

Red Saunders

... By ...

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"There's no telling how excited the passengers will be when they find they've got to go over the hills ford hunting."

"Are you going to send 'em all around, Ag?"

"The whole bunch. Anybody coming back from the diggings has gold in his clothes, so it won't hurt 'em none, and I propose to give that stage line an advertising that won't do it a bit of good. Come along, Red. Let's see that lad that has the shack up the river. We need something to eat, and maybe he's got a gun. If he's a decent feller, we'll let him in on a claim. Never mind about the hole. It won't run away, and there's nobody to touch anything. Come on."

"So we went up the river. The man's name was White, and he was a white man by nature too. He felt as well and was just as hot as us when we told him about the stage driver's trick. Then we told him about the find and let him in."

"Now," says Aggy, "have you got a gun?"

"I have that," says the man. "My dad used to be a duck hunter on Chesapeake bay. When you say 'gun' I'll show you a gun." He dove in under his bunk and fetched out what I should say was a No. 1 bore shotgun, with barrels six foot long.

"Gentlemen," says he, holding the gun up and patting it lovingly, "if you run a quarter pound of powder in each one of them barrels and a handful of buckshot on top of that you've got an argument that couldn't be upset by the supreme court. I'll guarantee that when you point her anywhere within ten feet of a man not over a hundred yards away and let her do her duty, all the talent that that man's family could employ couldn't gather enough of him to recognize him by, and you won't be in bed more'n long enough to heal a busted shoulder."

"I hope it ain't going to be my painful line of performance to pull the trigger," says Aggy. "I think the sight of her would have weight with most people. When's the stage due back?"

"Day after tomorrow, about noon."

"That gives us lots of time to stake and to salt claims that can't show cause their own selves," says Aggy. "I think we're all right."

"The next day we worked like the old Harry. We had everything fixed up right by nightfall, and there was nothing to do but dig and wait."

"Curious folks we all are, ain't we? I should have said my own self that if I'd found gold by the bucketful, I'd be more interested in that than I would be in getting even with a mut that had done me dirt, but it wasn't so. Perhaps it was because I hadn't paid much attention to money all my life, and I had paid the strictest attention to the way other people used me. Living where there's so few folks accounts for that, I suppose."

"Getting even on our esteemed friend, the stage driver, was right in your Uncle Reddy's line, and Aggy and our new pard, White, seemed to take kindly to it, also."

"If ever you saw three faces filled with innocent glee, it was when we heard the wheels of that stage coming—why, the night before I was woke up by somebody laughing. There was Aggy sound asleep, sitting up huzzing himself in the moonlight."

"Oh, my! Oh, my!" says he. "It's the only ford for 4,000 miles!"

"We planted a sign in the middle of the road with this wording on it in big letters, made with the black end of a stick:

NOTICE:

This and adjoining claims are the property of Aggimention G. Jones, Red Saunders, John Henry White, et al. Trespassing done at your own risk. Owners will not be responsible for the remains."

"There was a stretch of about a mile on the level before us. When the stage came in plain sight Aggy proceeds to load up 'Old Moral Snasion,' as he called her, so that the folks could see there was no attempt at deception. They come pretty fairly slow after that. At fifty yards, Ag hollers 'Halt!' The team sat right down on their tails."

"Now, Mr. Suick'muffin," says Aggy, "you that drives, I mean, come here and read this little sign."

"Suppose I don't?" says the feller, trying to be smart before the passengers."

"It's a horrible supposition," says Aggy, "and the innocent will have to suffer with the guilty." Then he cocks the gun."

"God sakes! Don't shoot!" yells one of the passengers. "Man, you ought to have more sense than to try and pick him out of a crowd with a shotgun! Get down there, you fool, and make it

quick!"

"So the driver walked our way and read. He never said a word. I reckon he realized it was the only ford



"Around you go!" he hollers.

for 4,000 miles, more or less, as Aggy had remarked. There he stood, with his mouth and eyes wide open."

"I'd like to have you other gentlemen come up and see our first cleanup, so you won't think we're running in a windy," says Aggy. They wanted to see bad, as you can imagine, and when they did see about fifteen pounds of gold in the bottom of my old hat they talked like people that hadn't had a Christian bringing up."

"Oh, Lord!" groans one man. "Brigham Young and all the prophets of the Mormon religion! This is my tenth trip over this line, and me and Pete Hendricks played a game of seven up right on the spot where that gent hit her not over a month ago, when the stage broke down! Somebody just make a guess at the way I feel and give me one small drink. And he put his hand to his head."

"Say, boys," he goes on, "you don't want the whole blamed creek, do you? Let us in!"

"How's that, fellers?" says Ag to me and White. We said we was agreeable."

"All right, in you come," says Aggy. "There ain't no hog about our firm. But as for you," says he, walking on his tiptoes up to the driver—"as for you, you cockeyed whelp, around you go! Around you go!" he hollers, jimmied the end of Moral Snasion into the driver's trap. "Oh, and won't you go round, though!" says he. "Listen to me, now; if any one of your ancestors for twenty-four generations had ever done anything as decent as robbing a hencoop it would have conferred a kind of degree of nobility upon him. It wouldn't be possible to find an ornier cuss than you if a man raked all hell with a fine toothed comb. Now, you stare coated, mangy, bandy legged, misbegotten, outlaw coyote, fly-fly!" whoops Aggy, jumping four foot in the air, before I squint enough lead into your system to make it a paying job to melt you down!"

"The stage driver acted according to orders. Three wide steps and he was in the wagon, and with one screech like a pizened bobcat he fairly lifted the canyuses over the first ridge. Nobody never saw him any more, and nobody wanted to."

"So that's the way I hit my stake, son, just as I'd always expected—by not knowing what I was doing any part of the time—and now, there comes my iron horse coughing up the track! I'll write you sure, boy, and you let old Reddy know what's going on—and on your life don't forget to give it to the lads straight why I sneaked off on the quiet! I've got ten years older in the last six months. Well, here we go quite fresh, and d—d if I altogether want to neither. Too late to argue though. By-by, son!"

CHAPTER IV.

MISS MATTIE sat on her little front porch, facing the setting sun. Across the road, now ankle deep in June dust, was the wreck of the Peters place—back broken roof, crumbling chimneys, shutters hanging down like broken wings, the old house had the pathetic appeal of shipwrecked gentility. A house without people in it, even when it is in repair, is as forlorn as a dog who has lost his master.

The road were more houses of the

nondescript. It was as though she were for coming, for she knows why they had come. Perhaps it was the old Puritan idea of physical perfection. One of these were kept in a window glass, but there were enough poor relations to spoil the effect."

In the road between the arches of the weeping willows came first the brook, with the stone bridge—this broken as to coping and threadbare in general—then on the hither side of the way some three or four neighbors' houses and opposite the blacksmith's shop and postoffice, the latter of course in a store, where you could buy anything from stale groceries to shingles."

In short, Fairfield was an eastern village whose cause had departed, a community drained of the male principle, leaving only a few queer men, the blacksmith and some halfling boys to give tone to the background of dozens of old maids."

An unsympathetic stranger would have felt that nothing was left to the Fairfieldians but memory, and the sooner they lost that the better."

Take a wineglassful of raspberry vinegar, two tablespoonfuls of sugar, half a cup each of bonset and rhubarb, a good full cup of the milk of human kindness, dilute in a gallon of water and you have the flavor of Fairfield. There was just enough of each ingredient to spoil the taste of all the rest."

Miss Mattie rested her elbow on the railing, her chin in her hand, and gazed thoughtfully about her. As a matter of fact, she was the most inspiring thing in view. At a distance of fifty yards she was still a tall, slender girl. Her body retained the habit as well as the lines of youth, a trick of gliding into unexpected, pleasing attitudes, which would have been awkward but for the suppleness of limb to which they testified and the unconsciousness and ease of their irregularity."

Her face was a child's face in the ennobling sense of the word. The record of the years written upon it seemed a masquerade—the face of a clear eyed girl of fourteen made up to represent her own aunt at a fancy dress party; a face drawn a trifle fine, a little ascetic, but balanced by the humor of the large, shapely mouth, and really beautiful in bone and contour, the beauty of mignonette and doves and gentle things."

You could see that she was thirty-five in the blatant candor of noon, but now, blushed with the pink of the setting sun, she was still in the days of the fairy prince."

Miss Mattie's reverie idled over the year upon year of respectable stupidity that represented life in Fairfield, while her eyes and soul were in the boiling gold of the sky glory. She sighed."

A panorama of life munched before Miss Mattie's mind about as vivid and full of red corpuscles as a Greek frieze. Her affectionate nature was starved. They visited each other, the ladies of Fairfield—these women who had rolled on the floor together as babies in their best black or green or whatever it might be, and gloves—this though the summer sun might be hammering down with all his might. And then they sat in a closed room and talked in a reserved fashion which was entirely the property of the call. Of course one could have a moment's real talk by chance meeting, and there were the natural griefs of life to break the corsets of this etiquette, although in general the griefs seemed to be long drawn out and conventional affairs, as if nature herself at last yielded to the system, conquered by the inevitable conventionality and stubbornness of the ladies of Fairfield. It was the unspoken but firm belief of each of these women that a person of their circle who had no more idea of respectability than to drop dead on the public road would never go to heaven."

Poor Miss Mattie! Small wonder she dropped her hands, sat back and wondered, with another sigh, if it were for this she was born. She did not rebel—there was no violence in her—but she regretted exceedingly. In spite of her slenderness it was a wide mother lap in which her hands rested, an obvious cradle for little children. And instinctively it would come to you as you looked at her that there could be no more comfortable place for a tired man to come home to than a household presided over by this slow moving, gentle woman."

There was nothing old maidish about Miss Mattie but the tale of her years. She had had offers, such as Fairfield and vicinity could boast, and declined them with tact and the utmost gratitude to the suitor for the compliment, but her "no," though mild, was firm, for there lay within her a certain quiet valiant spirit which would rather endure the fatigue and loneliness of old age in her little house than to take a larger life from any but the man who was all—a commonplace in fiction, in real life sometimes quite a strain."

The sun distorted himself into a Rugby football and hurried down as though to be through with Fairfield as soon as possible. It was a most magnificent sunset, flaming, gorgeous, wild—beyond the management of the women of Fairfield—and Miss Mattie stared into the heart of it with a longing for some-

thing to happen. Then the thought came, "What could happen?" She sighed again, and with eyes blinded by her own shine, glanced down the village street."

She thought she saw—she rubbed her eyes and looked on—she did see, and surely never a more beautiful man he had in Fairfield. He had a Royal Bengal tiger costume slouching through the dust it could not have been more unusual. The spectacle was a man; a very large and mighty shouldered man, who looked about him with a bold, imperious, keep the change regard. There was something in the swing of him that suggested the Bengal tiger. He wore high heeled boots outside of his trousers, a flannel shirt with a yellow silk kerchief around his neck, and on his head sat a white hat which seemed to Miss Mattie to be at least a yard in diameter. Under the hat was a remarkable head of hair. It hung below the man's shoulders in a silky mass of dark scarlet flecked with brown gold. Miss Mattie had seen red hair, but she remembered no such color as this, nor could she recall ever having seen hair a foot and a half long on a man. That hair would have made a fortune on the head of an actress, but Miss Mattie was ignorant of the possibilities of the profession."

The face of the man was a fine tan, against which eyes, teeth and mustache came out in brisk relief. The mustache avoided the tropical tint of the upper hair and was content with a modest brown. The owner came right along, walking with a stiff, strong, straddling gait, like a man not used to that way of traveling. He would be by her house directly, and it was hardly modest to sit aggressively on one's front porch while a strange man went by, particularly such a very strange man as this. Yet a thrill of curiosity held her for the moment, and then it was too late, for the man stopped and asked little Eddie Newell, who was playing placidly in the dust—all the children played placidly in Fairfield—asked Eddie in a voice which reached Miss Mattie plainly, although the owner evidently made no attempt to raise it, if he knew where Miss Mattie Saunders lived?"

Eddie had not noticed the large man's approach and nearly fell over in a fright, but seeing, with a child's intuition, that there was no danger in this fierce looking person he piped up instantly."

"Y-y-essir, I kin tell yer where she lives—yessir! She lives right down there in that little house. I kin go down with you jes' swell's not! Why, there she is now, on the stoop!"

"Thankee, sonny," said the big voice. "Here's for miggles," and Miss Mattie caught the sparkle of a coin as it flew into the grimy fists of Eddie.

"Much obliged!" yelled Eddie and vanished up the street."

Miss Mattie sat transfixed. Her breath came in swallows, and her heart beat irregularly. Here was novelty with a vengeance! The big man turned and fastened his eyes upon her. There was no retreat. She noticed with some reassurance that his eyes were grave and kindly."

As he advanced Miss Mattie rose in agitation, unconsciously putting her hand on her throat. What could it mean?"

The gate was opened and the stranger strode up the cinder walk to the porch. He stopped a whole minute and looked at her. At last!

"Well, Mattie!" he said, "don't you know me?"

A flood of the wildest hypotheses flashed through Miss Mattie's mind without enlightening her. Who was this picturesque giant who stepped out of the past with so familiar a salutation? Although the porch was a foot high, and Miss Mattie a fairly tall woman, their eyes were almost on a level as she looked at him in wonder."

Then he laughed and showed his white teeth. "No use to bother and worry you, Mattie," said he. "You couldn't call it in ten years. Well, I'm your half uncle Fred's boy Bill, and I hope you're a quarter as glad to see me as I am to see you."

"What?" she cried. "Not little Willy who ran away?"

"The same little Willy," he replied in a tone that made Miss Mattie laugh a little, nervously, "and what I want to know is, are you glad to see me?"

"Why, of course! But, Will—I suppose I should call you Will? I am so flustered—not expecting you—and it's been so warm today. Won't you come in and take a chair?" wound up Miss Mattie in desperation and fury at herself for saying things so different from what she meant to say."

There was a twinkle in the man's eyes as he replied in an injured tone: "Why, good Lord, Mattie! I've come 2,000 miles or more to see you, and you ask me to take a chair just as if I'd stepped in from across the way! Can't you give a man a little warmer welcome than that?"

"What shall I do?" asked poor Miss Mattie.

"Well, you might kiss me for a start," said he.

Miss Mattie was all abroad. Still one's half cousin, who has come such a distance and been received so very oddly, is entitled to consideration. She raised her agitated face and for the first time in her life realized the pleasure of wearing a mustache.

Then red saunders, late of the Chanta Seechee ranch, North Dakota, sat him down."

"I'm obliged to you, Mattie," he said in all seriousness. "To tell you the truth, I felt in need of a little comfort—here I've come all this distance—and, of course, I heard about father and mother—but I couldn't believe it was true. Seemed as if they must be waiting at the old place for me to come back, and when I saw it all gone to ruin— Well, then I set out to find somebody, and do you know, of all the family there's only you and me left? That's all, Mattie, just us two! While I was growing up out west I kind of expected things to be standing still back here and be just the same as I left them—hum— Well, how are you, anyhow?"

"I'm well, Will, and"—laying her hand upon his, "don't think I'm not glad to see you—please don't. I'm so glad, Will, I can't tell you—but I'm all confused—so little happens here."

"I shouldn't guess it was the liveliest place in the world, by the look of it," said Red. "And as far as that's concerned, I kinder don't know what to say myself. There's such a heap to talk about it's hard to tell where to begin. But we've got to be friends, though, Mattie—we've just got to be friends. Good Lord. We're all there's left! Funny I never thought of such a thing! Well, blast it! That's enough of such talk. I've brought you a present, Mattie." He stretched out a log that reached beyond the limits of the front porch and dove into his trousers pocket, bringing out a buckskin sack. He fumbled at the knot a minute and then passed it over, saying, "You make it—your fingers are suppler than mine." Miss Mattie's fingers were shaking, but the knots finally came undone, and from the sack she brought forth a chain of rich, dull yellow links fashioned into a necklace. It weighed a pound. She spread it out and looked at it astounded. "G gracious, Will! Is that gold?" she asked.

"That's what," he replied. "The real article, just as it came out of the ground; I dug it myself. That's the



"He's my own cousin," she whispered to herself.

reason I'm here. I'd never got money enough to go anywhere farther than a horse could carry me if I hadn't taken a fly at placer mining and hit her to beat her—the very mischief!"

Miss Mattie looked first at the barbaric, splendid necklace and then at the barbaric, splendid man. Things grew confused before her in trying to realize that it was real. What two planets so separated in their orbits as her world and his? She had the imagination that is usually lacking in small communities, and the feeling of a fairy story come true possessed her."

"And now, Mattie," said he, "I don't know what's manners in this part of the country, but I'll make free enough on the cousin part of it to tell you that I could look at some supper without flinching. I've walked a heap to-day, and I ain't used to walking."

Miss Mattie sprang up, herself again, at the chance to offer hospitality."

"Why, you poor man!" said she. "Of course you're starved! It must be nearly 8 o'clock. I almost forgot about eating, living here alone. You shall have supper directly. Will you come in or sit a spell outside?"

"Reckon I'll come in," said Red. "Don't want to lose sight of you now that I've found you."

It was some time since Miss Mattie had felt that any one had cared enough for her not to want to lose sight of her, and a delicate warm bloom went over her cheeks. She hurried into the little kitchen.

"Mattie!" called Red.

"What is it, Will?" she answered, coming to the door.

"Can I smoke in this little house?"

"Certainly. Sit right down and make yourself comfortable. Don't you remember what a smoker father was?"

Red tried the different chairs with his hand. They were not a stalwart lot. Finally he spied the homemade rocker in the corner. "There's the lad for me," he said, drawing it out. "Got to be kinder careful how you throw 250 pounds around."

[To be continued.]