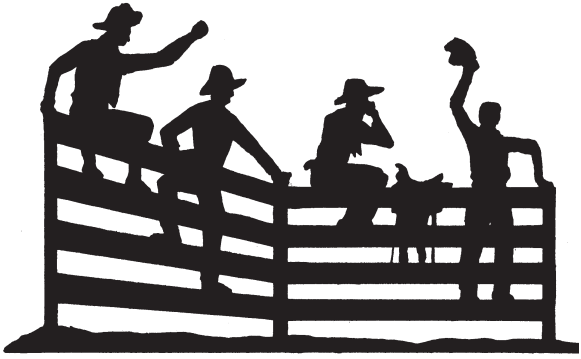
CHAPTER 1

# Enter the Man



Some notable sight was drawing the passengers—men and women—to the window. I got up to see. Near the tracks was a corral. Around it, men were laughing. Inside, dust whirled. In the middle of the dust some cow ponies ran about, huddled for a moment, and then darted away. One of them could not be caught, no matter who threw the rope.

We had plenty of time to watch this sport. Our train had stopped to be filled from a water tower only minutes from the station. We were six hours late and starved for entertainment.

The pony in the corral was wise, and quick.

Have you ever seen a skillful boxer keep a constant, but secret, eye on his opponent? The pony kept just such an eye on whoever took the rope. Pretending to look at the weather or to chat with a bystander was useless. The pony saw through it. His eye stayed fixed on the enemy. The serious look on his face made the matter quite comical. Someone would hurl a rope. The pony was already somewhere else. If horses laugh, snickers must have filled that corral.

For a moment, the pony stood alone. Then, in a flash, he slid in among his brothers. Suddenly, they whipped around the corral like a school of playful fish, kicking up the dust, and (I imagine) roaring with laughter. Through the window glass we could hear the thud of their mischievous hoofs and the curses of the cowboys.

For the first time I noticed a man looking on from the high gate of the corral. At that moment, he climbed down, moving like a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin. Where the others had whirled their ropes as high as their shoulders, I never saw his arm move. He held the rope down low, by his leg. But, as sudden as a snake his noose flew out and fell true. The thing was done. The captured pony walked in with a sweet, church-door expression. Our train moved slowly on to the station, and a passenger remarked, "That man knows his business."

Medicine Bow was my station. I descended, a stranger in this great cattle land. And here, in less than ten minutes, I learned news which made me

feel even more a stranger. My baggage was lost. It was loose somewhere back in the two thousand miles that lay behind me. The baggage man remarked that passengers often got separated from their trunks, but the trunks mostly found them after a while. Having offered this encouragement, he returned to his business whistling and left me planted in the baggage room at Medicine Bow. I stood deserted among crates and boxes, blankly holding my baggage check, hungry and miserable. I stared out through the door at the sky and the plains. I could not see the antelope shining among the sagebrush or the great sunset light of Wyoming. Annoyance blinded my eyes to everything except my annoyance. I saw only a lost trunk.

I was muttering half-aloud, "What a forsaken hole this is!" when suddenly from the platform came a slow voice. "Off to get married *again*? Oh, don't!" The voice was Southern and gentle and drawling.

A second voice answered, cracked and cantankerous. "It ain't again. Who says it's again? Who told you, anyway?"

And the first voice responded affectionately, "Why, your Sunday clothes told me, Uncle Hughey. They are speakin' mighty loud of a wedding."

"You don't worry me!" snapped Uncle Hughey.

And the other gently continued, "Ain't them gloves the same you wore to your last weddin'?"

"You don't worry me! You don't worry me!" screamed Uncle Hughey.

Already I had forgotten my trunk. I had never heard conversation like this in my life. I stepped to the door and looked out on the station platform.

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant. His broad, soft hat was pushed back. A loosely knotted, dull red handkerchief sagged from his throat. One thumb was casually hooked in the cartridge belt that slanted across his hips. The dust on him showed he had come many miles. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. His weather-beaten face shone through like ripe peaches on their trees in a dry season. Neither the dinginess of travel nor shabbiness of his clothes could tarnish his youth and strength.

"Who is the lucky lady this time?" he drawled.

The old man seemed to shake. "I tell you there ain't been no other! Call me a bigamist, will you? Then name some of my wives. Name two. Name one. I dare you!"

"—that widow from Laramie promised you—"

"Shucks!"

"—only her doctor suddenly ordered Southern climate and—"

"Shucks! You know nothing."

"—so nothing but her lungs came between you. And next you'd almost got united with Cattle Kate, only—"

"You don't know nothing!"

"—only she got hung."

"Where's the wives in all this? Show the wives! Come now!"

"That corn-fed biscuit-shooter at Rawlins you

gave the canary—"

"Never married her. Never did marry—"

"But you come so near, Uncle! She was the one left you that letter explaining how she got married to a young card player the very day before her ceremony with you was due, and—"

"Oh, you're nothing. You're a kid. You don't amount to—"

"—and how she'd never, never forgot to feed the canary."

"This country's getting full of kids," stated the old man, wearily. "It's doomed." He hoped this declaration would end the conversation. But his tall tormentor continued with a serious face and a gentle voice, "How is the health of that unfortunate—"

"That's right! Pour your insults on a sick, afflicted woman!"

"Insults? Oh, no, Uncle Hughey!"

"That's all right! Insults don't last!"

"Why, I was mighty relieved when she began to recover her memory. Last time I heard, they told me she'd got it pretty near all back. Remembered her father, her mother, her sisters and brothers, her friends, her happy childhood. Everything except your face. The boys was bettin' she'd get that too in time. But I reckon after such a terrible sickness as she had, that would be expectin' most too much."

At this, Uncle Hughey jerked out a small package. "Shows how much you know! That's my ring she sent back. So she don't remember me? Ha-ha!"

The Southerner put more fake concern in his voice. "And so you're a-takin' the old ring right on

to the new one? Oh, don't get married again, Uncle Hughey! What's the use of being married?"

"What's the use?" echoed the bridegroom, with scorn. "Hm! When you grow up you'll think different."

"I expect to think different when my age is different. I'm havin' the thoughts proper to twenty-four, and you're havin' the thoughts proper to sixty."

"Fifty!" shrieked Uncle Hughey, jumping in the air.

"Now, how could I forget you was fifty," he murmured, "when you have been telling it to the boys for the last ten years!"

Uncle Hughey seemed to swell up from all the insults. Without another word he boarded the Eastbound train, which had just arrived. He could have escaped long before. But the old man had evidently got a sort of joy from this teasing. He had reached that age when we are tickled to be linked with romance, no matter how.

I stared at the older man's train until only a faint wisp of smoke against the evening sky was visible. Then the lost trunk came back into my thoughts, and Medicine Bow seemed a lonely spot. I felt marooned in a foreign ocean. How was I to find Judge Henry's ranch? Where in this wilderness was Sunk Creek? My host had written he would meet me at the station and drive me to his ranch. This was all I knew. He was not here. The baggage man had not seen him lately. The ranch was almost certain to be too far to walk to, tonight.

At the same instant, I became aware that the

tall man was looking seriously at me—as seriously as he had looked at Uncle Hughey throughout their remarkable conversation. It was unsettling to see him staring at me, his thumb still hooked in his cartridge belt. I recalled some terrible tales about people who had traveled to the West. Was I about to be invited to dance on the platform to the music of pistol shots aimed at my feet?

"I reckon I am looking for you, seh," the tall man now observed.