

# THE RANCH AT THE WOLVERINE

A tale of the wild outdoor life of pioneer days that called forth all the courage and resourcefulness of men and women inured to danger and hardship

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By B. M. BOWER

## CHAPTER XIV.

### Billy Louise Gets a Surprise.

FRIGHTENED, worried, sick at heart because her crowding doubts and suspicions had suddenly developed into black certainty just when she had thought them dead forever, Billy Louise rode up the narrow, rocky gorge. She had come to have a vague comprehension of the temptation Ward must have felt. She had come to accept pitying the possibility that the canker of old influences had eaten more deeply than appeared on the surface. She had set herself stanchly beside him as his friend, who would help him win back his self-respect. She felt sure that he must suffer terribly with that keen, analytical mind of his, when he stopped to think at all. He had no warped ethics wherewith to ease his conscience. She knew his ideas of right and wrong were as uncompromising as her own, and if he stole cattle, he did it with his eyes wide open to the wrong he was doing. And yet—

"That's bad enough, but to try and fasten evidence on someone else!" Billy Louise gritted her teeth over the treachery of it. She believed he had done that very thing. How could she help it? She had seen the corral and had seen Ward ride away from it in the dusk of the evening; or she believed she had seen him, which was the same thing. And she knew what lay behind him. Was his version of the past after all the correct one? Might not the paragraph she had turned been nothing more than the truth?

Billy Louise fought for him; fought with her stern, youthful judgment which was so uncompromising. It takes years of close contact with life to give one a sure understanding of human weakness and human endeavor.

At the end, when Blue would have crossed and taken the trail home, Billy Louise reined him impulsively the other way. Until that instant she had not intended to seek Ward, but once her fingers had twitched the reins against Blue's neck, she did not hesitate; she did not even argue with herself. She just glanced up at the sun, saw that it was not yet noon—so much may happen in two or three hours—and sent Blue up the hill at a lope.

She did not know what she would do or what she would say when she saw Ward.

The two mares fed dispiritedly at the lowest corner of the field, their hair rough with exposure to the winter winds and the storms, their ribs showing. With all the hay he had put up, Ward might at least keep his horses in better shape, Billy Louise censured, as she passed them by.

Further along, Billy Louise heard a welcoming nicker and turned her head. Here came Rattler, thin-flanked and rough-coated, trotting down a shallow gulley to meet Blue. The two horses clumped together whenever Ward was at the Wolverine. Billy Louise pulled up and waited till Rattler reached her. He and Blue rubbed noses, and Blue laid back his ears and shook his head with teeth bared, in playful pretense of anger. Rattler kicked up his heels in disdain at the threat and trotted alongside them.

Billy Louise rode with puckered eyebrows. Ward might neglect his stock, but he would never neglect Rattler like this. And he must be at home, since here was his horse. Or else...

She struck Blue suddenly with her reins and went clattering up the trail where the snow lay in shaded, crusty patches rimmed with dirt. The trail was untracked save by the loose stock. Where was Ward? What had happened to him? She looked again at Rattler. There was no sign of recent saddle marks along his side, no telltale imprint of the cinch under his belly. Where was Ward?

Blind, unreasoning terror filled Billy Louise. She struck Blue again and plunged into the icy creek crossing near the stable. She stopped there just long enough to see how empty and desolate it was, and how the horses and cattle had huddled against its sheltering wall out of the biting winds; and how the door was shut and fastened so that they could not get in. She opened it and looked in, and shut it again. Then she turned and ran, white-faced, to the cabin. Where was Ward? What had happened to Ward? Thief or honest man, treacherous or true—what had happened to him?

Billy Louise saw the doorstep banked over with old, crusted snow. Her heart gave a jump and stopped still. She felt her knees shake under her. Her face seemed to pinch together, the flesh clinging close to the bones. Her whole being seemed to contract with the deadly fear that gripped her. It was like that chill morning when she had crept out of her cot and gone over to mummy's bed and had lifted mummy's hand that was hanging down...

She came to herself; she was running up the creek, away from the cabin. Running and stumbling over rocks, and getting tripped with her riding skirt. She stopped, as soon as she realized what she was doing; she stopped and stood with her hands pressed hard against each side of her

face, forcing herself to calmness again—or at least to sanity. She had to go back. She told herself so, many times.

So Billy Louise went back to the cabin, slowly, with shaking legs and a heart that fluttered and stopped, fluttered and jumped and stopped, and made her stagger as she walked. She reached the doorstep and stood there with her palms pressed hard against her cheeks again. "You've got to do it. You've got to!" she whispered to herself commandingly.

She never doubted that Ward was inside. She thought she would find him dead—dead and horrible, perhaps. No other solution seemed to fit the circumstances. He was in there, dead. It took courage to open that door, but Billy Louise had courage enough to open it, and to step inside and close the door after her. She did not look at anything in the cabin while she did it, though. She kept her eyelids down so that she only saw the floor directly in front of the door. She had a sense of relief that it looked perfectly natural, though dusty.

"Throw up your hands!" came hoarsely from the bunk. Billy Louise gasped and pulled her gun, and dropped crouching to the floor. Also she looked up.

From her crouching position she looked into Ward's fever-wild eyes. He was sitting up in the bunk, and he was pointing his big forty-five at her relentlessly. "Get up from there!" he ordered sternly. "Don't try any game like that on me, Buck Oney! Get up and go over and sit in that chair. I've got a few things to say to you."

Billy Louise somehow grasped the truth, up to a certain point. Ward was sick; so sick he didn't know her. She thought she would better humor him. She got up and went and sat in the chair as he directed.

Ward, keeping the gun pointing her way, sneered at her in a way that made the soul of Billy Louise crumple. She faced him big-eyed, too amazed at the change in him to feel any fear that he would harm her. He had wavered two inches long. She wouldn't have known him except for his hair—and that was terribly tousled; and his eyes, though they were wild and angry. His voice was hoarse, and while he glared at her, he coughed with a hard, croupy resonance.

"So you came back, did yuh?" he asked grimly at last. "Well, you didn't get a chance to plug me in the back. How long did you lay up there on the bluff this time, waiting to catch me when I wasn't looking? I've been wishing I'd left that rope so it would have hung you, you—!" (Billy Louise listened round-eyed to certain man-sized epithets strange to her ears.)

"I suppose you and Foxy and that halfbreed have been fixing up some more evidence, huh? You figure that I can't catch 'em this time and work the brands over, so they'll stand Y's, and I'll get railroaded to the pen."

"Erave Buckaroo got a headache?" she queried softly, stroking his temples soothingly. "Got the hookin'-cough, too. Got every meanest thing he can think of. E'n got a grinch against the Flower of the Ranch-oh!" Her voice was crooningly soft and sweet, as if she were murmuring over a sleepy baby.

Ward closed his eyes, opened them, and looked up into her face. One hand came up uncertainly and caught her fingers closely. "Wilhelmina!" he said, in his hoarse voice. His eyes cleared to sanity under her touch.

Billy Louise drew a small sigh of relief and reached unobtrusively with her free hand for the gun. She slid it down away from his fingers, and when he still paid no attention, she picked it up quite openly and laid it against the footboard. Ward did not say anything. He seemed altogether occupied with the amazing reality of her presence.

"You've got a terrible cold; and from the looks of things, you've had it for about six months," said Billy Louise. Her eyes went comprehensively about that end of the cabin, with the depleted cracker box, the half-emptied boxes of peaches and tomatoes, and the buckets that were all but empty of water. She was shocked at the pitiful evidence of long helplessness. She did not quite understand. Surely Ward's cold had not kept him in bed so long.

"Well, this is no time for mirth or laughter," she said briskly, to hide how close she was to hysteria, "since it looks very much like 'the morning after.' First, we've got to tackle that fever of yours." She picked up a water pail and started for the door. As she passed the foot of the bunk, she confiscated the two revolvers and took them outside with her. She had no desire to be mistaken again for Buck Oney.

When she came back Ward's eyes were wild again, and he started up in bed and glared at her. Billy Louise laughed at him and told him to lie down like a nice buckaroo, and Ward recalled to himself by her voice,

ing to yuh. I won't take any chances on your not trying it again. I'm going to protect myself right.

"You throw that gun on the bed," (Billy Louise did so, her eyes still upon Ward's flushed face.) "Now, get down that tablet from the shelf. Here's a pencil." He drew one from under his pillow and tossed it toward her. "Now you write the truth about all this rustling. It's a bigger thing than shows right in this neighborhood. I know that. And I know, too, that Foxy has been pulling down some on the side. He never paid for all the stock that's running around vented and rebranded MK. I've got that sized up. Pretty smooth trick, too; a heap better than working brands. He ought to have been satisfied with that—but a crook never is satisfied. I knew he wasn't the tenderfoot he tried to make out, and when I saw some of his stock and that gate fixed to ring a bell when it was opened, I knew he was a crook. But he made a big mistake when he threw in with you, you—"

"I want you to write down the truth about that Hardup deal; who was in with you. I know, all right, but I want it down on paper. And I want to know how long Foxy's been in with you, and who's working the game on the outside. Get busy; write it all down. I'll give you all the time you need; don't leave out anything. Dates and all. I want the whole graft. Don't try to get away. I've got this gun loaded to the guards, and you know I'm aching for an excuse—" He stopped and coughed again, hoarsely, rackingly. Then he lay quiet, except for his rasping breath and watched.

Billy Louise, with the tablet on her trembling knees, pretended to write. From under her lashes she watched Ward curiously. She saw his attention waver, saw his eyes wander aimlessly about the room. She sat very still and waited, making scrawly marks that had no meaning at all. She saw Ward's fingers loosen on the revolver, saw his head turn wearily on the pillow. He was staring out through the window at the brilliant blue of the sky with the dazzling white clouds drifting like bits of cotton to the northward. He had forgotten her.

## CHAPTER XV.

### The Hookin'-Cough Man.

BILLY LOUISE waited another minute or two, weighing the possibilities. She saw Ward's fingers drop away from the gun, but they remained close enough for a dangerously quick gripping of it again, if the whim seized him. Still—surely to goodness, Ward would never get crazy enough to hurt her! Perhaps her feminine assurance of her hold on him, more than her courage, kept her nerves fairly steady. She bit the pencil absently, watching him.

Ward turned his head restlessly on the pillow and coughed again. Billy Louise got up quietly, went close to the bed, and laid her hand on his forehead. His head was hot, and the veins were swollen and throbbing on his temples.

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obeyed. She got the washbasin and a towel and prepared to bathe his head. He wanted a drink. And when she held a cup to his lips and saw how greedily he drank, a little sob broke unexpectedly from her lips. She gritted her teeth after it and forced a laugh.

"You're sure a hard drinker," she bantered and wet her handkerchief to lay on his brow.

"That's the first decent drink I've had for a month," he told her, dropping back to the pillow, refreshed to the point of clear thinking. "Old Lady Fortune's still playing football with me, William. I've been laid up with a broken leg for about six weeks. And when I got gay and thought I could handle myself again, I put myself out of business for a while, and caught this cold before I came to and crawled back into bed. I'm—sure glad you showed up, old girl. I was—getting up against it for fair." He coughed.

"Looks like it," Billy Louise held herself rigidly back from any emotional expression. She could not afford to "go to pieces" now. She tried to think just what a trained nurse would do, in such a case. Her hospital experience would be of some use here, she told herself. She remembered reading somewhere that no experience is valueless, if one only applies the knowledge gained.

"First," she said cheerfully, "the patient must be kept quiet and cheerful. So don't go jumping up and down on your broken leg, Ward Warren; the nurse forbids it. And smile, if it kills you."

Ward grinned appreciatively. Sick as he was, he realized the gameness of Billy Louise; what he failed to realize was the gameness of himself. "I'm a pretty worthless specimen right now," he said apologetically. "But I'm yours to command, Bill-the-Conk. You're the doctor."

"Nope, I'm the cook, right now. I've got a hunch. How would you like a cup of tea, patient?"

"I'd rather have coffee—Doctor William."

"Tea, you mean. I'll have it ready in ten minutes." Then she weakened before his imploring eyes. "You really oughtn't to drink coffee, with that fever, Ward. But, maybe if I don't make it very strong and put in lots of cream—We'll take a chance, buckaroo!"

"How much sugar, patient?" Billy Louise turned toward him with the tomato can sugar bowl in her hands.

"None. I want to taste the coffee, this trip."

"Oh, all right! It's the worst thing you could think of, but that's the way with a patient. Patients always want what they mustn't have."

"Sure—get it, too." Ward spoke between long, satisfying gulps. "How's your other patient, Wilhelmina? How's mummy?"

"Oh, Ward! She's dead—mummy's dead!" Billy Louise broke down unexpectedly and completely. She went down on her knees beside the bed and cried as she had not cried since she looked the last time at mummy's still face, held in that terrifying calm. She cried until Ward's excited mutter: "Warned her that she must pull herself together."

"You be a-still," she commanded brokenly, fighting for her former safe cheerfulness. "I'm all right. Pity yourself, if you've got to pity somebody. I—can stand—my trouble. I haven't got any broken leg and—hookin' cough." She managed a laugh then and took Ward's hand from her hair and laid it down on the blankets. "Now we won't talk about things any more. You've got to have something done for that cold on your lungs." She rose and stood looking down at him with puckered eyebrows.

"Mummy would say you ought to have a good sweat," she decided. "Got any ginger?"

"I dunno. I guess not," Ward muttered confusedly.

"Well, I'll go out and find some sage, then, and give you sage tea. That's another cure-all."

She did not spend all her time picking sage twigs. A bush grew at the corner of the cabin within easy reach. She went first down to the stable and led Blue inside and unsaddled him. Ward was lying quiet when she went in, except that he was waving her handkerchief to and fro by the corners to cool it. Billy Louise took it from him, wet it again with cold water, and scolded him for getting his arms from under the covers. That, she said, was no nice way for a hookin'-cough man to do.

Ward meekly submitted to being covered to his eyes. Then he wriggled his chin free and demanded that she kiss him. Ward was fairly drunk with happiness because she was there, in the cabin.

"Ward Warren, you're a perfectly awful hookin'-cough man! There. Now that's going to be the only one—Oh, Ward, it isn't!" She knelt and curved an arm around his face and kissed him again and yet again. "I do love you, Ward. I've been a weak-kneed, horrid thing, and I'm ashamed to the middle of my bones. You're my own brave buckaroo always—always! You've done what no other man would

do, and you don't whine about it; and I've been weak and—horrid; and I'll have to love you about a million years before I can quit feeling ashamed." She kissed him again with a passion of remorse for her doubts of him.

"Are you through being pals, Wilhelmina?" Ward broke rules and freed an arm, so that he could hold her closer.

"No, I'm just beginning. Just beginning right. I'm your pal for keeps. But—"

"I love you for keeps, lady mine." Ward stifled another cough. "When are you going to—marry me?"

"Oh, when you get over the hookin' cough, I'll propose." Once more Billy Louise, for the good of her patient, forced herself into safe flippancy—that was not sippant at all, but merely a tender pretense.

"Now it's up to you to show me whether you are in any hurry at all to get well," she said. "Keep your hands under the covers while I make some tea. That fever of yours has got to be stopped immediately—to once."

She went over and busied herself about the stove, never once looking toward the bed, though she must have felt Ward's eyes worshipping her.

She hunted through the cupboards and found a bottle of turpentine; sirrup and yellowed with age, but pungent with strength. She found some

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(TO BE CONTINUED.)

### Zinc in Tennessee.

Over 52,000,000 pounds of zinc was produced by Tennessee mines in 1916, the largest operators being the American Zinc company, at Mascot, and the Embree Iron company, at Embreeville. The production of gold, silver and copper in 1916 was less than the production in 1915, but the output of lead and zinc increased.

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### CHILDREN WHO ARE SICKLY

Mothers who value the health of their children should never be without **MOTHER GRAY'S SWEET POWDERS FOR CHILDREN**, for use when needed. They tend to Break up Colds, Relieve Feverishness, Worms, Constipation, Headache, Teething disorders and Stomach Troubles.

Don't accept any Substitute. Used by Mothers for 27 years. Sold by Druggists everywhere for 25 cts. Trial package FREE. Address **A. S. OLMSTED, LE ROY, N. Y.**

Not the Same. A fledgling author at the Century club in New York drew forth a manuscript and volunteered to read it to Robert W. Chambers, the popular novelist.

"You know how Poe," the young man said, "read his stories to an old colored mammy, don't you? He believed that what pleased the old mammy would please the public, and he killed the scenes the old girl didn't like, and built up those she did. Well, Bob, I want—ha, ha, ha—I want to use you in the same way. Have a drink and a cigar, and then—"

"Excuse me, my man," said Mr. Chambers as he rose and took his hat and stick.

"You don't happen to be Poe, and therefore I don't feel called on to be your old colored mammy."

### BOSCHEE'S GERMAN SYRUP

will quiet your cough, soothe the inflammation of a sore throat and lungs, stop irritation in the bronchial tubes, insure a good night's rest, free from coughing and with easy expectoration in the morning. Made and sold in America for fifty-two years. A wonderful prescription, assisting Nature in building up your general health and throwing off the disease. Especially useful in lung trouble, asthma, croup, bronchitis, etc. For sale in all civilized countries.—Adv.

### Washington Once Drafted.

Even Washington himself was once drafted into the service of his country. It was in 1798, long after the revolution, and after Washington had been president for two terms, and had gone into a well-earned retirement at Mt. Vernon. France had broken relations with us, and war impended. Congress appointed Washington commander of the army, and the secretary of war, carrying the commission to him, found him in the harvest field. When Washington learned the errand on which his visitor had come, he said: "I am ready for any service that I can give my country."—Youth's Companion.

### RECIPE FOR GRAY HAIR.

To half pint of water add 1 oz. Bay Rum, a small box of Barbo Compound, and 1/2 oz. of glycerine. Any druggist can put this up or you can mix it at home at very little cost. Full directions for making and use come in each box of Barbo Compound. It will gradually darken streaked, faded gray hair, and make it soft and glossy. It will not color the scalp, is not sticky or greasy, and does not rub off. Adv.

### How She Told.

A visitor to a certain Brooklyn household was duly amazed by the wonderful likeness between the twins. "Why," she gasped, "I never saw two children look so much alike. How does your mother tell you apart?" "Well," explained Tommy, "she finds out by spanking us. Clarence hollers louder than I do."—Oakland Equivoc.

### Watch Your Skin Improve.

On rising and retiring gently smear the face with Cuticura Ointment. Wash off Ointment in five minutes with Cuticura Soap and hot water. For free sample address "Cuticura, Dept. X, Boston." At druggists and by mail. Soap 25, Ointment 25 and 50.—Adv.

### On Good Ground.

There is no place where a flirtation takes quicker root or matures more rapidly than in ecclesiastical soil—"Calvary Alley," by the author of "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch."

### RED CROSS BALL BLUE.

That's the idea. A pure blue, true blue, no dye. Gives to clothes a clear white, whiter than snow. Be careful, use the best. Large packages, sold by good grocers only, 5 cents. Ask for it today.—Adv.

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cough. There is only one "Brown Quinine" & W  
HIGBY'S REGISTERED BOX. 25c.

If a man feels it in his bones it's rheumatism.

### When Your Eyes Need Care

Try Murine Eye Remedy  
No Smarting—Just Eye Comfort—No Ointment  
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MURINE EYE REMEDY CO., CHICAGO