



"SHE WAS STANDING ON THE CENTRE TABLE BY NOW, SO SHE COULD LAMP HERSELF IN THE GLASS OVER THE MANTEL"

To
GEORGE HORACE LORIMER

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I. The Red Splash of Romance

CHAPTER II. Ma Pettengill and the Song of Songs

CHAPTER III. The Real Peruvian Doughnuts

CHAPTER IV. Once a Scotchman, Always

CHAPTER V. Non Plush Ultra

CHAPTER VI. Cousin Egbert Intervenes

CHAPTER VII. Kate; or, Up From the Depths

CHAPTER VIII. Pete's B'other-in-law

CHAPTER IX. Little Old New York

I

THE RED SPLASH OF ROMANCE

The walls of the big living-room in the Arrowhead ranch house are tastefully enlivened here and there with artistic spoils of the owner, Mrs. Lysander John Pettengill. There are family portraits in crayon, photo-engravings of noble beasts clipped from the *Breeder's Gazette*, an etched cathedral or two, a stuffed and varnished trout of such size that no one would otherwise have believed in it, a print in three colours of a St. Bernard dog with a marked facial resemblance to the late William E. Gladstone, and a triumph of architectural perspective revealing two sides of the Pettengill block, corner of Fourth and Main streets, Red Gap, made vivacious by a bearded fop on horseback who doffs his silk hat to a couple of overdressed ladies with parasols in a passing victoria.

And there is the photograph of the fat man. He is very large—both high and wide. He has filled the lens and now compels the eye. His broad face beams a friendly interest. His moustache is a flourishing, uncurbed, riotous growth above his billowy chin.

The checked coat, held recklessly aside by a hand on each hip, reveals an incredible expanse of waistcoat, the pattern of which raves horribly. From pocket to pocket of this gaudy shield curves a watch chain of massive links—nearly a yard of it, one guesses.

Often I have glanced at this noisy thing tacked to the wall, entranced by the simple width of the man. Now on a late afternoon I loitered before it while my hostess changed from riding breeches to the gown of lavender and lace in which she elects to drink tea after a day's hard work along the valleys of the Arrowhead. And for the first time I observed a line of writing beneath the portrait, the writing of my hostess, a rough, downright, plain fashion of script: "Reading from left to right—Mr. Ben Sutton, Popular Society Favourite of Nome, Alaska."

"Reading from left to right!" Here was the intent facetious. And Ma Pettengill is never idly facetious. Always, as the advertisements

say, "There's a reason!" And now, also for the first time, I noticed some printed verses on a sheet of thickish yellow paper tacked to the wall close beside the photograph—so close that I somehow divined an intimate relationship between the two. With difficulty removing my gaze from the gentleman who should be read from left to right, I scanned these verses:

SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD

*A child of the road – a gypsy I –
My path o'er the land and sea;
With the fire of youth I warm my nights
And my days are wild and free.*

*Then ho! for the wild, the open road!
Afar from the haunts of men.
The woods and the hills for my spirit untamed –
I'm away to mountain and glen.*

*If ever I tried to leave my hills
To abide in the cramped haunts of men,
The urge of the wild to her wayward child
Would drag me to freedom again.*

*I'm slave to the call of the open road;
In your cities I'd stifle and die.
I'm off to the hills in fancy I see –
On the breast of old earth I'll lie.*

WILFRED LENNOX, *the Hobo Poet,*
On a Coast-to-Coast Walking Tour.
These Cards for sale.

I briefly pondered the lyric. It told its own simple story and could at once have been dismissed but for its divined and puzzling relationship to the popular society favourite of Nome, Alaska. What could there be in this?

Mrs. Lysander John Pettengill bustled in upon my speculation, but as usual I was compelled to wait for the talk I wanted. For some

moments she would be only the tired owner of the Arrowhead Ranch—in the tea gown of a debutante and with too much powder on one side of her nose—and she must have at least one cup of tea so corrosive that the Scotch whiskey she adds to it is but a merciful dilution. She now drank eagerly of the fearful brew, dulled the bite of it with smoke from a hurriedly built cigarette, and relaxed gratefully into one of those chairs which are all that most of us remember William Morris for. Even then she must first murmur of the day's annoyances, provided this time by officials of the United States Forest Reserve. In the beginning I must always allow her a little to have her own way.

"The annual spring rumpus with them rangers," she wearily boomed. "Every year they tell me just where to turn my cattle out on the Reserve, and every year I go ahead and turn 'em out where I want 'em turned out, which ain't the same place at all, and then I have to listen patiently to their kicks and politely answer all letters from the higher-ups and wait for the official permit, which always comes—and it's wearing on a body. Darn it! They'd ought to know by this time I always get my own way. If they wasn't such a decent bunch I'd have words with 'em, giving me the same trouble year after year, probably because I'm a weak, defenceless woman. However!"

The lady rested largely, inert save for the hand that raised the cigarette automatically to her lips. My moment had come.

"What did Wilfred Lennox, the hobo poet, have to do with Mr. Ben Sutton, of Nome, Alaska?" I gently inquired.

"More than he wanted," replied the lady. Her glance warmed with memories; she hovered musingly on the verge of recital. But the cigarette was half done and at its best. I allowed her another moment, a moment in which she laughed confidentially to herself, a little dry, throaty laugh. I knew that laugh. She would be marshalling certain events in their just and diverting order. But they seemed to be many and of confusing values.

"Some said he not only wasn't a hobo but wasn't even a poet," she presently murmured, and smoked again. Then: "That Ben Sutton, now, he's a case. Comes from Alaska and don't like fresh eggs for breakfast because he says they ain't got any kick to 'em like Alaska

eggs have along in March, and he's got to have canned milk for his coffee. Say, I got a three-quarters Jersey down in Red Gap gives milk so rich that the cream just naturally trembles into butter if you speak sharply to it or even give it a cross look; not for Ben though. Had to send out for canned milk that morning. I drew the line at hunting up case eggs for him though. He had to put up with insipid fresh ones. And fat, that man! My lands! He travels a lot in the West when he does leave home, and he tells me it's the fear of his life he'll get wedged into one of them narrow-gauge Pullmans some time and have to be chopped out. Well, as I was saying—" She paused.

"But you haven't begun," I protested. I sharply tapped the printed verses and the photograph reading from left to right. Now she became animated, speaking as she expertly rolled a fresh cigarette.

"Say, did you ever think what aggravating minxes women are after they been married a few years—after the wedding ring gets worn a little bit thin?"

This was not only brutal; it seemed irrelevant.

"Wilfred Lennox—" I tried to insist, but she commandingly raised the new cigarette at me.

"Yes, sir! Ever know one of 'em married for as long as ten years that didn't in her secret heart have a sort of contempt for her life partner as being a stuffy, plodding truck horse? Of course they keep a certain dull respect for him as a provider, but they can't see him as dashing and romantic any more; he ain't daring and adventurous. All he ever does is go down and open up the store or push back the roll-top, and keep from getting run over on the street. One day's like another with him, never having any wild, lawless instincts or reckless moods that make a man fascinating—about the nearest he ever comes to adventure is when he opens the bills the first of the month. And she often seeing him without any collar on, and needing a shave mebbe, and cherishing her own secret romantic dreams, while like as not he's prosily figuring out how he's going to make the next payment on the endowment policy.

"It's a hard, tiresome life women lead, chained to these here plodders. That's why rich widows generally pick out the dashing young devils they do for their second, having buried the man that made it

for 'em. Oh, they like him well enough, call him 'Father' real tenderly, and see that he changes to the heavy flannels on time, but he don't ever thrill them, and when they order three hundred and fifty dollars' worth of duds from the Boston Cash Emporium and dress up like a foreign countess, they don't do it for Father, they do it for the romantic guy in the magazine serial they're reading, the handsome, cynical adventurer that has such an awful power over women. They know darned well they won't ever meet him; still it's just as well to be ready in case he ever should make Red Gap—or wherever they live—and it's easy with the charge account there, and Father never fussing more than a little about the bills.

"Not that I blame 'em. We're all alike—innovent enough, with freaks here and there that ain't. Why, I remember about a thousand years ago I was reading a book called 'Lillian's Honour,' in which the rightful earl didn't act like an earl had ought to, but went traveling off over the moors with a passel of gypsies, with all the she-gypsies falling in love with him, and no wonder—he was that dashing. Well, I used to think what might happen if he should come along while Lysander John was out with the beef round-up or something. I was well-meaning, understand, but at that I'd ought to have been laid out with a pick-handle. Oh, the nicest of us got specks inside us—if ever we did cut loose the best one of us would make the worst man of you look like nothing worse than a naughty little boy cutting up in Sunday-school. What holds us, of course—we always dream of being took off our feet; of being carried off by main force against our wills while we snuggle up to the romantic brute and plead with him to spare us—and the most reckless of 'em don't often get their nerve up to that. Well, as I was saying—"

But she was not saying. The thing moved too slowly. And still the woman paltered with her poisoned tea and made cigarettes and muttered inconsequently, as when she now broke out after a glance at the photograph:

"That Ben Sutton certainly runs amuck when he buys his vests. He must have about fifty, and the quietest one in the lot would make a leopard skin look like a piker." Again her glance dreamed off to visions.

I seated myself before her with some emphasis and said firmly: "Now, then!" It worked.

"Wilfred Lennox," she began, "calling himself the hobo poet, gets into Red Gap one day and makes the rounds with that there piece of poetry you see; pushes into stores and offices and hands the piece out, and like as not they crowd a dime or two bits onto him and send him along. That's what I done. I was waiting in Dr. Percy Hailley Martingale's office for a little painless dentistry, and I took Wilfred's poem and passed him a two-bit piece, and Doc Martingale does the same, and Wilfred blew on to the next office. A dashing and romantic figure he was, though kind of fat and pasty for a man that was walking from coast to coast, but a smooth talker with beautiful features and about nine hundred dollars' worth of hair and a soft hat and one of these flowing neckties. Red it was.

"So I looked over his piece of poetry—about the open road for his untamed spirit and him being stifled in the cramped haunts of men—and of course I get his number. All right about the urge of the wild to her wayward child, but here he was spending a lot of time in the cramped haunts of men taking their small change away from 'em and not seeming to stifle one bit.

"Ain't this new style of tramp funny? Now instead of coming round to the back door and asking for a hand-out like any self-respecting tramp had ought to, they march up to the front door, and they're somebody with two or three names that's walking round the world on a wager they made with one of the Vanderbilt boys or John D. Rockefeller. They've walked thirty-eight hundred miles already and got the papers to prove it—a letter from the mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, and the mayor of Davenport, Iowa, a picture post card of themselves on the courthouse steps at Denver, and they've bet forty thousand dollars they could start out without a cent and come back in twenty-two months with money in their pocket—and ain't it a good joke?—with everybody along the way entering into the spirit of it and passing them quarters and such, and thank you very much for your two bits for the picture post card—and they got another showing 'em in front of the Mormon Tabernacle at Salt Lake City, if you'd like that, too—and thank you again—and now they'll be off once more to the open road and the

wild, free life. Not! Yes, two or three good firm Nots. Having milked the town they'll be right down to the dee-po with their silver changed to bills, waiting for No. 6 to come along, and ho! for the open railroad and another town that will skin pretty. I guess I've seen eight or ten of them boys in the last five years, with their letters from mayors.

"But this here Wilfred Lennox had a new graft. He was the first I'd give up to for mere poetry. He didn't have a single letter from a mayor, nor even a picture card of himself standing with his hat off in front of Pike's Peak—nothing but poetry. But, as I said, he was there with a talk about pining for the open road and despising the cramped haunts of men, and he had appealing eyes and all this flowing hair and necktie. So I says to myself: 'All right, Wilfred, you win!' and put my purse back in my bag and thought no more of it.

"Yet not so was it to be. Wilfred, working the best he could to make a living doing nothing, pretty soon got to the office of Alonzo Price, Choice Improved Real Estate and Price's Addition. Lon was out for the moment, but who should be there waiting for him but his wife, Mrs. Henrietta Templeton Price, recognized leader of our literary and artistic set. Or I think they call it a 'group' or a 'coterie' or something. Setting at Lon's desk she was, toying petulantly with horrid old pens and blotters, and probably bestowing glances of disrelish from time to time round the grimy office where her scrubby little husband toiled his days away in unromantic squalor.

"I got to tell you about Henrietta. She's one of them like I just said the harsh things about, with the secret cry in her heart for romance and adventure and other forbidden things and with a kindly contempt for peaceful Alonzo. She admits to being thirty-six, so you can figure it out for yourself. Of course she gets her husband wrong at that, as women so often do. Alonzo has probably the last pair of side whiskers outside of a steel engraving and stands five feet two, weighing a hundred and twenty-six pounds at the ring side, but he's game as a swordfish, and as for being romantic in the true sense of the word—well, no one that ever heard him sell a lot in Price's Addition—three miles and a half up on the mesa, with only the smoke of the canning factory to tell a body they was still near the busy haunts of men, that and a mile of concrete sidewalk lead-

ing a life of complete idleness—I say no one that ever listened to Lon sell a lot up there, pointing out on a blue print the proposed site of the Carnegie Library, would accuse him of not being romantic.

"But of course Henrietta never sees Lon's romance and he ain't always had the greatest patience with hers—like the time she got up the Art Loan Exhibit to get new books for the M.E. Sabbath-school library and got Spud Mulkins of the El Adobe to lend 'em the big gold-framed oil painting that hangs over his bar. Some of the other ladies objected to this—the picture was a big pink hussy lying down beside the ocean—but Henrietta says art for art's sake is pure to them that are pure, or something, and they're doing such things constantly in the East; and I'm darned if Spud didn't have his oil painting down and the mosquito netting ripped off it before Alonzo heard about it and put the Not-at-All on it. He wouldn't reason with Henrietta either. He just said his objection was that every man that saw it would put one foot up groping for the brass railing, which would be undignified for a Sabbath-school scheme, and that she'd better hunt out something with clothes on like Whistler's portrait of his mother, or, if she wanted the nude in art, to get the Horse Fair or something with animals.

"I tell you that to show you how they don't hit it off sometimes. Then Henrietta sulks. Kind of pinched and hungry looking she is, drapes her black hair down over one side of her high forehead, wears daring gowns—that's what she calls 'em anyway—and reads the most outrageous kinds of poetry out loud to them that will listen. Likes this Omar Something stuff about your path being beset with pitfalls and gin fizzes and getting soused out under a tree with your girl.

"I'm just telling you so you'll get Henrietta when Wilfred Lennox drips gracefully in with his piece of poetry in one hand. Of course she must have looked long and nervously at Wilfred, then read his poetry, then looked again. There before her was Romance against a background of Alonzo Price, who never had an adventurous or evil thought in his life, and wore rubbers! Oh, sure! He must have palsied her at once, this wild, free creature of the woods who couldn't stand the cramped haunts of men. And I have said that Wilfred was there with the wild, free words about himself, and the hat and tie

and the waving brown hair that give him so much trouble. Shucks! I don't blame the woman. It's only a few years since we been let out from under lock and key. Give us a little time to get our bearings, say I. Wilfred was just one big red splash before her yearning eyes; he blinded her. And he stood there telling how this here life in the marts of trade would sure twist and blacken some of the very finest chords in his being. Something like that it must have been.

"Anyway, about a quarter to six a procession went up Fourth Street, consisting of Wilfred Lennox, Henrietta, and Alonzo. The latter was tripping along about three steps back of the other two and every once in a while he would stop for a minute and simply look puzzled. I saw him. It's really a great pity Lon insists on wearing a derby hat with his side whiskers. To my mind the two never seem meant for each other.

"The procession went to the Price mansion up on Ophir Avenue. And that evening Henrietta had in a few friends to listen to the poet recite his verses and tell anecdotes about himself. About five or six ladies in the parlour and their menfolks smoking out on the front porch. The men didn't seem to fall for Wilfred's open-road stuff the way the ladies did. Wilfred was a good reciter and held the ladies with his voice and his melting blue eyes with the long lashes, and Henrietta was envied for having nailed him. That is, the women envied her. The men sort of slouched off down to the front gate and then went down to the Temperance Billiard Parlour, where several of 'em got stewed. Most of 'em, like old Judge Ballard, who come to the country in '62, and Jeff Tuttle, who's always had more than he wanted of the open road, were very cold indeed to Wilfred's main proposition. It is probable that low mutterings might have been heard among 'em, especially after a travelling man that was playing pool said the hobo poet had come in on the Pullman of No. 6.

"But I must say that Alonzo didn't seem to mutter any, from all I could hear. Pathetic, the way that little man will believe right up to the bitter end. He said that for a hobo Wilfred wrote very good poetry, better than most hobos could write, he thought, and that Henrietta always knew what she was doing. So the evening come to a peaceful end, most of the men getting back for their wives and Alonzo showing up in fair shape and plumb eager for the comfort

of his guest. It was Alonzo's notion that the guest would of course want to sleep out in the front yard on the breast of old earth where he could look up at the pretty stars and feel at home, and he was getting out a roll of blankets when the guest said he didn't want to make the least bit of trouble and for one night he'd manage to sleep inside four stifling walls in a regular bed, like common people do. So Lon bedded him down in the guest chamber, but opened up the four windows in it and propped the door wide open so the poor fellow could have a breeze and not smother. He told this downtown the next morning, and he was beginning to look right puzzled indeed. He said the wayward child of Nature had got up after about half an hour and shut all the windows and the door. Lon thought first he was intending to commit suicide, but he didn't like to interfere. He was telling Jeff Tuttle and me about it when we happened to pass his office.

"And there's another funny thing," he says. "This chap was telling us all the way up home last night that he never ate meat—simply fruits and nuts with a mug of spring water. He said eating the carcasses of murdered beasts was abhorrent to him. But when we got down to the table he consented to partake of the roast beef and he did so repeatedly. We usually have cold meat for lunch the day after a rib roast, but there will be something else to-day; and along with the meat he drank two bottles of beer, though with mutterings of disgust. He said spring water in the hills was pure, but that water out of pipes was full of typhoid germs. He admitted that there were times when the grosser appetites assailed him. And they assailed him this morning, too. He said he might bring himself to eat some chops, and he did it without scarcely a struggle. He ate six. He said living the nauseous artificial life even for one night brought back the hateful meat craving. I don't know. He is undeniably peculiar. And of course you've heard about Pettikin's affair for this evening?"

"We had. Just before leaving the house I had received Henrietta's card inviting me to the country club that evening 'to meet Mr. Wilfred Lennox, Poet and Nature Lover, who will recite his original verses and give a brief talk on "The World's Debt to Poetry."' And there you have the whole trouble. Henrietta should have known better. But I've let out what women really are. I told Alonzo I would sure be among those present, I said it sounded good. And then

Alonzo pipes up about Ben Sutton coming to town on the eleven forty-two from the West. Ben makes a trip out of Alaska every summer and never fails to stop off a day or two with Lon, they having been partners up North in '98.

"Good old Ben will enjoy it, too," says Alonzo; 'and, furthermore, Ben will straighten out one or two little things that have puzzled me about this poet. He will understand his complex nature in a way that I confess I have been unequal to. What I mean is,' he says, 'there was talk when I left this morning of the poet consenting to take a class in poetry for several weeks in our thriving little city, and Henrietta was urging him to make our house his home. I have a sort of feeling that Ben will be able to make several suggestions of prime value. I have never known him to fail at making suggestions.'

"Funny, the way the little man tried to put it over on us, letting on he was just puzzled—not really bothered, as he plainly was. You knew Henrietta was still seeing the big red splash of Romance, behind which the figure of her husband was totally obscured. Jeff Tuttle saw the facts, and he up and spoke in a very common way about what would quickly happen to any tramp that tried to camp in his house, poet or no poet, but that's neither here nor there. We left Alonzo looking cheerily forward to Ben Sutton on the eleven forty-two, and I went on to do some errands.

"In the course of these I discovered that others besides Henrietta had fell hard for the poet of Nature. I met Mrs. Dr. Percy Hailey Martingale and she just bubbles about him, she having been at the Prices' the night before.

"Isn't he a glorious thing!" she says; 'and how grateful we should be for the dazzling bit of colour he brings into our drab existence!' She is a good deal like that herself at times. And I met Beryl Mae Macomber, a well known young society girl of seventeen, and Beryl Mae says: 'He's awfully good looking, but do you think he's sincere?' And even Mrs. Judge Ballard comes along and says: 'What a stimulus he should be to us in our dull lives! How he shows us the big, vital bits!' and her at that very minute going into Bullitt & Fleishacker's to buy shoes for her nine year old twin grandsons! And the Reverend Mrs. Wiley Knapp in at the Racquet Store wanting to know if the poet didn't make me think of some wild, free

creature of the woods—a deer or an antelope poised for instant flight while for one moment he timidly overlooked man in his hideous commercialism. But, of course, she was a minister's wife. I said he made me feel just like that. I said so to all of 'em. What else could I say? If I'd said what I thought there on the street I'd of been pinched. So I beat it home in self-protection. I was sympathizing good and hearty with Lon Price by that time and looking forward to Ben Sutton myself. I had a notion Ben would see the right of it where these poor dubs of husbands wouldn't—or wouldn't dast say it if they did.

"About five o'clock I took another run downtown for some things I'd forgot, with an eye out to see how Alonzo and Ben might be coming on. The fact is, seeing each other only once a year that way they're apt to kind of loosen up—if you know what I mean.

"No sign of 'em at first. Nothing but ladies young and old—even some of us older ranching set—making final purchases of ribbons and such for the sole benefit of Wilfred Lennox, and talking in a flushed manner about him whenever they met. Almost every darned one of 'em had made it a point to stroll past the Price mansion that afternoon where Wilfred was setting out on the lawn, in a wicker chair with some bottles of beer surveying Nature with a look of lofty approval and chatting with Henrietta about the real things of life.

"Beryl Mae Macomber had traipsed past four times, changing her clothes twice with a different shade of ribbon across her forehead and all her college pins on, and at last she'd simply walked right in and asked if she hadn't left her tennis racquet there last Tuesday. She says to Mrs. Judge Ballard and Mrs. Martingale and me in the Cut-Rate Pharmacy, she says: 'Oh, he's just awfully magnetic—but do you really think he's sincere?' Then she bought an ounce of Breath of Orient perfume and kind of two-stepped out. These other ladies spoke very sharply about the freedom Beryl Mae's aunt allowed her. Mrs. Martingale said the poet, it was true, had a compelling personality, but what was our young girls coming to? And if that child was hers—

"So I left these two lady highbinders and went on into the retail side of the Family Liquor Store to order up some cooking sherry,