

On the Long Overland Trail

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WITHROW, sitting his saddle loosely with the plainman's easy seat, let his quiet gray eyes sweep the irregular, shifting line of restless broncos. Tough as whalebone, they were built for hard pounding, and showed to the experienced eye stamina in every line. The riders, too, tanned and weather-beaten to a leathery brown, wore the sign manual of the West. Most of them offered no picturesqueness of costuming, but they were fit to the minute for the six-hundred-mile race before them.

The starter's strident voice cut into the kaleidoscope of dusty animation as the nervous ponies were being maneuvered for position.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?"

His sharp, ensuant pistol shot let loose the line with a rush. A few boyish riders applied quirt and spurs to take the immediate lead, but Dan Withrow pulled up to a long, easy trot. The old Overland Trail stretched many a hundred mile across the State of Wyoming, and the man who broke the heart of his mount on the first day's travel would not win the big two-thousand-dollar prize in the long endurance race to Denver.

Dave Thomas, a grizzled cowman close to fifty, fell into the place beside him. More than one young fellow passed them with jovial badinage, but Thomas was on the spot, and gave them as good as they sent.

"I'll tell them down in Denver that you're coming," curly-headed Jack Hilton called back, with a flash of strong white teeth.

"Y'u'll have to tell them by wire, then," retorted Dave, equably chewing his cud.

Rider after rider passed them with cowboy yells,

leaving yellow dust clouds in their wake.

"Ain't y'u mistakin' this for a funeral procession?" inquired "Four Eyes" Hardy solicitously, when they rode into Carter.

Withrow merely smiled, but his companion offered the rough-and-ready repartee of his kind.

"Y'u must be wearin' telescopes for glasses, son. Denver ain't just over that hill there." To Withrow he remarked as he unsaddled and curried: "I ain't worryin' a mite about them anxious lads that want to run this off in a gallop. They'll come back to us and find us right on the job. It's wise guys like y'u I'm watchin' and that Billings hawss of yours."

Withrow looked indeed as if he were ready to give a good account of himself. He was a long, supple, brown man, hard as nails, with a close-gripped, salient jaw, and keen eyes that asked many questions, and answered none. The veterinary, Parks, at the checking-in station, observed approvingly that he looked in a businesslike way to the needs of his horse before attending to his own. At Granger the same inspector was on hand, having taken a train between the points, to pass on the condition of the horses as they went through in the late evening.

"Y'u're among the tail-enders, Dan," he remarked to Withrow, as his shrewd eyes passed over the bronco, fresh and strong as from an exercise canter.

"There has got to be a last car to every train. I reckon we'll move up later," answered Thomas.

Parks nodded. "That's right. Curly Hilton's covering a hundred and twelve miles today. Y'u watch his bronc blow up when he reaches the heavy going of the Red Desert. I notice your Jim

Dandy hawss hasn't turned a hair, Dan, nor your bay, neither, Thomas."

He broke off to jerk his head toward a lad leading a gray from the stable, and dragging saddle and blankets. "There's a hawss that's got points. Notice the hocks and rump. Tremendous power in the shoulders, too. He'd ought to show up among the winners if that kid knew how to save him up—which he don't. By rights he should bed here tonight. Ninety miles a day is good enough to pull down the money. But he's like all them cowboys—bent on leading the procession from the word go."

The young fellow indicated was a slight, short lad of about eighteen, in plain leather chaps, gauntlet, gray shirt, with neatly knotted scarlet kerchief at the neck, and light Stetson hat. Many untempered Western suns had browned his face and hands without toughening the softness of the young skin. Dan had noticed him at the starting line, and had been momentarily struck by some suggestion of timidity and unobtrusiveness in his manner. The almost apologetic nod with which he greeted them now reinforced the cowman's earlier impression.

"Don't believe I ever met the kid. What's his name?" asked Withrow.

"Jess Evans. He rides for some cow outfit down in Colorado—somewheres round Meeker, seems to me."

"For a kid just out of the nursery, he's up against the toughest proposition of his young life. Bet a hat he don't last to Rawlins," contributed Thomas carelessly.

Dan went forward and spoke to Evans. "Y'u got a good traveler there, all right. If you don't have any hard luck, y'u'd ought to show for a place."

The boy looked across with shy, grateful eyes. "Do you think so?" he asked in a low, soft voice..

"If you don't get too anxious. Take it easy. Denver's several suns from here."

"But some of them are getting so far ahead of us. Maybe we won't catch them."

Dan laughed. "They'll be slipping back one after another. Y'u'll get there faster if y'u don't hurry."

Withrow saw nothing of young Evans the second day, though several riders dropped back from the front to keep them company. From a newspaperman who passed them in a motorcar they learned that Curly Hilton was still leading, "Old Man" Jackson close on his heels. The heavy sand

of the Red Desert had weeded out several broncos.

"See anything of the Evans kid on the gray gelding, Billie?" asked Dan, for somehow the boy's slight figure and big, shy eyes persisted in his memory.

"Saw him plugging along about fifteen miles behind Jackson. He looked tired, but his Billie is stepping right along."

On the Red Desert, Withrow's "Billings hawss" kept to his long, tireless stride, and shook off one by one his companions. He lost Thomas last in the deep sand of the washes through which they plowed.

During that day and the next, Jim Dandy passed nearly a dozen of his rivals, among them the ones ridden by Hardy and Curly Hilton. Somewhere in front, Old Man Jackson was showing the way along the dusty Overland Trail, followed by a cowpuncher called "Red" Reubens.

It was late on the third day, a few miles from Rawlins, that Withrow came on a rider and pony silhouetted on a hilltop against the silent, starry desert sky. He was close on them before a turn of the road brought them to his vision. That slim, slight figure he knew at once, even before the lad turned wearily on him the big brown eyes which showed a courage under temporary eclipse.

"How's it going?" Dan asked quietly, noticing how heavily the youth clung to the pommel of his saddle.

"I—I got off to tighten the girth," explained the boy.

Young Evans was plainly so close to a breakdown that the cowman turned in embarrassment his attention to the mount.

"Your bronc looks pretty good to me. Fresh as a daisy, and just beginning to hit up his stride. Y'u'd ought to be among the winners, pardner."

Suddenly the boy's head went forward, and was buried in the saddle leather. The hat fell backward, and revealed thick, short curls of crisp, coppery hair. An unmistakable sob disgusted Withrow.

"Oh, hell! What's got into the little quitter?" the cowman asked himself, and was surprised by an immediate answer from the buried lips.

"I—I'm nothing but a baby. I know it's true, what you say. Billie ought to win, but I'm so tired—oh, you don't know how tired. If I could only lie down and die."

There was such an ache to the broken little voice that Dan desisted from his intention to tell the

boy curtly what he thought of such a childish display. Instead, he laid a hand, not unkindly, on the quivering shoulder.

"Oh, cut it out, kid. 'Course we're all tired, but we got to stand the acid or quit. A fellow has got to have guts to stay in a race like this."

"I can't quit; I've got to win. You don't understand," came huskily to the cowman.

"That's the way to talk. Buck up and win. It ain't but three miles to Rawlins. Y'u ride in with me and get a good night's sleep. Then in the mo'ning you'll feel like a colt again. We'll get an early start and mosey along easy. There'll be nothing to it," Dan responded cheerfully.

The boy pulled himself to his saddle, and they jogged silently through the silvery moonlit night till the lights of the town gleamed before them. Riding through the outskirts of Rawlins, Withrow said a little gruffly:

"Y'u'd better tumble off to sleep as soon as we light, kid. I'll look out for your hawss, and I'll wake y'u in the mo'ning when it's time to be going."

Evans choked over his murmured thanks before he got out audibly: "You're very good to me."

Like many of the other riders, Withrow slept in the stall with his bronco. He awoke long before daylight, fed and watered the two ponies, and went across with his long elastic step to the haymow, where the youngster was sleeping.

"All up, pardner," he called cheerily, and, getting no answer, climbed the ladder to the top of the stack.

Jess Evans was fast asleep, the ruddy head resting on one brown, plump, rounded arm. The hard leather chaps had been slipped off, for comfort, and in the yielding overalls, the soft young lines of the figure revealed themselves. It took Dan just one startled moment to grasp the amazing truth. This was no boy, but a girl. Once given the clew, it was impossible to miss her sex, though in her shapeless get-up of the young puncher she made a good enough boy to pass muster.

The discovery threw light on several things: the young rider's shrinking from observation, her tricks of manner, the breakdown from exhaustion. Blended with Dan's strange liking for the lad had been an instinctive contempt for his weakness. Admiration and sympathy displaced this instantly. How game she had been! How she must have schooled herself to endure the soreness and

weariness of the long days in the saddle! And with what torture her sensitive soul must have faced the ordeal of garbing herself so and risking the shame of possible detection! His sense of values told him that her motive to the adventure could have been no slight one.

Before Dan could withdraw, the lids opened drowsily and shook sleep from them. A fawn-like fear came to her eyes, and she sat up hastily to tug at the overalls with a woman's instinct for arranging any chance disarray of drapery.

"Mo'ning," smiled Withrow with such nonchalance as he could summon.

"Is it morning already? Why, I fell asleep only five minutes ago," she remonstrated.

"Y'u've been dead to the world five hours. We got to grub and be moving."

They rode all morning under an azure sky, their ponies taking the trail in a long, easy, tireless stride that left the miles rapidly behind them. He showed her how to get the most out of her mount without tiring him, and how to change her own seat in the saddle so as to rest her stiffness of body. Occasionally they dismounted and unsaddled, themselves lying flat on their backs to relax their muscles, while their animals dropped into absolute quiescence. After these short stops, Withrow slapped the heavy saddles on both the ponies with some humorous, disarming observation about his fondness for attending to other people's business.

At Fort Steele they caught up with another rider, whose horse was plainly very weary and footsore. It plucked up heart to stay with them for nearly an hour before it began slipping gradually to the rear.

"Only two ahead of us now, pardner. I figure we'd ought to catch them this side of Cheyenne," grinned Withrow, who had developed from a man of silence into one of optimistic prophecy.

The tail of his eye was always on his companion, sensing her fatigue and depression, and lightening the road with shrewd, humorous talk and cheerful comfort not obviously predigested. He knew that the leaders were still far to the front, though in no such condition as Jim Dandy and the gray, and that hard night riding must be done to bridge the gap. For himself, he would have had no doubts. From the beginning he had planned his course, and, barring accidents, he would have abided the issue with a sure confidence. But the cruelty of the situation lay in the frailty of his plucky companion. He was resolved not to leave

her. Somehow he must contrive that she endure to the finish.

The pure white sunset light was on the sagebrush as they rode into Laramie. They learned that Jackson and Reubens had come in side by side and left about three hours before. Withrow's keen eye judged his companion still able to continue despite her weariness. He gave her two hours' rest before they took the road again. That it was cruelly hard on her he knew, but he felt that if she could stick it out another day they would be safely in the lead and able to take it easier.

At midnight they passed the buildings of a ranch which loomed up darkly on their left. Here Dan gave her a surprise he had been saving with difficulty for hours.

"Little pardner, they're asleep in there, old man Jackson and Red Haid Reubens are. Y'u and me are leading this race. All we got to do is to stick it out, and one of us gets first money, the other, second. Y'u don't want ever to forget that Denver's getting closer every hour now."

She smiled wanly at him. "I know you will win even if I don't last it out. But I'm going to try."

In the vague light her eyes shone like stars. Her courage flushed his heart, in which something warm and soft glowed. To ride beside her in that night of wonders was a miracle, to know that he alone was her stay a comfort inestimable.

He made camp beside a fresh brook, and after she had fallen into almost immediate sleep, brought the horses' feed from a house close at hand. Again the joy of being alone with her in that near presence, lapped by the velvet Wyoming night, went like sweet wine to his head. He longed to stretch out a hand and touch her crisp curls and her brown, soft cheek. Out of the very gladness of his heart he found himself singing softly a snatch of a song that cowboys use in their night herding.

She awakened before him, while the hooters were still calling to each other in the fresh early dawn. He was deep in sleep, every supple line of him relaxed. Without his steady gaze to embarrass her, she read the details of the fine bronzed throat and neck line, the clean-cut, masculine jaw, the brown, untorn, muscular hands. Every dominant inch of him helped the impression of competence and force that go to the making of the perfect physical man. She knew he was her well of strength, that from him she somehow drew the power that kept her going, and through the shy

pleasure of this knowledge ran deep some thread of fear. It was the heart of the maid primeval answering reluctantly the inevitable call of nature.

They rode into the rising day and kept the pace steady hour after hour, so that before darkness they had left Cheyenne behind on the last stage of their long journey. With the dusk came a change of wind, bringing a sudden storm of sleet from the mountains. He untied the slicker from behind the saddle and wrapped her in it.

"A fellow would think you had taken a contract to bring me right-side up with care to Denver," she said with the shy little ripple of laughter he loved to provoke.

"We've lined up as side partners for this race, and I reckon we got to stand by each other," he explained easily.

"The trouble is you have to do all the standing by. I don't do anything but lean," she sighed.

The storm passed as quickly as it had swept upon them, leaving a moon, which sailed into and out of eclipse through a sky of tumbled billows. The jagged line of mountains had deepened from violet to purple, and again to a deep blue-black.

She was very haggard and tired, drooping over her saddle-horn with exhaustion. Still her companion did not give the signal to stop, nor did she ask for it, though her whole being cried out piteously for rest. Withrow's iron frame, toughened by the relentless riding of many a day on the round-up, still held to its easy uprightness, but his big heart melted over her distress.

"She's game," he exulted, even while his sympathy overflowed, and it was her courage in combination with such sweet, tender helplessness that brought a dryness to his throat.

It was in the heart of a grassy park two hours after midnight that Dan drew rein and swung from the saddle. She was so stiff that he had to lift her down.

"We're well across the Colorado line now, and more than twenty miles to the good. We're plumb safe. They can't catch us. Y'u sleep and I'll wake y'u in the mo'ning."

In the pure champagne air of dawn she opened her eyes much refreshed. They rode now with frequent stops, for their ponies had outfooted competition. Breakfast at Greeley brought them news over the wires that Reubens was now nearly twenty-five miles behind, Old Man Jackson holding fourth place doggedly on a very tired

bronco. Dan gave his companion another three-hour rest during the heat of the day, which brought them to Brighton, twenty miles from the finish, in time to start on the last lap by the light of the stars.

The broncos were still "hitting the trail" with the aplomb that characterizes the wiry little breed, Jim Dandy showing more signs of weariness than the gray.

"Y'u're going to beat me in at the finish, pardner," Dan told his companion gravely.

"I'll not," she flashed.

"It's a fair fight. If y'u've got the best hawss, I'll not squeal."

"I don't care. If it hadn't been for you I should never have finished at all. Do you think I'm thief enough to beat you out just because my Billie is better on a sprint?" she asked hotly.

"Do you think *I'm* going to let y'u soldier while I rob y'u of the prize?" he smiled. "And after y'u making so game a fight?"

"But I won't take it. It wouldn't be right."

"Are you quite sure you can help it, little pardner?"

Her swift glance was caught and tangled confusedly in his steady, kind gaze, and under it the tan of cheek and throat could not conceal the blush that swept her. He was a dominating man, and the deep, troubled sweetness of her eyes knew the mastery of his. The fringes of her lids drooped to her hot cheeks, and she fell into a long, shy silence.

When she spoke it was to pump out a low, hesitating question.

"I suppose you— Do you think it strange that I am riding in this race?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

"I had a reason. My brother Jess wants to be an artist. We think he would be a great one if he had a chance. But we are orphans and live with my uncle. He can't go away to study because we have no money. Then this chance came, and he entered. The

very morning he was to leave the ranch for the starting point he sprained his ankle. I couldn't let him lose his chance. You know we are twins, and my name is Jessie, too. I'm used to riding, and—I slipped away and took his place."

"Y'u're the gamest little lady I ever met up with," cried Dan.

"No, I'm not brave at all, but I couldn't let him lose his chance. Do you think that I don't know that my courage came from you? Do you think I don't appreciate all you have done for me? I knew you knew I was not a boy—I saw it in your eyes that morning in the haymow—and because I am a girl you have been to me the truest partner anyone ever had."

There were tears of gratitude in her eyes.

He leaned toward her in the darkness. "Not only because y'u were a girl."

She made no answer to that unless it was one to turn her head from him so that he saw only the rise and fall of her breast and the oval outline of her cheek below the dull, coppery waves of hair.

"But because I love y'u, honey."

He covered her little hand with his large one, and so they rode for a space in silence. Then she turned her sweet lips toward him without a word.

They rode together through the outskirts of Denver and into the streets lined with thousands of cheering people gathered to see the end of the great endurance race. Three blocks from the finish line Jim Dandy and Billie raced in, and the gray won by a short length. Of all the sea of eager, upturned faces and of the babel of cheers that rose and died away and rose again, Jessie Evans was conscious of no detail. She saw only one strong, tanned, smiling face beside her. She heard only the low voice that was music to her heart:

"My hat's off, pardner, to the champeen of the world."