SELWOOD of SLEEPY CAT

by FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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WNU SERVICE

CHAPTER II

Choice Fare.

When the town of Sleepy Cat was throwing its excited head over its saloon excited hocks to a rapid growth there were few quiet stretches along the riverbend trail.

It was on one of the long, winding stretches of this trail, between Point of Rocks and Sleepy Cat, one May morning nearly a year after the tragic affair at Foster's place, that a mountain man, seated in a light but serviceable buckboard supplied with a comfortable fartherback seat, and driving a team of range bay horses was headed westward quite alone on the trail.

Wearing the long-gauntlet, soft buckskin gloves, the stout, broad bellowed hat, and the knotted bandanna handkerchief of the seasoned plainsman of the trail, he was comfortably shod in footgear of the kind known here and there as one likely to be at home in the inevitable emergencies of frontier life.

The horses slackening presently their lively pace around their driver from a reverie climbing up, he saw that he had reached the bluff of an important crossing, the hoarse wave startling down-hill of the second foot tone of the crawling Stone wash.

Driving faster for a few minutes as he gained the level bottom, John Selwood turned his horses off the trail forward a grove of small trees on the border of the creek.

Hitting, quite at his ease with the thus buckled about his left arm, as the horses turned into the beaten path, his eye fell on a horseshoe. He paused in a moment to distinguish in one of his nature that is to one of the creepers notice. He saw it did not, for, the horseshoe particular style and make, quite identified by the practiced eye. He hesitated for being whether it was worth while to add one more to the load he was bringing the horseshoe to when his eye fell on an object lying at the end of the thrust out of all.

It was a woman's shoe. It was a high shoe of the appearance of good quality. The shoe closed Bleeding, the ankle was of slender range, he saw that ampleness had accrued to the ankle and the instep of the shoe, the whole swinging in the shower wagon. It was a shoe that had turned this shower into the road from the direction of the wagon of which the horses now. To Selwood it looked like the shoe of a lady. It was not common to see a shoe of the size and style in the country. Selwood, well trained to note the slightest circumstance, noted the shoe, and, following the wagon tracks, found the footprints of a woman.

Perceiving the awkwardness and unsightliness of the shoe, Selwood, still waiting to see its owner, threw it into the wagon. Then he noticed by the wagon tracks that the horses had been driven from the direction of Sleepy Cat.

Selwood, answering laconically a rapid flow of questions, was glad to be ready to drive on. He gathered his reins to step into the buckboard. As he lifted his foot, still one hand on the dash and the other on the seat, to do so, his eyes fell on Tyler's first wagon, standing twenty yards away. The canvas opening at the blind end was parted and to his great surprise he saw that at the moment it framed the face of a girl of eighteen or twenty years. She did not see Selwood, and he stood motionless, staring at the unexpected sight.

She was bareheaded, with her hair parted in the middle and drawn plainly over her temples in the new mode. A simple kerchief rested loosely above a simple dress. Women-folk were not uncommon in emigrant trains; indeed they were the rule. Yet Selwood paused as if petrified at the ordinary sight. Unlikely for him, he became interested in the situation, changed at their bits and tried to start. More even than the clear profile had promised was revealed to the full face, it was mere girlhood—simplicity and frank innocence—but it made Selwood catch his breath.

When her eyes fell on Selwood she looked rather quickly away and the parted canvas flap softly closed. Selwood stepped quietly up into the buckboard and settled himself in his seat. The hopefulest horses leaped ahead. He did not attempt to look back.

Selwood reached Sleepy Cat late that night. His tired team headed without guiding for the barn of Bent and Wentworth horse barn.

Selwood threw them down to a well hay bustler. He got stiffly down after his long ride, flipped the dust from his seat, took out and stuffed into a side pocket of his coat the gauntlet of his glove, and walked forward. As he passed the open door of the office he saw Colonel Bent, McAlpin, in earnest talk with a little woman sitting in the chair at the desk. Near them, listening, stood an overgrown boy of twenty. The woman was talking earnestly and rapidly. Selwood was hungry, tired overall, and tired, and without speaking to McAlpin he passed out through the gateway at the end and went to his room at Dexter Carey's house.

McAlpin in the barn office stood politely attentive to the story of the little woman sitting in the chair at a lunch-cart, much knotted to her hands, and with her feet drawn up and pressed to her least slighted ever.

"What should you do, stranger?" asked the settler, apparently resisting that the buckboard men knew more than he knew about the situation.

For answer Selwood spoke sharply to the boy standing at the door, who was gazing and fanning the jade glare with a broad hat. He had one of the few wheels of the wagon deeper into the water. "Get out of the water you ass!" cried Selwood. "and get that load twice before I come to see the next load you drive in."

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"This Is All Right When It's Dry Enough."

As the rock bottom. This is all right when it's dry enough. It's a mean place after a rain. And if you don't get that load team out of that sand pretty quick, you're liable get it up there out of all."

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