Red Saunders

...By...

HENRY WALLACE PHILLIPS

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They decided that they'd think it over until next day, but that turned

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out to be too late, for what must Kyle do but get chucked from his horse and have his leg broke near the hip. You don't want to take any love affairs on to the back of a bad horse, now you mark me! There was no such thing as downing that boy when he was in his right mind.

"Now, here was a hurrah! Loys, she dasn't cry, for fear of uncle, and Kyle, he used the sinfulest language known to the tongue of man. 'Twas the first time I'd ever heard him say anything much, but he made it clear that it wasn't because he couldn't.

"'What will we do, Red? What will we do?' says he.

"'Now,' says I, 'don't bike over like that, because it's bad for your leg.'

"He cussed the leg.

"'Go on and tell me what we can do,' says he.

"'When you ask me that, you've pulled the right arm,' says I. 'I'll tell you exactly what we'll do. I go for the doctor. Savvy? Well, I bring back the minister at the same time. Angevine, he loses the Jersey cow over in the canebreak, and uncle and Angevine go hunting her, for not even Loys is ace high in uncle's mind alongside that cow. The rest is easy.'

"'Red, you're a brick. You're the best fellow alive,' says Kyle, nearly squeezing the hand off me.

"'I've tried to conceal it all my life, but I knew it would be discovered some day,' says I. 'Well, I suppose I'd better break the news to Loys. 'Twouldn't be any more than polite.'

"'Oh, Lord! I wonder if she'll be willing?' says he.

"'No reason I shouldn't turn an honest dollar on the transaction. I'll bet you a month's wages she is,' says I. He wanted to do it, thinking I was in earnest, but I laughed at him.

"She was willing all right—even anxious. There's some women, and men, too, for that matter, who go through life like a cat through a back alley, not caring a cuss for either end or the middle. They would have been content to wait. Not so Loys. She wanted her Kyle, her poor Kyle, and she wanted him quick. That's the kind of people for me! Your cautious folk are all the time falling down wells because their eyes are up in the air, keeping tabs so that they can dodge shooting stars.

"Now, I had a minister friend up in town, Father Slade by name. No, he was not a Catholic, I think. They called him 'father' because it fitted him. His church had a steeple on it, anyhow, so it was no maverick. Just what particular kind of religion the old man had I don't know, but I should say he was a homeopath on a guess. He looked it. 'Twas a comfort to see him coming down the street, his old face shining in his white hair like a shriveled pink apple in a snowdrift, God blessing everything in sight—good, bad or indifferent. He had something pleasant to say to all. We was quite friends, and every once in awhile we'd have a chin about things.

"'Are you keeping straight, Red?' he'd ask when we parted.

"'Um,' I'd say, 'I'm afraid you'd notice a bend here and there if you slid your eyes along the edge.'

"'Well, keep as straight as you can; don't give up trying, my boy,' he'd tell me, mighty earnest, and I'd feel ashamed of myself clear around the corner.

"I knew the old man would do me a favor if it could be done, so I pulled out easy in my mind.

"First place, I stopped at the doctor's, because I felt they might fix up the marrying business some other time, but if a leg that's broke in the upper joint ain't set right you can see a large dark complected hunk of trouble over the party's left shoulder for the rest of his days. The doctor was out, so I left word for him what was wanted and to be ready when I got back and pulled for Father Slade's. The old gentleman had the rheumatism, and he groaned when I come in. Rheumatism's no disease for people who can't swear.

"'How are you, my boy?' says he. 'I'm glad to see you. Here am I, an old man, nipped by the leg and much wanting to talk to somebody.'

"I passed the time of day to him, but felt kind of blue. This didn't look like keeping my word with the kids. I really hated to say anything to the old man, knowing his disposition; still, I felt I had to, and I out with my story.

"'Dear, dear!' says he. 'The hurry and skurry of young folks! How idle it seems when you get fifty years away from it and see how little anything counts! For all that, I thank God,' says he, 'that there's a little red left in my blood yet, which makes me sympathize with them. But the girl's people object, you say?'

"I made that all clear to him. 'The girl's always all right, father,' says I, 'and as for the man in this case, my word for him.'

"Now, it ain't just the right thing for me to say; but, seeing as I've never had anything in particular to be modest about, and I'm proud of what the old gentleman told me, I'm going to repeat it.

"'Your word is good for me, Red,' says he. 'You're a mischievous boy at times, but your heart and your head are both reliable. Give me your arm to the wagon.'

"Then I felt mighty sorry to think of lugging that poor old man all that ways.

"'Here,' says I. 'Now you sit down again. Don't you do anything of the sort. You ain't fit.'

"He put his hand on my shoulder and hobbled his weight off the game leg.

"'Reddy, I was sitting there thinking when you came in—thinking of how comfortable it was to be in an easy chair with my foot on a stool, and then I thought, "If the Lord should send me some work to do, would I be willing?" Now, thanks be to him, I am willing and glad to find myself so, and I do not believe there's any work more acceptable to him than the union of young folk who love each other. Ouch!' says he as that foot touched the ground. 'Perhaps you'd better pick me up and carry me bodily.'

"So I did it, the old housekeeper following us with an armful of things and jawing the both of us, him for a fool and me for a villain. She was a strong minded old lady, and I wish I could remember some of her talk. It was great.

"We went around and got the doctor

"'Hoo!' says he. 'Is it as bad as that?' I winked at Father Slade.

"'It's a-plenty worse than that,' says I. 'You won't know the half of it till you get down there.'

"But of course we had to tell him, and he was tickled. Funny what an interest everybody takes in these happenings. He wanted all the details.

"'By Jove,' says he, 'the man whose feelings ain't the least dimmed by a broken leg—horse rolled on him, you said; splintered it, probably—that man is one of the right sort. He'll do to tie to.'

"When we reached the ranch the boys were lined up to meet us. 'Hurry along!' they called. 'Angey can't keep uncle amused all day!'

"So we hustled. Kyle was for being married first and then having his leg set, but I put my foot down flat. It had gone long enough now, and I wasn't going to have him cripping it all his life. But the doctor worked like a man who gets paid by the piece, and in less than no time we were able to call Loys in.

"Wind River Smith spoke to get to give the bride away, and we let him have it.

"We'd just got settled to business when in comes Angevine, puffing like a buffalo. 'For heaven's sakes, ain't you finished yet?' says he. 'Well, you want to be at it, for the old man ain't over two minutes behind me, coming fast. I took the distance in ten foot steps. Just my luck! Foot slipped when I was talking to him, and I dropped a remark that made him suspicious—I wouldn't have done it for a ton of money—but it's too late now. I'll down him and hold him out there if you say so.'

"Well, sir, at this old Father Slade stood right up, forgetting that foot entirely.

"'Children, be ready,' says he, and he went over the line for a record.

"'Hurry there!' hollers old Bob from the outside, where he was on watch. 'Here comes uncle up the long coulee!'

"'What are your names?' says Father Slade. They told him, both reddening.

"'Do you, Kyle, take this woman, Loys, to have and keep track of, come hell or high water, her heirs and assigns for ever?—or such a matter—says he, all in one breath. They both said they did.

"Things flew till we came to the ring. There was a hitch. We had plumb forgotten that important article. For a minute I felt stingy. Then I cussed myself for a mean old long horn and dived into my box.

"'Here, take this!' I says. 'It was my mother's!'

"'Oh, Red, you mustn't part with that!' cried Loys, her eyes filling up.

"'Don't waste time talking. I put through what I tackle. Hurry, please, father.'

"'Has anybody any objections to these proceedings?' says he.

"'I have,' says I, 'but I won't mention 'em. Give them the verdict.'

"'I pronounce you man and wife. Let us pray,' says he.

"'What's that?' screeches Uncle Jonesy from the doorway. And then he gave us the queerest prayer you ever heard in your life. He stood on one toe and clawed chunks out of the air while he delivered it.

"He seemed to have it in for me in particular. 'You villain! You rascal! You redheaded rascal! You did this! I know you did!'

"'Oh, uncle,' says I, 'forgive me!' With that I hugged him right up to me, and he filled my bosom full of smothered language.

"'Cheese it, you little cuss,' I whispered in his ear, 'or I'll break every rib in your poor old chest!' I came in on him a trifle, just to show him what I could do if I tried.

"'Nuff!' he wheezes. 'Quit! 'Nuff!'

"'Go up and congratulate 'em,' I whispered again.

"'I won't,' says he. 'Ouch! Yes, I will! I will!' So up he goes, grinding his teeth.

"'I wish you every happiness,' he grunts.

"'Won't you forgive me, uncle?' begs Loys.

"'Some other time: some other time!' he hollers, and he pranced out of the house like a hosstyle spider, the maddest little man in the territory.

"Loys had a hard time of it until Kyle got so he could travel, and they went up to the Yellowstone with a team for a wedding trip.

"The rest of Loys' folks was in an unpleasant frame of mind too. They sent out her brother, and while I'd have took most anything from Loys' brother, there comes a place where human nature is human nature, and the upshot of it was I planked that young man gently but firmly across my knees. Suffering Ike, but he was one sassy young man! Howsomever, the whole outfit came round in time—all except uncle and me. He used to grit his teeth together till the sparks flew when he saw me. I was afraid he'd bust a blood vessel in one of them fits, so I quit. I hated to let go of the old ranch, but I'm pretty well fixed—I'm superintendent here. It's Kyle's ranch, you know. That's his brand—the queer looking thing on the left hip of that critter, over the vented hash knife. Loys' invention, that is. She says it's a cherubdim, but we call it the 'flying flapjack.' There's a right smart lot of beef critters toting that signal round this part of the country. Kyle's one of the fellers that rises like a setting of bread—quiet and gentle, but steady and sure. He's going to the state legislature next year. 'Twon't do no harm to have one honest man in the outfit.

"Now, perhaps if I'd married some nice woman I might have had 1,000 steers of my own and a chance to make rules and regulations for my feller citizens—and then again I might have took to gambling and drinking and raising blazes and broke my poor wife's broom handle with my hard head. So I reckon we'll let it slide as it is. Now, you straddle that cayuse of yours and come along with me, and I'll show you some rattling colts."

CHAPTER III.

READY was on the station platform, walking up and down, looking about him anxiously. We caught sight of each other at the same time.

"Hi, there!" said he and jumped for me. "Gad-dog your little hide!" he cried as he put my right hand in line for a pension. "I thought I was booked to go without saying goodby to you. You got the note I pinned on your shack?"

"Sure."

"Well, there's time for a chin before the choo-choo starts. Thought I'd be early, not savvying this kind of traveling a great deal. Darned if you ain't growed since I saw you! Getting fat too! Well, how's everything? I didn't say nothing to the other boys about pulling my freight, as I wanted to go sober for once. You explain to 'em that old Red's head ain't swelled, will you? Seems kind of dirty to go off that way, but I'm bound for God's country and the old time folks, and somehow I feel that I must cut the budge out of it. 'Nother thing is I'm superstitious, as you may or may not have noticed, and I believe if you try the same game twicet you'll get just as different results as can be the second time. You heard how I hit it in the mines, didn't you? No? Well, that's so. You ain't seen many people out on the flat, have you? Hum! I don't know principally where to begin. You remember Wind River Smith's pardner that the boys called Shadder, because he was so thin? Nice feller, always willing to do you a favor or say something comical when you least expected it. Had kind of a style with him too. Yes, sir, that's the man. Well, him and me was out in the Bend one day, holding a mess of Oregon half breeds that was to be shipped by train shortly, when old Smithy comes with the mail. 'Letter for you, Shadder,' says Smith and passes over a big envelope with wads of sealing wax all over it. Shadder reads his letter and folds it up. Then he takes a look over the country—the kind of a look a man gives when he's thinking hard. Then says he, 'Red, take off your hat.' I done it. 'Smithy, take off your hat.' 'All right,' says Smith, 'but you tell me why or I'll snake the shirt off you to square things.'

"'Boys,' says Shadder, 'I'm Lord Walford.'

"'Lord Hellford!' hollers Smithy. 'You'd better call somebody in to look at your plumbing. What you been drinkin', Shadder?'

"'Read for yourself,' says Shadder, and he handed him the letter.

"Wish't you could have seen old Smithy's face as he read it. He thought his pardner had been cut out of his herd forever.

"'It's the God's truth, Red,' says he slowly, and he had a sideways smile on his face as he turned to Shadder. 'Well, sir,' says he, 'I suppose congratulations are in order?'

"Shadder's hand stopped short on its way to the cigarette, and he looked at Smithy as if he couldn't believe what he saw.

"'To hell with 'em!' says he as savage as a wildcat, and he jabbed the irons in and whirled his cayuse about on one toe, heading for the ranch.

"'Now you go after him, you jealous old sorehead,' says I. 'Go on,' I says as he started to argue the point, 'or I'll spread your nose all the way down your spinal column!' The only time to say 'No' to me is when I'm not meaning what I say, so away goes Wind River, and they made it up all right in no time. Well, Shadder had to pull for England to take a squint at the ancestral estates, and all of us was right here at this station to see him off. Lord, it seems as if that happened last world! Well, it took a little bit the edge off any and all drunks a ranch as an institution had ever seen before. There was old Smithy crying around, wiping his eyes on his sleeve and explaining to a lot of eastern folks that it wasn't Shadder's fault—gad hook it all! He was the best, hootin', tootin' son-of-a-sea cook that ever hit a prairie breeze in spite of this dum foolishness.

"They can't make no 'lord' of Shadder!' hollers Smithy. 'That is, not for long. He's a man, Shadder is—ain't cher, yer d——d old gangle legged hide rack?'

"And Shadder never lost his patience at all, though it must have been kind of trying to be made into such a holy show before the kind of people he used to be used to. All he'd say was, 'Bet your life, old boy!' Well, it was right enough, too, as Smithy had nursed him through smallpox one winter up in the Shoshonee country and mighty near starved himself to death feeding Shadder out of the slim grub stock when the boy was on the mend. Still, some people would have forgot that.

"But did your uncle Red get under the influence of strong drink? Did he? Oh, my! Oh, my! I wish I could make it clear to you. The vigilantes put after a horse thief once in Montana, and they landed on him in a butt end canyon, and there was all the stock with the brands on 'em as big as a patent medicine sign, as the lad hadn't had time to stop for alterations.

"'Well,' says they, 'what have you got to say for yourself?' He looked at them brands staring him in the face, and he bit off a small hunk of chewing 'Pit-chay!' Says he, 'Gentlemen, I'm at a loss for words!' And they let him go, as a good joke is worth its price in any man's country. I'm in that lad's fix. I ain't got the words to tell you how seriously drunk I was on that occasion. I remember putting for what I thought was the hotel and settling down, thinking there must be a hulu of a scrap in the bar room from the noise. Then somebody gave me a punch in the ribs and says, 'Where's your ticket?' and I don't know what I said nor what he said after that, but it must have been all right. Then it got light, and I met a lot of good friends I never saw before nor since. Then more noise and trouble, and at last I woke up—in a hotel bedroom, all right, but not the one I was used to. I went to the window, heaved her open and looked out. It was a bully morning, and I felt A1. There was a nice range of mountains out in front of me that must have come up during the night. I'd like to [illegible]

somebody will tell me before long, so there is no use worrying about that—the main point is, have I been touched?' I dug down into my jeans, and there wasn't a thing of any kind to remember me by. 'No,' I says to myself, 'I ain't been touched—I've been grabbed—they might have left me the price of a breakfast! Well, it's a nice looking country, anyhow!' So down I walks to the office. A cheerful seeming, plump kind of a man was sitting behind the desk. 'Hello!' says he, glancing up and smiling as I came in. 'How do you open up this morning?'

"Here's your watch and the rest of your valuables."

"'Somebody saved me the trouble,' says I. 'I'm afraid I'll have to give you the strong arm for breakfast.'

"He grinned wide. 'Oh, it ain't as bad as that, I hardly reckon,' says he. He dove into a safe and brought out a cigar box.

"'When a gentleman's in the condition you was in last night,' he says, 'I always make it a point to go through his clothes and take out anything a stranger might find useful, trusting that there won't be no offense the next morning. Here's your watch and the rest of your valuables, including the cash. Count your money and see if it's right.'

"Well, sir! I was one happy man, and I thanked that feller as I thumbed over the bills, but when I got up to a hundred and seventy I begun to feel queer. Looked like I'd made good money on the trip.

"'What's the matter?' says he, seeing my face. 'Nothing wrong, I hope!'

"'Why, the watch and the gun and the other things is all right,' says I, 'but I'm now $50 to the good, even figuring that I didn't spend a cent, which ain't in the least likely, and here's ten dollar bills enough to make a bed spread left over.'

"'Pshaw!' says he. 'Blame it! I've mixed your plunder up with the mining gentleman that came in at the same time. You and him was bound to fight at first, and then you both turned to to lick me, and what with keeping you apart and holding you off and taking your valuables away from you all at the same time, and me all alone here, as it was the night man's day off, I've made a blunder of it. Just take your change out of the wad and call for a drink on me when you feel like it, will you?'

"I said I would do that, and, moreover, that he was an officer and a gentleman and that I'd stay at his hotel two weeks at least to show my appreciation, no matter where it was, but to satisfy a natural curiosity, I'd like to know what part of the country I was at present inhabiting.

"'You're at Boise, Ida.,' says he, 'one of the best little towns in the best little territory in the United States of America, including Alaska.'

"'Well'—says I. 'Well'—for again I was at a loss for words. I had no idea I'd gone so far from home. 'I believe what you say,' says I. 'What do you do round these parts?'

"'Mining,' says he. 'You're just in time—big strike in the Rob Cat district. Poor man's mining. Placer, and durned good placer, right on the top of the ground. The mining gentleman I spoke about is having his breakfast now. Suppose you go in and have a talk with him? Nice man, drunk or sober, although excitable when he's had a little too much or not quite enough. He might put you on to a good thing. I'm not a mining person myself.'

"'Thanks,' says I and in I went to the dining room.

"There was a great, big, fine looking man eating his ham and eggs the way I like to see a man eat the next morning. He had a black beard that was so strong it fairly jumped out from his face.

"'Mornin',' says I.

"'Good morning, sir!' says he. 'A day of commingled lucent clarity and vernal softness, ain't it?'

"'Well, I wouldn't care to bet on that without going a little deeper into the subject,' says I; 'but it smells good at least—so does that ham and eggs. Mary, I'll take the same, with coffee extra strong.'

[To be continued.]