

A Man in the Open

by Roger Rocock

Illustrations by Ellsworth Young

SYNOPSIS.

The story opens with Jesse Smith relating the story of his birth, early life in Labrador and of the death of his father. Jesse becomes a sailor. His mother marries the master of the ship and both are lost in the wreck of the vessel. Jesse becomes a cowboy in Texas.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

Yes, when I looks back on them rambunctious entertainments along with Bull Durham, I see now what a success they was in learning me to ride. "What you need," says he, "is confidence. Got to forget mere matters of habes corpus, and how your toes point, and whether you're looking pretty. Just trust you' horse to pull through, so that you ain't caught in the flower of youthful innocence, and hung on the nearest telegraph pole."

Once I been to a theater, and seen a play. That's act one, with fifteen minutes hoping for act two. That's act after act till you just has to fill up the times between with injun war whoops, until act five, when all the ladies and gents is shot or married. It just can't go on. So the audience says, "Let's go'n have a drink," and the band goes off for a drink, and the lady with the programs tells you to get to hell out of that.

It's all over. The millionaire Lord Bishop of Durham is only Bull's father-in-law. Bull's not exactly a cowboy yet—but assists his mother, Mrs. Brooke, who is chef at a ranch. Bull won't be quite popular with his mother for having gorgeous celebrations with the hundred dollars she'd give him to pay off a little debt. It'd better not come to the ranch after leading mummie's boy astray from the paths of virtue.

There's the dust of Bull's horses way off along the road, and me settin' down by the wayside. A dog sets down in his skin, tall handy for wagging, all his possessions around him. I ain't even got no tail.

CHAPTER IV.

The Ordeal by Torture.

The Labrador was good to me, the sea was better, the stock range—wall, I'd four years punching cows, and I'm most surely grateful.

The world in them days was peopled with only two species, puncher and tenderfoot, the last bein' made by mistake. Moreover, we cow-boys belonged to two sects, our outfit, and others of no account. And in our outfit, this Jesse person which me, laid claims on being best man, having a pair of gold mounted spurs won at cyards from Pieface, our old foreman. I'd a roiled canteen, double-rig Cheyenne of carved leather, and silver horn—a dandy saddle that, first prize for "rope and tie down" again all comers.

Gun, belt, quirt, bridle, hat, gloves, everything, my whole kit was silver mounted and everything in it a trophy of trading, poker, or fighting. Besides my string of ponies I'd Tiger, an entire black colt I'd broke—though I own he was far from convinced. Add a good pay-day in my hind pocket, and d'ye think I'd own up to them twelve apostles for uncles? D'ye know what glory is? Well, I suppose it mostly consists of being young.

Time I speak of, our outfit had turned over three thousand head of long-horns to the Circle S and rode right into Abilene. Thar we was to take the train for our home ranch.

Yelled "Injuns!" and Stampeded.

down south, and I hoped to get back to my dog pup Rockyfeller. And yet I'd never before been on a railroad, and dreaded the boys would find out how scared I was of trains.

I lit in Abilene with a blush, and just stood rooted while a guy selling gold watches reads my name graved on the saddle, and then addressed me as Mister Smith. Old Pieface, scared for my morals, did kick this person sudden and severe, but all the same that Mister went to my head.

The smell of indoors made my stomach flop right over while we ranged up brave at the bar for a first drink. The raw rye felt like flames, though the preserved cherry afloat in it tasted familiar, like soap. At the same time the sight of a gambling lay-out made my pocket twitch, and I'd an inward

conviction telling me this place ain't good for kids. It's the foreman sent me off with a message.

I rolled my tail, and curved off with Tiger to take in the sights of the town. He shied heaps, and it's curious to think why he objected to sign-boards, awnings, lamp-posts, even to a harmless person lying drunk. Then a railroad engine snorted in our face, so Tiger and me was plumb stamped up a little side street. It's that he bucks for all he's worth, because of a kneeling man with a straw hat and a punctured soul, praying abundant. Of course this penitent turned round to enjoy the bucking match—

and sure reveals the face of my old friend, Bull Durham. We hadn't met for years, so as soon as Tiger was tired, Bull owned to finding the Lord, and being stony busted, ask if I was saved. I seen he'd got 'em bad, and shared my wad of money level with him. So we had cigars, a pound of chocolate creams, an oyster stew, and he bought a bottle of patent medicine for his liver. We shared that, and went on, he walking by my stirrup to the revival meetings.

This revival was happening at a barn, so I rode in. Tiger, you see, needed religion bad, and when people tried to turn him out, he kicked them. You should just have heard what the preacher told the Lord about me, and all the congregation groaned at me being so young and fair, with silver harness, and the hottest prospects—just as Pieface always said when I was late for breakfast.

They had a great big wooden cross upon the dais, and somehow, I dunno why, that made me feel ashamed. A girl in a white dress was singing "Rock of Ages"—oh, most beautiful, her arms thrown round the cross, the sun-bright hair about her like a glory.

The sight of girls went to my head like liquor, and this one was surely good with her sun-bright hair, her cheeks flushed 'cause I stared, her sulky lips rebuking when I threw a kiss, her yellow-brown eyes—

Oh, had I really washed behind my ears? Suppose I'd got high-water marks! Was my hands—I whipped off my gloves to inquire. That's what's the matter, sure. Got to make good before bein' introduced. Got to get a move on Tiger. I swung, spurred with one spring through the doors, yelled "Injuns!", and stamped, scatterin' gravel and panic through Abilene. I just went like one man for our cook wagon down by the railroad corrals.

Now, for all the shaving-glass could see, I was nice an' clean, but then that mirror has small views, and I'm not taking risks, but stripped and scrubbed all over. The place was so durned public I blushed from nose to heels till I was dressed again, shining my hair and boots. Then I procured an extra special, cherry-red, silk scarf out of the wrangler's kit.

Some of our boys made friendly signs as I passed on my way back, and fired a few shots after me for luck, but I'd no time to play. I joined the revival meeting just as the hat came round, so penitent sinners making for the door, came back to stay and pray because of Tiger. I gave Bull ten dollars to hand to the hat, only he passed it into his own pocket. He seemed annoyed, too, saying, "Waste not, want not." Then he explained how the fire-escape only paid Miss Ellis fifty dollars a day, whereas he was making hundreds.

Just then she passed, and I got introduced. "Say, Polly," says Bull, "here's Sailor Jesse wants to get acquainted."

She stopped, sort of impatient for supper, and velvet-soft her voice, full of contempt.

"Another damned suppliant?" she asked, and Bull—was holding a light for her cigarette. "Is it saved?" she added.

I couldn't speak. I wanted to tell her how I despised all the religion I'd seen, the bigots it made, an' the cowards. I'd rather burn with the goats than bleat among the sheep even now.

"Oh, that's all-right, then," she said as though she answered me, and frank as a man she gave her hand to shake. "Good stunt of mine, eh?" Although I own I'd like to have that cross stage-managed."

She passed the weather, admired Tiger, talked Browns and Jones with Bull, turning her back on me, asked him to supper, walked off with him, an' that's all. Egg-shells throw'd in the ash-heap may feel like I did then.

Nobody loved me, 'cept our pony herd, inquirin' piteous for food an' water. Our boys, of course, was drunk by then, just sleepin' whar they fell, so I was desolate as a moonlit dog-howl, ridin' herd with my night horse what Polly's little home glowed lights across the prairie. I seen Bull and the preacher leave there toward midnight, walkin' sort of extravagant into town.

The lights went out. Then times I'd take some sleep, or times ride herd

guarding her little house, till the cold came, till the dawn broke, till the sun came up.

It was half past breakfast when I seen Bull again, on his knees like yes-

terday, a-puttin' up loud prayers, which made me sick. "Rehearin'," says he, "cause Polly's stuck, and I'm to be chief mourner."

He was my only chance of meetin' Miss Polly, when a guy comes butting into our conversation. He'd puffed sleeves to his pants, and was all dressed saucy, standing straddle, aiming to impress. "Oh, what's my gun?" says Bull.

This person owned to being a gentleman, with a strong English accent. He'd 'undreds of 'orse at 'ome in Amherst, but wanted to own an 'ack'ere, don'tcherknow.

So Bull lifts up his eyes to Heaven, praying, "Oh, don't deliver us from temptation yet!" Whereas I confided with this person about Bull being far gone in religious mania. I owned Bull right though, about my bein' a sailor, timid with 'orse; and he seen for himself the way I was riding my Sam 'orse somethin' dreadful. Told me I'd ought to 'old my 'ed 'igh instead of 'umping. It's in toes, down 'heels, young feller, an' don't be 'ard on the bally hanimal. He'd gimme lessons only I was frightened, but out away from town the ground was softer for fallin', an' I gained courage. Happens Miss Polly's house was opposite. I scrambled down ungainly, shoved a pebble in along Sam's withers, and let this gent explain just how to set an

it. It Slid Him Around as He Dropped.

ard-mouthed 'unter. You 'olds is 'ed, placin' the 'and on the 'orn of the saddle, so. Then hup! That pebble done the rest.

Now, it's partly due to this 'ere entertainment, and the diamond ring I gave her, that Miss Polly began to perceive me with the naked eye, and said I might come to supper.

And that evening was most surely wonderful, in a parlor all antimacassars and rocker chairs with pink bows.

There was champagne wine, the little cigarettes with dreams inside, and a bottle no bigger'n my thumb smellin' so fierce it well-nigh blew my head off. Oh, it was all so elegant and high-toned that I got proud of being allowed indoors.

Her people was real society, her poppa an army general, ruined by the war, her mother prime Virginian. But then she'd gone on the stage, so there was mean suspicions.

I hold suspicion to be a form of meanness when it touches women. My mother would have shied at naked ladies, and dad was powerful again cigarettes. As for the smell, so fierce it had to be bottled, I'll own up I was shocked. But then you see mother and dad, an' me being working people, was not supposed to feel the heightened senses which belongs with wealth. It's not for grade stock like me to set up as judge on thoroughbreds, or call a lady immoral for using a spoon whar I should need a shovel.

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It was the seventh day she married me. I know, because Bull, acting as best man, claimed a kiss, which she gave him. "Bull," says she, "didn't I bet you I'd marry Sailor Jesse within a week? You owe me twenty dollars."

I saw the joke was on me. She passed the weather, admired Tiger, talked Browns and Jones with Bull, turning her back on me, asked him to supper, walked off with him, an' that's all. Egg-shells throw'd in the ash-heap may feel like I did then.

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"On cow-boy pay?" she said laughing. "On forty dollars a month? I spend more'n that on champagne. Here you Miss Jesse, who's payin' for this—you? Who keeps you, eh, Miss Prunes—and—prisms? Shamed of my bein' a lady, eh? I am a lady, too, and don't you forget it. And now, git out of my home."

I struck a match to the bo-kay of paper flowers, heaped on the hand-painted pictures, the paper fans, the rocker chairs, and slung the coal-oil lamp into the flames; then while she tore my shoulder with her teeth, I carried her to my tent. "That's your home now," I said. "The home of an honest working-man," I said, "and if another tough defiles my home, I'll kill you."

The house-warming gathered the neighbors, but she had no use for neighbors. Only they seen the line I drew in the dust around that tent, the dead-line. Afterward if any man came near that line, she'd scream.

But she'd taught me to drink, an' I drank, day after day, night after night, while she sat frightened in the tent, moaning when I came. Only when she was cured could I get work, not while I had to watch all day, all night.

She swore she loved me, she vowed that she'd repented, and I believed until she claimed religion. I'd seen her breed of religion. I'd rather have her atheist than shamming. She would keep straight, and be my faithful wife if I'd quit drinking, if I'd only take her away. But she'd married me for a joke, and false as a cracked bell she'd chimed out lies and lies, knowing as I knew that if she'd ever been among us. "Tain't more'n a day since you told me, and others present that you was marryin' for fun. You laughed at warnings, and this hero Jesse would have shot the man who warned him. You are a lady, and this boy you married for fun, is goin' to see you treated as a lady. I own he got rattled first shot, missing this tenderfoot's heart, which ain't up to average practice; but it's time you began to see the point of the joke."

They took the tenderfoot away, and we were alone, me watching the pool of red blood turning brown. Polly sat drumming tunes on the table, her face turned white, staring out through the window at the noon heat of the plains. I remember I took a bottle of champagne wine, filled a big goblet, and drank it off. It made me laugh to think she'd taught me drinking, so I had another. "I see," says Polly. "I understand now." At that she began to scream.

I should have told you, that after our boys of the Flying Zee quit Abilene, I pitched a little A tent on the prairie back of Polly's house. There I could see my ponies at grass, and snuff the air clear of that stinkin' town.

But from the time I moved into the house, that was something disturbing my nose—something uneasy—oh, I don't know what it was, back of all house smells, which gave me a sense of evil, so I could hardly bear to stay indoors.

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