. His ear had caught the phonograph operator in another musical mistake.

"That horn-toad let Mrs. Melby die again to-night," said he. "It's sure comin' to a runnacaboo between him and me. If somebody don't kill him pretty soon, he'll wear out that machine before we git it back."

"Humph! It don't look like we'd ever get it back," said Stover.

One of the four sighed audibly, then vaulting into his saddle, went loping away without waiting for his companions.

"Cloudy's sore because they didn't play _Navajo,"_ said Willie. "Well, I don't blame 'em none for omittin' that war-dance. It ain't got the class of them other pieces. While it's devised to suit the intellect of an Injun, perhaps; it ain't in the runnin' with _The Holy City,_ which tune is the sweetest and sacrest ever sung."

Carara paused with a hand upon the neck of his cayuse.

"Eet is not so fine as _The Baggage Car in Front,"_ he declared.

"It's got it beat a mile!" Willie flashed back, harshly.

"Here you!" exclaimed Stover, "no arguments. We all have our favorites, and it ain't up to no individual to force his likes and dislikes down no other feller's throat." The two men he addressed mounted their broncos stiffly.

"I repeat," said Willie: "_The Holy City_, as sung by Mrs. Melby, is the swellest tune that ever hit these parts."

Carara muttered something in Spanish which the others could not understand.

"They're all fine pieces," Stover observed, placatingly, when fairly out of hearing of the ranch-houses. "You boys have each got your preference. Cloudy, bein' an Injun, has got his, and I rise to state that I like that monologue, _Silas on Fifth Avenoo_, better than all of 'em, which ain't nothin' ag'inst my judgment nor yours. When Silas says, 'The girl opened her valise, took our her purse, closed her valise, opened her purse, took out a dime, closed her purse, opened her valise, put in her purse, closed her valise, give the dime to the conductor, got a nickel in change, then opened her valise, took out her purse, closed her valise-' Stover began to rock in his saddle, then burst into a loud guffaw, followed by his companions. "Gosh! That's awful funny!"

"_Si! si!_" acknowledged Carara, his white teeth showing through the gloom.

"An' it's just like a fool woman," tittered Willie. "That's sure one ridic'ulous line of talk."

"Still Bill" wiped his eyes with the back of a bony hand. "I know that hull monologue by heart, but I can't never get past that spot to save my soul. Right there I bog down, complete." Again he burst into wild laughter, followed by his companions. "I don't see how folks can be so dam' funny!" he gasped.

"It's natural to 'em, like warts," said Willie; "they're born with it, the same as I was born to shoot straight with either hand, and the same as the Mex was born to throw a rope. He don't know how he does it, and neither do I. Some folks can say funny things, some can sing, like Missus Melby; some can run foot-races, like that Centipede cook--" Carara breathed an eloquent Mexican oath.

"Do you reckon he fixed that race with Humpy Joe?" inquired Stover.

"Name's Skinner," Willie observed. "It sure sounds bad."

"I'm sorry Humpy left us so sudden," said Still Bill. "We'd ought to have questioned him. If we only had proof that the race was crooked--"

"You can so gamble it was crooked," the little man averred. "Them Centipede fellers never done nothin' on the square. They got Humpy Joe, and fixed it for him to lose so they could get that talkin'-machine. That's why he pulled out."

"I'd hate to think it," said the foreman, gloomily; then after a moment, during which the only sound was that of the muffled hoofbeats: "Well, what we goin' to do about it?"

"Humph! I've laid awake nights figurin' that out. I reckon we'll just have to git another foot-racer and beat Skinner. He ain't the fastest in the world."

"That takes coin. We're broke."

"Mebbe Mr. Chapin would lend a helpin' hand."

"No chance!" said Stover, grimly. "He's sore on foot-racin'. Says it disturbs us and upsets our equalubrium."

Carara fetched a deep sigh.

"It's ver' bad t'ing, Senor. I don' feel no worse w'en my gran'mother die."

The three men loped onward through the darkness, weighted heavily with disappointment.

Affairs at the Flying Heart Ranch were not all to Jack Chapin's liking. Ever since that memorable foot-race, more than a month

before, a gloom had brooded over the place which even the presence of two Smith College girls, not to mention that of Mr. Fresno, was unable to dissipate. The cowboys moped about like melancholy shades, and neglected their work to discuss the disgrace that had fallen upon them. It was a task to get any of them out in the morning, several had quit, the rest were quarrelling among themselves, and the bunk-house had already been the scene of more than one encounter, altogether too sanguinary to have originated from such a trivial cause as a foot-race. It was not exactly an auspicious atmosphere in which to entertain a houseful of college boys and girls, all unversed in the ways of the West.

The master of the ranch sought his sister Jean, to tell her frankly what was on his mind.

"See here, Sis," he began, "I don't want to cast a cloud over your little house-party, but I think you'd better keep your friends away from my men."

"Why, what is the matter?" she demanded.

"Things are at a pretty high tension just now, and the boys have had two or three rows among themselves. Yesterday Fresno tried to 'kid' Willie about _The Holy City;_ said it was written as a coon song, and wasn't sung in good society. If he hadn't been a guest, I guess Willie would have murdered him."

"Oh, Jack! You won't let Willie murder anybody, not even Berkeley, while the people are here, will you?" coaxed Miss Chapin, anxiously.

"What made you invite Berkeley Fresno, anyhow?" was the rejoinder. "This is no gilded novelty to him. He is a Western man."

Miss Chapin numbered her reasons sagely. "In the first place--Helen. Then there had to be enough men to go around. Last and best, he is the most adorable man I ever saw at a house-party. He's an angel at breakfast, sings perfectly beautifully--you know he was on the Stanford Glee Club--"

"Humph!" Jack was unimpressed. "If you roped him for Helen Blake to brand, why have you sent for Wally Speed?"

"Well, you see, Berkeley and Helen didn't quite hit it off, and Mr. Speed is--a friend of Culver's." Miss Chapin blushed prettily.

"Oh, I see! I thought myself that this affair had something to do with you and Culver Covington, but I didn't know it had lapsed into a sort of matrimonial round-up. Suppose Miss Blake shouldn't care for Speed after he gets here?"

"Oh, but she will! That's where Berkeley Fresno comes in. When two men begin to fight for her, she'll have to begin to form a preference, and I'm sure it will be for Wally Speed. Don't you see?"

The brother looked at his sister shrewdly. "It seems to me you learned a lot at Smith."

Jean tossed her head. "How absurd! That sort of knowledge is perfectly natural for a girl to have." Then she teased: "But you admit that my selection of a chaperon was excellent, don't you, Jack?"

"Mrs. Keap and I are the best of friends," Jack averred, with supreme dignity. "I'm not in the market, and a man doesn't marry a widow, anyhow. It's too old and experienced a beginning."

"Nonsense! Roberta Keap is only twenty-three. Why, she hardly knew her husband, even! It was one of those sudden, impulsive affairs that would overwhelm any girl who hadn't seen a man for four years. And then he enlisted in the Spanish War, and was killed."

"Considerate chap!"

"Roberta, you know, is my best friend, after Helen. Do be nice to her, Jack." Miss Chapin sighed. "It is too bad the others couldn't come."

"Yes, a small house-party has its disadvantages. By-the-way, what's that gold thing on your frock?"

"It's a medal. Culver sent it to me."

"Another?"

"Yes, he won the intercollegiate championship again." Miss Chapin proudly extended the emblem on its ribbon.

"I wish to goodness Covington had been here to take Humpy Joe's place," said the young cattle-man as he turned it over. "The boys are just brokenhearted over losing that phonograph."

"I'll get him to run and win it back," Jean offered, easily. Her brother laughed. "Take my advice, Sis, and don't let Culver mix up in this game! The stakes are too high. I think that Centipede cook is a professional runner, myself, and if our boys were beaten again--well, you and mother and I would have to move out of New Mexico, that's all. No, we'd better let the memory of that defeat die out as quickly as possible. You warn Fresno not to joke about it any more, and I'll take Mrs. Keap off your hands. She may be a widow, she may even be the chaperon, but I'll do it; I will do it," promised Jack--"for my sister's sake."

CHAPTER II

Helen Blake was undeniably bored. The sultry afternoon was very long--longer even than Berkeley Fresno's autobiography, and quite as dry. It was too hot and dusty to ride, so she took refuge in the latest "best seller," and sought out a hammock on the vine-shaded gallery, where Jean Chapin was writing letters, while the

disconsolate Fresno, banished, wandered at large, vaguely injured at her lack of appreciation.

Absent-mindedly, the girls dipped into the box of bonbons between them. Jean finished her correspondence and essayed conversation, but her companion's blond head was bowed over the book in her lap, and the effort met with no response. Lulled by the somniferous droning of insects and lazy echoes from afar, Miss Chapin was on the verge of slumber, when she saw her guest rapidly turn the last pages of her novel, then, with a chocolate between her teeth, read wide-eyed to the finish. Miss Blake closed the book reluctantly, uncurled slowly, then stared out through the dancing heat-waves, her blue eyes shadowed with romance.

"Did she marry him?" queried Jean.

"No, no!" Helen Blake sighed, blissfully. "It was infinitely finer. She killed herself."

"I like to see them get married."

"Naturally. You are at that stage. But I think suicide is more glorious, in many cases."

Miss Chapin yawned openly. "Speaking of suicides, isn't this ranch the deadest place?"

"Oh, I don't think so at all." Miss Blake picked her way fastidiously through the bonbons, nibbling tentatively at several before making her choice. "Oh yes, you do, and you needn't be polite just because you're a guest." "Well, then, to be as truthful as a boarder, it is a little dull. Not for our chaperon, though. The time doesn't seem to drag on her hands. Jack certainly is making it pleasant for her."

"If you call taking her out to watch a lot of bellowing calves get branded, entertainment," Miss Chapin sighed.

"I wonder what makes widows so fascinating?" observed the youthful Miss Blake.

"I hope I never find out." Jean clutched nervously at the gold medal on her dress. "Wouldn't that be dreadful!"

"My dear, Culver seems perfectly healthy. Why worry?"

"I--I wish he were here."

Miss Blake leaned forward and read the inscription on her companion's medal. "Oh, isn't it heavy!" feeling it reverently.

"Pure gold, like himself! You should have seen him when he won it. Why, at the finish of that race all the men but Culver were making the most horrible faces. They were simply dead."

Miss Blake's hands were clasped in her lap. "They all make faces," said she. "Have you told Roberta about your engagement?"

"No, she doesn't dream of it, and I don't want her to know. I'm so afraid she'll think, now that mother has gone, that I asked her here just as a chaperon. Perhaps I'll tell her when Culver comes."

"I adore athletes. I wouldn't give a cent for a man who wasn't athletic."

"Does Mr. Speed go in for that sort of thing?"

"Rather! The day we met at the Yale games he had medals all over him, and that night at the dance he used the most wonderful athletic language--we could scarcely understand him. Mr. Covington must have told you all about him; they are chums, you know."

Miss Chapin furrowed her brows meditatively.

"I have heard Culver speak of him, but never as an athlete. Have you and Mr. Speed settled things between you, Helen? I mean, has he--said anything?"

Miss Blake flushed.

"Not exactly." She adjusted a cushion to cover her confusion, then leaned back complacently. "But he has stuttered dangerously several times."

A musical tinkle of silver spurs sounded in the distance, and around the corner of the cook-house opposite came Carara, the Mexican, his wide, spangled sombrero tipped rakishly over one ear, a corn-husk cigarette drooping from his lips. Evidently his presence was inspired by some special motive, for he glanced sharply about, and failing to detect the two girls behind the distant screen of vines, removed his cigarette and whistled thrice, like a quail, then, leaning against the adobe wall, curled his black silken mustaches to needle-points.

"It's that romantic Spaniard!" whispered Helen. "What does he want?"

"It's his afternoon call on Mariadetta, the maid," said Jean. "They meet there twice a day, morning and afternoon."

"A lovers' tryst!" breathed Miss Blake, eagerly. "Isn't he graceful and picturesque! Can we watch them?"

"Sh-h! There she comes!"

From the opposite direction appeared a slim, swarthy Mexican girl, an Indian water-jug balanced upon her shoulders. She was clad in the straight-hanging native garment, belted in with a sash; her feet were in sandals, and she moved as silently as a shadow.

During the four days since Miss Blake's arrival at the Flying Heart Ranch she had seen Mariadetta flitting noiselessly here and there, but had never heard her speak. The pretty, expressionless face beneath its straight black hair had ever retained its wooden

stolidity, the velvety eyes had not laughed nor frowned nor sparkled. She seemed to be merely a part of this far southwestern picture; a bit of inanimate yet breathing local color. Now, however, the girl dropped her jug, and with a low cry glided to her lover, who tossed aside his cigarette and took her in his arms. From this distance their words were indistinguishable.

"How perfectly romantic," said the Eastern girl, breathlessly. "I had no idea Mariadetta could love anybody."

"She is a volcano," Jean answered.

"Why, it's like a play!"

"And it goes on all the time."

"How gentle and sweet he is! I think he is charming. He is not at all like the other cowboys, is he?"

While the two witnesses of the scene were eagerly discussing it, Joy, the Chinese cook, emerged from the kitchen bearing a bucket of water, his presence hidden from the lovers by the corner of the building. Carara languidly released his innamorata from his embrace and lounged out of sight around the building, pausing at the farther corner to waft her a graceful kiss from the ends of his fingers, as with a farewell flash of his white teeth he disappeared. Mariadetta recovered her water-jug and glided onward into the court in front of the cook-house, her face masklike, her movements deliberate as usual. Joy, spying the girl, grinned at her. She tossed her head coquettishly and her step slackened, whereupon the cook, with a sly glance around, tapped her gently on the arm, and said:

"Nice l'il gally."

"The idea!" indignantly exclaimed Miss Blake from her hammock.

But Mariadetta was not offended. Instead she smiled over her shoulder as she had smiled at her lover an instant before.

"Me like you fine. You like pie?" Joy nodded toward the door to the culinary department, as if to make free of his hospitality, at the instant that Carara, who had circled the building, came into view from the opposite side, a fresh cigarette between his lips. His languor vanished at the first glimpse of the scene, and he strode toward the white-clad Celestial, who dove through the open door like a prairie dog into its hole. Carara followed at his heels.

"It serves him right!" cried Miss Blake, rising. "I hope Mr. Carara--"

A din of falling pots and pans issued from the cook-house, mingled with shrill cries and soft Spanish imprecations; then, with one long-drawn wail, the pandemonium ceased as suddenly as it had commenced, and Carara issued forth, black with anger.

"Ha!" said he, scowling 'at Mariadetta, who had retreated, her hand upon her bosom. He exhaled a lungful of cigarette smoke

through his nostrils fiercely. "You play wit' me, eh?"

"No! no!" Mariadetta ran to him, and, seizing his arm, cooed amorously in Spanish.

"Bah! _Vamos!" _ Carara flung her from him, and stalked away.

"Well, of all the outrageous things!" said Miss Blake. "Why, she was actually flirting with that Chinaman."

"Mariadetta flirts with every man she can find," said Jean, calmly, "but she doesn't mean any harm. She'll marry Carara some time--if he doesn't kill her."

"Kill her!" Miss Blake's eyes were round. "He wouldn't do _that!_"

"Indeed, yes. He is a Mexican, and he has a terrible temper."

Miss Blake sank back into the hammock. "How perfectly dreadful! And yet-it must be heavenly to love a man who would kill you."

Miss Chapin lost herself in meditation for an instant. "Culver is almost like that when he is angry. Hello, here comes our foreman!"

Stover, a tall, gangling cattle-man with drooping grizzled mustache, came shambling up to the steps. His weather-beaten chaps were much too short for his lengthy limbs, the collar of his faded flannel shirt lacked an inch of meeting at the throat, its sleeves were shrunken until his hairy hands hung down like tassels. He was loose and spineless, his movements tempered with the slothfulness of the far Southwest. His appearance gave one the impression that ready-made garments are never long enough. He dusted his boots with his sombrero and cleared his throat.

"Evening, Miss Jean. Is Mr. Chapin around?"

"I think you'll find him down by the spring-house. Can I do anything for you?"

"Nope!" Stover sighed heavily, and got his frame gradually into motion again.

"You're not looking well, Stover. Are you ill?" inquired Miss Chapin.

"Not physical," said the foreman, checking the movement which had not yet communicated itself the entire length of his frame. "I reckon my sperret's broke, that's all."

"Haven't you recovered from that foot-race?"

"I have not, and I never will, so long as that ornery Centipede outfit has got it on us."

"Nonsense, Stover!"

"What have they done?" inquired Miss Blake, curiously. "I haven't

heard about any foot-race."

"You tell her," said the man, with another sigh, and a hopeless gesture that told the depth of his feelings.

"Why, Stover hired a fellow a couple of months ago as a horse-wrangler. The man said he was hungry, and made a good impression, so we put him on."

Here Stover slowly raised one booted foot and kicked his other calf. "The boys nicknamed him Humpy Joe--"

"Why, poor thing! Was he humpbacked?" inquired Helen.

"No," answered Still Bill. "Humpback is lucky. We called him Humpy Joe because when it came to running he could sure get up and hump himself."

"Soon after Joseph went to work," Jean continued, "the Centipede outfit hired a new cook. You know the Centipede Ranch--the one you see over yonder by the foot-hills."

"It wasn't 'soon after,' it was simuletaneous," said Stover, darkly. "We're beginnin' to see plain at last." He went on as if to air the injury that was gnawing him. "One day we hear that this grub-slinger over yonder thinks he can run, which same is as welcome to us as the smell of flowers on a spring breeze, for Humpy Joe had amused us in his idle hours by running jack-rabbits to earth--"

"Not really?" said Miss Blake.

"Well, no, but from what we see we judge he'd ought to limp a hundred yards in about nothing and three-fifths seconds, so we frame a race between him and the Centipede cook."

"As a matter of fact, there has been a feud for years between the two outfits," Jean offered.

"With tumulchous joy we bet our wages and all the loose gear we have, and in a burst of childish enthusiasm we put up--the talking-machine."

"A phonograph?"

"Yes. An Echo Phonograph," said Miss Chapin.

"Of New York and Paris," added Stover.

"Our boys won it from this very Centipede outfit at a bronco-busting tournament in Cheyenne."

"Wyoming." Stover made the location definite.

"The Centipede crowd took their defeat badly on Frontier Day, and swore to get even."

"And was Humpy Joe defeated?" asked Helen.

"Was he?" Still Bill shook his head sadly, and sighed for a third time. "It looked like he was running backward, miss."

"But really he was only beaten a foot. It was a wonderful race. I saw it," said Jean. "It made me think of the races at college."

Miss Blake puckered her brows trying to think.

"Joseph," she said. "No, I don't think I have seen him."

Stover's lips met grimly. "I don't reckon you have, miss. Since that race he has been hard to descry. He passed from view hurriedly, so to speak, headed toward the foot-hills, and leaping from crag to crag like the hardy shamrock of the Swiss Yelps."

Miss Blake giggled. "What made him hurry so?"

"Us!" Stover gazed at her solemnly. "We ain't none of us been the same since that foot-race. You see, it ain't the financial value of that Echo Phonograph, nor the 'double-cross' that hurts: it's the fact that the mangiest outfit in the Territory has trimmed us out of the one thing that stands for honor and excellence and 'scientific attainment,' as the judge said when we won it. That talking-machine meant more to us than you Eastern folks can understand, I reckon."

"If I were you I would cheer up," said Miss Blake, kindly, and with some importance. "Miss Chapin has a college friend coming this week, and he can win back your trophy."

Stover glanced up at Jean quickly.

"Is that right, Miss Chapin?"

"He can if he will," Jean asserted.

"Can he run?"

"He is the intercollegiate champion," declared that young lady, with proud dignity.

"And do you reckon he'd run for us and the Echo Phonograph of New York and Paris, if we framed a race? It's an honor!"

But Miss Chapin suddenly recalled her brother's caution of the day before, and hesitated.

"I--I don't think he would. You see, he is an amateur--he might be out of training--"

"The idea!" exclaimed Miss Blake, indignantly. "If Culver won't run, I know who will!" She closed her lips firmly, and turned to the foreman. "You tell your friends that we'll see you get your trophy back."

"Helen, I--"

"I mean it!" declared Miss Blake, with spirit.

Stover bowed loosely. "Thank you, miss. The very thought of it will cheer up the gang. Life 'round here is blacker 'n a spade flush. I think I'll tell Willie." He shambled rapidly off around the house.

"Helen dear, I don't want Culver to get mixed up in this affair," explained Miss Chapin, as soon as they were alone. "It's all utterly foolish. Jack doesn't want him to, either."

"Very well. If Culver doesn't feel that he can beat that cook running, I know who will try. Mr. Speed will do anything I ask. It's a shame the way those men have been treated."

"But Mr. Speed isn't a sprinter."

"Indeed!" Miss Blake bridled. "Perhaps Culver Covington isn't the only athlete in Yale College. I happen to know what I'm talking about. Naturally the two boys have never competed against each other, because they are friends--Mr. Speed isn't the sort to race his room-mate. Oh! he wouldn't tell me he could run if it were not true."

"I don't think he will consent when he learns the truth."

"I assure you," said Miss Blake, sweetly, "he will be delighted."

CHAPTER III

It was still early in the afternoon when Jack Chapin and the youthful chaperon found the other young people together on the gallery.

"Here's a telegram from Speed," began Jack.

"It's terribly funny," said Mrs. Keap. "That Mexican brought it to us down at the spring-house."

Miss Blake lost her bored expression, and sat up in the hammock.

"Mr. Jack Chapin," read the owner of the Flying Heart Ranch. "Dear Jack: I couldn't wait for Covington, so meet with brass-band and fireworks this afternoon. Have flowers in bloom in the little park beside the depot, and see that the daisies nod to me.--J. Wallingford Speed."

"Park, eh?" said Fresno, dryly. "Telegraph office, water-tank, and a cattle-chute. Where does this fellow think he is?"

"Here is a postscript," added Chapin.

"I have a valet who does not seem to enjoy the trip. Divide a kiss among the girls."

"Well, well! He's stingy with his kisses," observed Berkeley. "Who is this humorous party?"

"He was a Freshman at Yale the year I graduated," explained Jack.

"Too bad he never got out of that class." It was evident that Mr. Speed's levity made no impression upon the Glee Club tenor. "He hates to talk about himself, doesn't he?"

"I think he is very clever," said Miss Blake, warmly.

"How well do you know him?"

"Not as well as I'd like to."

Fresno puffed at his little pipe without remarking at this.

"Well, who wants to go and meet him?" queried Jack.

"Won't you?" asked his sister.

"I can't. I've just got word from the Eleven X that I'm wanted. The foreman is hurt. I may not be back for some time."

"Nigger Mike met me," observed Fresno, darkly.

"Then Nigger Mike for Speed," laughed the cattle-man. "I've told Carara to hitch up the pintos for me. I must be going."

"I'll see that you are safely started," said the young widow; and leaving the trio on the gallery, they entered the house.

When they had gone, Jean smiled wisely at Helen. "Roberta's such a thoughtful chaperon," she observed, whereupon Miss Blake giggled.

As for Mrs. Keap, she was inquiring of Jack with genuine solicitude:

"Do you really mean that you may be gone for some time?"

"I do. It may be a week; it may be longer; I can't tell until I get over there."

"I'm sorry." Mrs. Keap's face showed some disappointment.

"So am I."

"I shall have to look out for these young people all by myself."

"What a queer little way you have of talking, as if you were years and years old."

"I do feel as if I were. I--I--well, I have had an unhappy experience. You know unhappiness builds months into years."

"When Jean got up this house-party," young Chapin began, absently, "I thought I should be bored to death. But--I haven't been. You know, I don't want to go over there?" He nodded vaguely toward the south.

"I thought perhaps it suited your convenience." His companion

watched him gravely. "Are you quite sure that your sister's guests have not--had something to do with this sudden determination?"

"I am quite sure. I never liked the old Flying Heart so much as I do to-day. I never regretted leaving it so much as I do at this moment."

"We may be gone before you return."

Young Chapin started. "You don't mean that, really?" Mrs. Keap nodded her dark head. "It was all very well for me to chaperon Helen on the way out from the East, but--it isn't exactly regular for me to play that part here with other young people to look after."

"But you understand, of course--Jean must have explained to you. Mother was called away suddenly, and she can't get back now. You surely won't leave--you _can't_." Chapin added, hopefully: "Why, you would break up Jean's party. You see, there's nobody around here to take your place."

"But--"

"Nonsense! This is an unconventional country. What's wrong with you as a chaperon, anyway? Nobody out here even knows what a chaperon is. And I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Do you really think that would help?" Roberta's eyes laughed humorously.

"I'm not thinking of the others, I'm thinking of myself," declared the young man, boldly. "I don't want you to go before I return. You must not! If you go, I--I shall follow you." He grasped her hand impulsively.

"Oh!" exclaimed the chaperon. "This makes it even more impossible. Go! _Go!_" She pushed him away, her color surging. "Go to your old Eleven X Ranch right away."

"But I mean it," he declared, earnestly. Then, as she retreated farther: "It's no use, I sha'n't go now until--"

"You have known me less than a week!"

"That is long enough. Roberta--"

Mrs. Keap spoke with honest embarrassment. "Listen! Don't you see what a situation this is? If Jean and Helen should ever discover--"

"Jean planned it all; even this."

Mrs. Keap stared at him in horrified silence.

"You do love me, Roberta?" Chapin undertook to remove the girl's hands from her face, when a slight cough in the hall behind caused him to turn suddenly in time to see Berkeley Fresno passing the open door.

"There! You see!" Mrs. Keap's face was tragic. "_You see!_" She turned and fled, leaving the master of the ranch in the middle of the floor, bewildered, but a bit inclined to be happy. A moment later the plump face of Berkeley Fresno appeared cautiously around the door-jamb. He coughed again gravely.

"I happened to be passing," said he. "You'll pardon me?"

"This is the most thickly settled spot in New Mexico!" Chapin declared, with an artificial laugh, choking his indignation.

Fresno slowly brought his round body out from concealment.

"I came in to get a match."

"Why don't you carry matches?"

Fresno puffed complacently upon his pipe. "This," he mused, as his host departed, "eliminates the chaperon, and that helps some."

Still Bill Stover lost no time in breaking the news to the boys.

"There's something comin' off," he advised Willie. "We've got another foot-runner!"

If he had hoped for an outburst of rapture on the part of the little gun man he was disappointed, for Willie shifted his holster, smiled evilly through his glasses, and inquired, with ominous restraint:

"Where is he?"

Being the one man on the Flying Heart who had occasion to wear a gun, Willie seldom smiled from a sense of humor. Here it may be said that, deceived at first by his scholarly appearance, his fellow-laborers had jibed at Willie's affectation of a swinging holster, but the custom had languished abruptly. When it became known who he was, the other ranch-hands had volubly declared that this was a free country, where a man might exercise a wide discretion in the choice of personal adornment; and as for them, they avowed unanimously that the practice of packing a Colts was one which met with their most cordial approbation. In time Willie's six-shooter had become accepted as a part of the local scenery, and, like the scenery, no one thought of remarking upon it, least of all those who best knew his lack of humor. He had come to them out of the Nowhere, some four years previously, and while he never spoke of himself, and discouraged reminiscence in others, it became known through those vague uncharted channels by which news travels on the frontier, that back in the Texas Panhandle there was a limping marshal who felt regrets at mention of his name, and that farther north were other men who had a superstitious dread of undersized cow-men with spectacles. There were also stories of lonesome "run-ins," which, owing to Willie's secretiveness and the permanent silence of the other participants, never became more than intangible rumors. But he was a good ranchman, attended to his business, and the sheriff's office was remote, so Willie had worked on unmolested.

"This here is a real foot-runner," said Stover.

"Exactly," agreed the other. "Where is he?"

"He'll be here this afternoon. Nigger Mike's bringin' him over from the railroad. He's a guest."

"Oh!"

"Yep! He's intercollegit champeen of Yale."

"Yale?" repeated the near-sighted man. "Don't know's I ever been there. Much of a town?"

"I ain't never travelled East myself, but Miss Jean and the little yaller-haired girl say he's the fastest man in the world. I figgered we might rib up something with the Centipede." Still Bill winked sagely.

"See here, do you reckon he'd run?"

"Sure! He's a friend of the boss. And he'll run on the level, too. He can't be nothin' like Humpy."

"If he is, I'll git him," said the cowboy. "Oh, I'll git him sure, guest or no guest. But how about the phonograph?"

"The Centipede will put it up quick enough; there ain't no sentiment in that outfit."

"Then it sounds good."

"An' it'll work. Gallagher's anxious to trim us again. Some folks can't stand prosperity."

Willie spat unerringly at a grasshopper. "Lord!" said he, "it's too good! It don't sound possible."

"Well, it is, and our man will be here this evenin'. Watch out for Nigger Mike, and when he drives up let's give this party a welcome that'll warm his heart on the jump. There's nothin' like a good impression."

"I'll be on the job," assured Willie. "But I state right here and now, if we do get a race there ain't a-goin' to be no chance of our losin' for a second time."

And Stover went on his way to spread the tidings.

It was growing dark when the rattle of wheels outside the ranch-house brought the occupants to the porch in time to see Nigger Mike halt his buck-board and two figures prepare to descend.

"It's Mr. Speed!" cried Miss Blake. Then she uttered a scream as the velvet darkness was rent by a dozen tongues of flame, while a shrill yelping arose, as of an Apache war-party.

"It's the boys," said Jean. "What on earth has possessed them?"

But Stover had planned no ordinary reception, and the pandemonium did not cease until the men had emptied their weapons.

Then Mr. J. Wallingford Speed came stumbling up the steps and into the arms of his friends, the tails of his dust-coat streaming.

"Really? This is more than I expected," he gasped; then turning, doffed his straw hat to the half-revealed figures beyond the light, and cried, gayly: "Thank you, gentlemen! Thank you for missing me!"

"Yow--ee!" responded the cowboys.

"How do you do, Miss Chapin!" Speed shook hands with his hostess, and in the radiance from the open doorway she saw that his face was round and boyish, and his smile peculiarly engaging.

She welcomed him appropriately; then said: "This reception is quite as startling to us as to you. You know, Mr. Speed, that we have with us a friend of yours." She slightly drew Helen forward. "And this is Mrs. Keap, who is looking after us a bit while mother is away. Roberta, may I present Mr. Covington's friend, and ask you to be good to him?"

"Don't forget me," said Fresno, pushing into the light.

"Mr. Berkeley Fresno, of Leland Stanford University."

"Hello, Frez!" Speed thrust out his hand warmly. Not so the Californian. He replied, with hauteur:

"Fresno! F-r-e-s-n-o"; and allowed the new-comer to grasp a limp, moist hand.

"Ah! Go to the head of the class! I'm sorry you broke your wrist, however." The Eastern lad spoke lightly, and gave the palm a hearty squeeze, then turned to Jean.

"I dare say you are all disappointed, Miss Chapin, that Culver didn't come with me, but he'll be along in a day or so. I simply couldn't wait." He avoided glancing at Helen Blake, whose answering blush was lost in the darkness.

"I did think when you drove up that might be Mr. Covington with you," Miss Chapin remarked, wistfully.

"Oh no, that's my man." Speed glanced around him. "And, by-the-way, where is he?"

The sound of angry voices came through the glo

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