

“I WAS A STRANGER, AND YE TOOK ME IN”

AS Shock stood, uncertain as to his next move, he noticed that out of the confused mingling of men and horses order began to appear. The course was once more being cleared. The final heat, which the Swallow had won, and which had been protested by the owner of the Demon, on the ground that his course had been blocked by Shock and his cayuse, was to be run again. Shock was too much occupied with his own disappointment and uncertainty to take much interest in the contest that was the occasion of such intense excitement to the throngs on the street. With languid indifference he watched the course being cleared and the competitors canter back to the starting point. Behind them followed a cavalcade of horsemen on all sorts of mounts, from the shaggy little cayuse, with diminishing rump, to the magnificent thoroughbred stallion, stall-fed and shining. In the final heat it was the custom for all the horsemen in the crowd to join at a safe distance behind the contestants, in a wild and tumultuous scramble.

Shock's attention was arrested and his interest quickened by the appearance of Ike in the crowd, riding a hard-looking, bony, buckskin broncho, which he guessed to be Slipper.

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In a short time the Demon and the Swallow were in their places. Far behind them bunched the motley crowd of horsemen.

The start was to be by the pistol shot, and from the scratch. So intense was the stillness of the excited crowd that, although the starting point was more than half a mile out on the prairie, the crack of the pistol was clearly heard.

In immediate echo the cry arose, “They're off! They're off!” and necks were strained to catch a glimpse of the first that should appear where the course took a slight turn.

In a few seconds the two leading horses are seen, the riders low over their necks, and behind them, almost hidden by the dust, the crowd of yelling, waving, shooting horsemen.

The Demon is leading, the Swallow close on his flank. As they come within clear view the experienced eyes of the crowd see that while the Demon, though as yet untouched by whip or spur, is doing all that is in him, the Swallow is holding him easily. On all sides the men of the west raise a pæan of victory, “The Swallow! The Swallow! Good boy, Kiddie! Let her go! Let her go!” “You've got him standing!” “Bully boy!”

Fifty yards from the winning post The Kid leans over his mare's neck and shakes out his fluttering reins. Like the bird whose name she bears the Swallow darts to the front, a length ahead. In vain the Captain calls to the Demon, plying fiercely whip and spur. With nostrils distended and blood-red, with

eyes starting from their sockets, and mouth foaming bloody froth, the noble animal responds and essays his final attempt.

It is a magnificent effort. Slowly he creeps up to the Swallow's flank, but beyond that he cannot make an inch, and so they remain to the winning post.

Down the street behind the leaders, yelling wild oaths, shooting off their guns, flinging hats in the air, and all enveloped in a cloud of dust, thunders the pursuing cavalcade.

Just as the Swallow shoots to the front, out from the cloud of dust behind, with his cowboy hat high in one hand and his reins fluttering loosely in the other, Ike emerges on his beloved Slipper. At every bound the buckskin gains upon the runners in front, but when level with the Demon, Ike steadies him down, for he would not be guilty of the bad taste of "shoving his nose into another man's fight," nor would he deprive the little mare, who carried the fortunes of the men of the west, of the glory of her victory.

The riot that follows the race passes description. The men from the west go mad. About The Kid and his little mare they surge in a wave of frantic enthusiasm. Into the Ranchers' Roost they carry the rider to wash down the dust, while as many as can find room for a hand get vigorously to work upon the Swallow.

After the riot had somewhat subsided and the street had become partially clear, side by side, threading their way through the crowd, appeared the two com-

petitors for the Cup. On all sides they were greeted with renewed cheers, and under the excitement of the hour they abandoned the customary reserve of the cowboy, and began performing what seemed to Shock impossible feats of horsemanship.

"I bet you I'll ride her into the Roost, Captain," cried The Kiddie.

"Done, for the drinks!" replied the Captain.

The boy cantered his mare across the street.

"Out of the way there!" he cried. "Out of the way, you fellows! I'm coming!"

As he spoke he put the little mare straight at the flight of steps leading up to the door of the Roost. The crowd parted hastily, but the Swallow balked and swerved, and but for the fine horsemanship of the rider he would have been thrown.

With an oath, the Kid took hold of his horse again, and riding carelessly, faced her once more at the steps. But again she plunged, reared, swung round, and set off at a run down the street.

The lad rode her easily back, brought her up to the steps at a walk, quieted her with voice and hand, and then, cantering across the street, came back again at an easy lope to the steps. The mare made as if to balk again.

"Up, girl!" cried the boy, lifting her with the rein; and then, as she rose, touching her with the spur, Like a cat the little mare clambered up the steps, and before she could change her mind she found herself through the door, standing in the bar-room with her rider on her back.

Through the outer entrance thronged the crowd of men, giving vent to their admiration in yells and oaths, and lining up at the bar waited for the payment of the bet.

Shock, who had been singularly attracted by the handsome, boyish face of the rider, walked up to the door and stood looking in, his great form towering above the crowd of men that swayed and jostled, chafing and swearing, inside. As he stood looking at the boy, sitting his horse with such careless grace, and listening with pleased and smiling face to the varied and picturesque profanity in which the crowd were expressing their admiration, the words of his Convener came to his mind, "They may not want you, but they need you."

"Yes," he muttered to himself, "they need me, or someone better."

A great pity for the lad filled his heart and overflowed from his eyes.

The boy caught the look. With a gay laugh he cried, "I would drink to your very good health, sir!" his high, clear voice penetrating the din and bringing the crowd to silence. "But why carry so grave a face at such a joyous moment?" He lifted his glass over his head and bowed low to Shock.

Arrested by his words, the crowd turned their eyes toward the man that stood in the door, waiting in silence for his reply.

A quick flush rose to Shock's face, but without moving his eyes from the gay, laughing face of the boy, he said in a clear, steady voice, "I thank you,

sir, for your courtesy, and I ask your pardon if my face was grave. I was thinking of your mother."

As if someone had stricken him the boy swayed over his horse's neck, but in a moment recovering himself he sat up straight, and lifting high his glass, he said reverently, as if he had been toasting the Queen: "Gentlemen, my mother! God bless her!"

"God bless her!" echoed the men.

Drinking off the glass he dismounted and, followed by the cheers of the crowd, led his horse out of the room and down the steps, and rode away.

Meantime Shock went in search of the doctor. In a corner of the International bar he found him in a drunken sleep. After vain efforts to wake him, without more ado Shock lifted him in his arms, carried him out to the buckboard and drove away, followed by the jibes and compliments of the astonished crowd.

But what to do with him was the question. There was no room for himself, much less for his charge, in any of the hotels or stopping places.

"May as well begin now," Shock said to himself, and drove out to a little bluff of poplars at the river bank near the town, and prepared to camp.

He disposed of the doctor by laying him in the back of his buckboard, covered with the buffalo. He unhitched and tethered the pony, and, according to his crude notions of what a camp should be, began to make his preparations. With very considerable difficulty, he first of all started a fire.

"Hello! Rather chilly for campin' out yit?"

He looked up and saw Ike.

"I guess you aint lived much out of doors," continued his visitor, glancing at the apology for a fire, and noticing the absence of everything in camp-making that distinguishes the experienced camper.

"No, this is my first camp," said Shock. "But I suppose every man must make a beginning."

"Yes," agreed Ike, "when he's got to. But I have a lingerin' suspicion that you'd be better inside to-night. It aint goin' to be pleasant."

"Oh, I'll be all right," replied Shock cheerfully. "I have a small tent, a couple of coats, a pair of blankets, and my pony has got his oats."

"Yes," drawled Ike, regarding the cayuse with contemptuous eyes, "he's all right. You can't kill them fellers. But, as I remarked, you'd be better inside."

He walked around the buckboard and his eyes fell upon the doctor.

"What the——" Ike checked himself, either out of deference to Shock's profession or more likely from sheer amazement.

He turned down the buffalo, gazed at the sleeping figure with long and grave interest, then lifting his head he remarked with impressive solemnity, "Well, I be chawed and swallowed! You *have* got him, eh? Now, how did you do it?"

"Well," said Shock, "it was not difficult. I found him asleep in the International. I carried him out, and there he is."

"Say," said Ike, looking at Shock with dawning admiration in his eyes, "you're a bird! Is there any-

thin' else you want in that town? Guess not, else it would be here. The General said you'd kidnap him, and he was right. Now, what you goin' to do when he comes to? There aint much shelter in this bluff, and when he wakes he'll need someone to set up with him, sure. He's a terror, a dog-goned terror!"

"Oh, we'll manage," said Shock lightly. "I mean to start early in the morning."

"Before he gets up, eh? As I remarked before, you're a bird!"

For some moments Ike hung about the camp, poking the fire, evidently somewhat disturbed in his mind. Finally he said in a hesitating tone, "It aint much to offer any man, but my shack kin hold two men as well as one, and I guess three could squeeze in, specially if the third is in the condition he's in," nodding toward the doctor. "We kin lay him on the floor. Of course, it aint done up with no picters and hangin's, but it keeps out the breeze, and there aint no bugs, you bet."

Shock's experience of Western shacks had not been sufficiently varied and extensive to enable him to appreciate to the full this last commendation of Ike's.

Ike's hesitation in making the offer determined Shock.

"Thank you very much," he said cordially. "I shall be delighted to go with you."

"All right, let's git," said Ike, proceeding to hitch up the pony, while Shock gathered his stuff together. In a few minutes they were ready to start.

"Guess he'll ride comfortable where he is," said

Ike. "You can't kill a drunk man. Strange, aint it?"

It was growing dusk as they drove through the town, but the streets, the hotel stoops, and bars were filled with men in various stages of intoxication. As they caught sight of Ike and recognised his companion, they indulged themselves in various facetious remarks.

"Hello, Ike. Goin' to meetin'?"

"No," retorted Ike shortly. "Goin' to school fer manners. Want to come?"

"Ikey's got religion. Caught on to the fire-escape you bet."

"No, he's goin' to learn that rasslin' trick."

"Ikey's showin' the stranger the town. He's on for a bust, you bet."

"Blank lot of jay birds," said Ike grimly, in a low tone. "I'll see 'em later. You'd think they'd never seen a stranger before."

"That is all for me, I suppose, Ike," said Shock apologetically.

"Don't you worry. It won't give me any grey hair." Ike emphasised his indifference by tilting his hat till it struck on the extreme back of his head, and lounging back in his seat with his feet on the dashboard.

"They all seen you givin' me that h'ist this afternoon," he continued, "and they can't get over that we aint fightin'. And," he added, hitting the hub of the wheel with a stream of tobacco juice, "it is a rather remarkable reminiscence."

Ike had a fondness for words not usually current among the cowboys, and in consequence his English was more or less reminiscent, and often phonetic rather than etymological.

Ike's shack stood at the further side of the town. Upon entering Shock discovered that it needed no apology for its appearance. The board walls were adorned with illustrations from magazines and papers, miscellaneous and without taint of prejudice, the *Sunday Magazine* and the *Police Gazette* having places of equal honour. On the wall, too, were nailed heads of mountain sheep and goats, of wapiti and other deer, proclaiming Ike a hunter.

Everything in the shack was conspicuously clean, from the pots, pans, and cooking utensils, which hung on a row of nails behind the stove, to the dish-cloth, which was spread carefully to dry over the dish-pan. Had Shock's experience of bachelors' shacks and bachelors' dishes been larger, he would have been more profoundly impressed with that cooking outfit, and especially with the dish-cloth. As it was, the dish-cloth gave Shock a sense of security and comfort.

Depositing the doctor upon a buffalo skin on the floor in the corner, with a pillow under his head, they proceeded to their duties, Ike to prepare the evening meal, and Shock to unpack his stuff, wondering all the while how this cowboy had come to hunt him up and treat him with such generous hospitality.

This mystery was explained as they sat about the fire after the tea-dishes had been most carefully washed and set away, Ike smoking and Shock musing.

"That old skunk rather turned you down, I guess," remarked Ike, after a long silence; "that old Macfarren, I mean," in answer to Shock's look of enquiry.

"I was surprised, I confess," replied Shock. "You see, I was led to believe that he was waiting for me, and I was depending upon him. Now, I really do not know what to think."

"Movin' out, perhaps?" said Ike, casting a sharp look at him from out of his half-closed eyes.

"What? Leave this post, do you mean?" said Shock, his indignant surprise showing in his tone. "No, sir. At least, not till my chief says so."

A gleam shot out from under Ike's lowered eyelids.

"The old fellow 'll make it hot for you, if you don't move. Guess he expects you to move," said Ike quietly.

"Move!" cried Shock again, stirred at the remembrance of Macfarren's treatment that afternoon. "Would you?"

"See him blanked first," said Ike quietly.

"So will I," said Shock emphatically. "I mean," correcting himself hastily, "see him saved first."

"Eh? Oh—well, guess he needs some. He needs manners, anyhow. He'll worry you, I guess. You see, he surmises he's the entire bunch, but a man's opinion of himself don't really affect the size of his hat band."

Shock felt the opportunity to be golden for the gathering of information about men and things in

the country where his work was to be done. He felt that to see life through the eyes of a man like Ike, who represented a large and potent element in the community, would be valuable indeed.

It was difficult to make Ike talk, but by careful suggestions, rather than by questioning, Ike was finally led to talk, and Shock began to catch glimpses of a world quite new to him, and altogether wonderful. He made the astounding discovery that things that had all his life formed the basis of his thinking were to Ike and his fellows not so much unimportant as irrelevant; and as for the great spiritual verities which lay at the root of all Shock's mental and, indeed, physical activities, furnishing motive and determining direction, these to Ike were quite remote from all practical living. What had God to do with rounding up cattle, or broncho-busting, or horse-trading? True, the elemental virtues of justice, truth, charity, and loyalty were as potent over Ike as over Shock, but their moral standards were so widely different that these very virtues could hardly be classified in the same categories. Truth was sacred, but lying was one thing and horse-swapping another, and if a man was "white to the back" what more would you ask, even though at poker he could clean you out of your whole outfit?

Hitherto, a man who paid no respect to the decencies of religion Shock had regarded as "a heathen man and a publican," but with Ike religion, with all its great credos, with all its customs, had simply no bearing. Shock had not talked long with Ike until

he began to feel that he must readjust not only his whole system of theology, but even his moral standards, and he began to wonder how the few sermons and addresses he had garnered from his ministry in the city wards would do for Ike and his people. He was making the discovery that climate changes the complexion, not only of men, but of habits of thought and action.

As Shock was finding his way to new adjustments and new standards he was incidentally finding his way into a new feeling of brotherhood as well. The lines of cleavage which had hitherto determined his interests and affinities were being obliterated. The fictitious and accidental were fading out under this new atmosphere, and the great lines of sheer humanity were coming to stand out with startling clearness. Up to this time creed and class had largely determined both his interest and his responsibility, but now, apart from class and creed, men became interesting, and for men he began to feel responsibility. He realised as never before that a man was the great asset of the universe—not his clothes, material, social or religious.

It was this new feeling of interest and responsibility that made him ask, "Who was that lad that rode the winning horse to-day?"

"That chap?" replied Ike. "He's my boss. The Kid, they call him."

Men of laconic speech say much by tone and gesture, and often by silence. In Ike's tone Shock read contempt, admiration, pity.

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"A rancher?" he enquired.

"Well, he's got a ranch, and horses and cattle on it, like the rest of 'em. But ranchin'——" Ike's silence was more than sufficient.

"Well," said Shock, with admiring emphasis, "he seems to be able to ride, anyway."

"Ride! I should surmise! Ride! That kid could ride anythin' from a he-goat to a rampagin', highpotopotamus. Why, look here!" Ike waxed enthusiastic. "He's been two years in this country, and he's got us all licked good and quiet. Why, he could give points to any cattle-man in Alberta."

"Well, what's the matter with him?"

"Money!" said Ike wrathfully. "Some blamed fool uncle at home—he's got no parents, I understand—keeps a-sendin' him money. Consequently, every remittance he cuts things loose, with everyone in sight a-helpin' him."

"What a shame!" cried Shock. "He has a nice face. I just like to look at him."

"That's right!" answered Ike, with no waning of his enthusiasm. "He's white—but he's soft. Makes me so blank mad! He don't know they're playin' him, and makin' him pay for the game. The only question is, will he hold out longer'n his money."

"Why! hasn't he any friends here who would remonstrate with him?"

"Remonstrate! Remonstrate!" Ike rolled the word under his tongue as if it felt good. "You try to remonstrate, and see him look at you, and then smile, till you feel like a cluckin' hen that has lost her

nest. Not any for me, thank you. But it's a blank pity! He's a white kiddie, he is."

"And that friend of his who was riding with him—who is he?"

"Harricomb—Captain Hal Harricomb, they call him. Good sort of fellow, too, but lazy—and considerable money. Goin' at a pretty good lick. Wife pulls him up, I guess. Good thing for him, too. Lives up by the General's—old gent, you know, sat by when you set me down out yonder. Mighty slick, too. Wasn't on to you, though."

"No," Shock hastened to say, "it was a fluke, of course. General Brady, you mean. Yes, he was very kind, indeed."

"Oh, the General's a gentleman, you bet! Horse ranch. Not very big, but makes it go."

"Could not a man like the General, now, help that young fellow—what is his name?"

"His name? Well, he goes by 'The Kid.' His name's Stanton, I think. Yes, Stanton—Vic Stanton. Though he never gets it."

"Well, could not the General help him?" repeated Shock.

"Help The Kid? Not he, nor anyone else. When a horse with blood in him gets a-goin', why, he's got to go till his wind gives out, unless you throw him right down, and that's resky. You've got to wait his time. Then's your chance. And that reminds me," said Ike, rising and knocking the ashes out of his pipe, "that I've got a job on hand. There'll be doin's to-night there after the happy time is over."

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Shock looked mystified.

"They'll get the ladies off, you know, and then the fun'll begin."

"Fun?"

Ike winked a long, significant wink. "Yes. Literary Society, you know. A little game in the back room."

"And are you going to play, Ike?"

"Not to-night, thank you. I aint no saint, but I aint a blank fool altogether, and to-night I got to keep level. To-day's the boss's remittance day. He's got his cheque, I've heard, and they're goin' to roll him."

"Roll him?"

"Yes, clean him out. So I surmise it'd be wise for me to be on hand."

"Why, what have you got to do with it, Ike?"

Ike paused for a few moments, while he filled his pipe, preparatory to going out.

"Well, that's what I don't right know. It aint any of my own business. Course he's my boss, but it aint that. Somehow, that Kiddie has got a hitch onto my innards, and I can't let him get away. He's got such a blank slick way with him that he makes you feel like doin' the things you hate to do. Why, when he smiles at you the sun begins to shine. That's so. Why, you saw that race this afternoon?"

"Yes, the last heat."

"Well, did you observe Slipper come in?"

"Well, yes, I did. And I could not understand

why Slipper was not running. Why didn't you run him, Ike?"

"Why?" said Ike, "that's what I don't know. There aint nothin' on four legs with horsehide on in these here Territories that can make Slipper take dust, but then—well, I knowed he had money on the Swallow. But I guess I must be goin'."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'll fall down somewheres and go to sleep. You see lots of things when you're asleep, providin' you know how to accomplish it."

"Shall I go with you?" asked Shock.

Ike regarded him curiously.

"Guess you wouldn't care to be mixed up in this kind of thing. But blame it, if I don't think you'd stay with it if it was in your line, which it aint."

"But suppose you get into difficulty."

"Well," said Ike, smiling a slow smile, "when I want you I'll send for you," and with that he passed out into the night.

XII

HIS KEEPER

TILL long after midnight Shock sat over the fire pondering the events of the day, and trying to make real to himself the strange series of happenings that had marked his introduction to his work in this country. His life for the last month had been so unlike anything in his past as to seem quite unnatural.

As he sat thus musing over the past and planning for the future, a knock came to the door, and almost immediately there came in a little man, short and squat, with humped shoulders, bushy, grizzled hair and beard, through which peered sharp little black eyes. His head and face and eyes made one think of a little Scotch terrier.

"Ye're the meenister?" he said briefly.

"Yes," replied Shock, greatly surprised at his visitor, but warming to the Scotch voice.

"Aye. Ye're wanted."

"Wanted? By whom?"

"The man that lives in this hoose. He's deein', I'm thinkin'."

"Dying!" said Shock, starting up and seizing his hat. "What! Ike?"

"Aye, Ike. He's verra ill."