**Art and the Bronco**

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Out of the wilderness had come a painter. Genius, whose coronations alone are democratic, had woven a chaplet of chaparral for the brow of Lonny Briscoe. Art, whose divine expression flows impartially from the fingertips of a cowboy or a dilettante emperor, had chosen for a medium the Boy Artist of the San Saba. The outcome, seven feet by twelve of besmeared canvas, stood, gilt-framed, in the lobby of the Capitol.

The legislature was in session; the capital city of that great Western state was enjoying the season of activity and profit that the congregation of the solons bestowed. The boarding-houses were corralling the easy dollars of the gamesome lawmakers. The greatest state in the West, an empire in area and resources, had arisen and repudiated the old libel or barbarism, lawbreaking, and bloodshed. Order reigned within her borders. Life and property were as safe there, sir, as anywhere among the corrupt cities of the effete East. Pillow-shams, churches, strawberry feasts and *habeas corpus* flourished. With impunity might the tenderfoot ventilate his “stovepipe” or his theories of culture. The arts and sciences received nurture and subsidy. And, therefore, it behooved the legislature of this great state to make appropriation for the purchase of Lonny Briscoe’s immortal painting.

Rarely has the San Saba country contributed to the spread of the fine arts. Its sons have excelled in the solider graces, in the throw of the lariat, the manipulation of the esteemed.45, the intrepidity of the one-card draw, and the nocturnal stimulation of towns from undue lethargy; but, hitherto, it had not been famed as a stronghold of æsthetics. Lonny Briscoe’s brush had removed that disability. Here, among the limestone rocks, the succulent cactus, and the drought-parched grass of that arid valley, had been born the Boy Artist. Why he came to woo art is beyond postulation. Beyond doubt, some spore of the afflatus must have sprung up within him in spite of the desert soil of San Saba. The tricksy spirit of creation must have incited him to attempted expression and then have sat hilarious among the white-hot sands of the valley, watching its mischievous work. For Lonny’s picture, viewed as a thing of art, was something to have driven away dull care from the bosoms of the critics.

The painting—one might almost say panorama—was designed to portray a typical Western scene, interest culminating in a central animal figure, that of a stampeding steer, life-size, wild-eyed, fiery, breaking away in a mad rush from the herd that, close-ridden by a typical cowpuncher, occupied a position somewhat in the right background of the picture. The landscape presented fitting and faithful accessories. Chaparral, mesquit, and pear were distributed in just proportions. A Spanish dagger-plant, with its waxen blossoms in a creamy aggregation as large as a water-bucket, contributed floral beauty and variety. The distance was undulating prairie, bisected by stretches of the intermittent streams peculiar to the region lined with the rich green of live-oak and water-elm. A richly mottled rattlesnake lay coiled beneath a pale green clump of prickly pear in the foreground. A third of the canvas was ultramarine and lake white—the typical Western sky and the flying clouds, rainless and feathery.

Between two plastered pillars in the commodious hallway near the door of the chamber of representatives stood the painting. Citizens and lawmakers passed there by twos and groups and sometimes crowds to gaze upon it. Many—perhaps a majority of them—had lived the prairie life and recalled easily the familiar scene. Old cattlemen stood, reminiscent and candidly pleased, chatting with brothers of former camps and trails of the days it brought back to mind. Art critics were few in the town, and there was heard none of that jargon of colour, perspective, and feeling such as the East loves to use as a curb and a rod to the pretensions of the artist. ‘Twas a great picture, most of them agreed, admiring the gilt frame—larger than any they had ever seen.

Senator Kinney was the picture’s champion and sponsor. It was he who so often stepped forward and asserted, with the voice of a bronco-buster, that it would be a lasting blot, sir, upon the name of this great state if it should decline to recognize in a proper manner the genius that had so brilliantly transferred to imperishable canvas a scene so typical of the great sources of our state’s wealth and prosperity, land—and—er—live-stock.

Senator Kinney represented a section of the state in the extreme West—400 miles from the San Saba country—but the true lover of art is not limited by metes and bounds. Nor was Senator Mullens, representing the San Saba country, lukewarm in his belief that the state should purchase the painting of his constituent. He was advised that the San Saba country was unanimous in its admiration of the great painting by one of its own denizens. Hundreds of connoisseurs had straddled their broncos and ridden miles to view it before its removal to the capital. Senator Mullens desired reëlection, and he knew the importance of the San Saba vote. He also knew that with the help of Senator Kinney—who was a power in the legislature—the thing could be put through. Now, Senator Kinney had an irrigation bill that he wanted passed for the benefit of his own section, and he knew Senator Mullens could render him valuable aid and information, the San Saba country already enjoying the benefits of similar legislation. With these interests happily dovetailed, wonder at the sudden interest in art at the state capital must, necessarily, be small. Few artists have uncovered their first picture to the world under happier auspices than did Lonny Briscoe.

Senators Kinney and Mullens came to an understanding in the matter of irrigation and art while partaking of long drinks in the café of the Empire Hotel.

“H’m!” said Senator Kinney, “I don’t know. I’m no art critic, but it seems to me the thing won’t work. It looks like the worst kind of a chromo to me. I don’t want to cast any reflections upon the artistic talent of your constituent, Senator, but I, myself, wouldn’t give six bits for the picture—without the frame. How are you going to cram a thing like that down the throat of a legislature that kicks about a little item in the expense bill of six hundred and eighty-one dollars for rubber erasers for only one term? It’s wasting time. I’d like to help you, Mullens, but they’d laugh us out of the Senate chamber if we were to try it.”

“But you don’t get the point,” said Senator Mullens, in his deliberate tones, tapping Kinney’s glass with his long forefinger. “I have my own doubts as to what the picture is intended to represent, a bullfight or a Japanese allegory, but I want this legislature to make an appropriation to purchase. Of course, the subject of the picture should have been in the state historical line, but it’s too late to have the paint scraped off and changed. The state won’t miss the money and the picture can be stowed away in a lumber-room where it won’t annoy any one. Now, here’s the point to work on, leaving art to look after itself—the chap that painted the picture is the grandson of Lucien Briscoe.”

“Say it again,” said Kinney, leaning his head thoughtfully. “Of the old, original Lucien Briscoe?”

“Of him. ‘The man who,’ you know. The man who carved the state out of the wilderness. The man who settled the Indians. The man who cleaned out the horse thieves. The man who refused the crown. The state’s favourite son. Do you see the point now?”

“Wrap up the picture,” said Kinney. “It’s as good as sold. Why didn’t you say that at first, instead of philandering along about art. I’ll resign my seat in the Senate and go back to chain-carrying for the county surveyor the day I can’t make this state buy a picture calcimined by a grandson of Lucien Briscoe. Did you ever hear of a special appropriation for the purchase of a home for the daughter of One-Eyed Smothers? Well, that went through like a motion to adjourn, and old One-Eyed never killed half as many Indians as Briscoe did. About what figure had you and the calciminer agreed upon to sandbag the treasury for?”

“I thought,” said Mullens, “that maybe five hundred—”

“Five hundred!” interrupted Kinney, as he hammered on his glass for a lead pencil and looked around for a waiter. “Only five hundred for a red steer on the hoof delivered by a grandson of Lucien Briscoe! Where’s your state pride, man? Two thousand is what it’ll be. You’ll introduce the bill and I’ll get up on the floor of the Senate and wave the scalp of every Indian old Lucien ever murdered. Let’s see, there was something else proud and foolish he did, wasn’t there? Oh, yes; he declined all emoluments and benefits he was entitled to. Refused his head-right and veteran donation certificates. Could have been governor, but wouldn’t. Declined a pension. Now’s the state’s chance to pay up. It’ll have to take the picture, but then it deserves some punishment for keeping the Briscoe family waiting so long. We’ll bring this thing up about the middle of the month, after the tax bill is settled. Now, Mullens, you send over, as soon as you can, and get me the figures on the cost of those irrigation ditches and the statistics about the increased production per acre. I’m going to need you when that bill of mine comes up. I reckon we’ll be able to pull along pretty well together this session and maybe others to come, eh, Senator?”

Thus did fortune elect to smile upon the Boy Artist of the San Saba. Fate had already done her share when she arranged his atoms in the cosmogony of creation as the grandson of Lucien Briscoe.

The original Briscoe had been a pioneer both as to territorial occupation and in certain acts prompted by a great and simple heart. He had been one of the first settlers and crusaders against the wild forces of nature, the savage and the shallow politician. His name and memory were revered, equally with any upon the list comprising Houston, Boone, Crockett, Clark, and Green. He had lived simply, independently, and unvexed by ambition. Even a less shrewd man than Senator Kinney could have prophesied that his state would hasten to honour and reward his grandson, come out of the chaparral at even so late a day.

And so, before the great picture by the door of the chamber of representatives at frequent times for many days could be found the breezy, robust form of Senator Kinney and be heard his clarion voice reciting the past deeds of Lucien Briscoe in connection with the handiwork of his grandson. Senator Mullens’s work was more subdued in sight and sound, but directed along identical lines.

Then, as the day for the introduction of the bill for appropriation draws nigh, up from the San Saba country rides Lonny Briscoe and a loyal lobby of cowpunchers, bronco-back, to boost the cause of art and glorify the name of friendship, for Lonny is one of them, a knight of stirrup and chaparreras, as handy with the lariat and.45 as he is with brush and palette.

On a March afternoon the lobby dashed, with a whoop, into town. The cowpunchers had adjusted their garb suitably from that prescribed for the range to the more conventional requirements of town. They had conceded their leather chaparreras and transferred their six-shooters and belts from their persons to the horns of their saddles. Among them rode Lonny, a youth of twenty-three, brown, solemn-faced, ingenuous, bowlegged, reticent, bestriding Hot Tamales, the most sagacious cow pony west of the Mississippi. Senator Mullens had informed him of the bright prospects of the situation; had even mentioned—so great was his confidence in the capable Kinney—the price that the state would, in all likelihood, pay. It seemed to Lonny that fame and fortune were in his hands. Certainly, a spark of the divine fire was in the little brown centaur’s breast, for he was counting the two thousand dollars as but a means to future development of his talent. Some day he would paint a picture even greater than this—one, say, twelve feet by twenty, full of scope and atmosphere and action.

During the three days that yet intervened before the coming of the date fixed for the introduction of the bill, the centaur lobby did valiant service. Coatless, spurred, weather-tanned, full of enthusiasm expressed in bizarre terms, they loafed in front of the painting with tireless zeal. Reasoning not unshrewdly, they estimated that their comments upon its fidelity to nature would be received as expert evidence. Loudly they praised the skill of the painter whenever there were ears near to which such evidence might be profitably addressed. Lem Perry, the leader of the claque, had a somewhat set speech, being uninventive in the construction of new phrases.

“Look at that two-year-old, now,” he would say, waving a cinnamon-brown hand toward the salient point of the picture. “Why, dang my hide, the critter’s alive. I can jest hear him, ‘lumpety-lump,’ a-cuttin’ away from the herd, pretendin’ he’s skeered. He’s a mean scamp, that there steer. Look at his eyes a-wallin’ and his tail a-wavin’. He’s true and nat’ral to life. He’s jest hankerin’ fur a cow pony to round him up and send him scootin’ back to the bunch. Dang my hide! jest look at that tail of his’n a-wavin’. Never knowed a steer to wave his tail any other way, dang my hide ef I did.”

Jud Shelby, while admitting the excellence of the steer, resolutely confined himself to open admiration of the landscape, to the end that the entire picture receive its meed of praise.

“That piece of range,” he declared, “is a dead ringer for Dead Hoss Valley. Same grass, same lay of land, same old Whipperwill Creek skallyhootin’ in and out of them motts of timber. Them buzzards on the left is circlin’ ‘round over Sam Kildrake’s old paint hoss that killed hisself over-drinkin’ on a hot day. You can’t see the hoss for that mott of ellums on the creek, but he’s thar. Anybody that was goin’ to look for Dead Hoss Valley and come across this picture, why, he’d just light off’n his bronco and hunt a place to camp.”

Skinny Rogers, wedded to comedy, conceived a complimentary little piece of acting that never failed to make an impression. Edging quite near to the picture, he would suddenly, at favourable moments emit a piercing and awful “Yi-yi!” leap high and away, coming down with a great stamp of heels and whirring of rowels upon the stone-flagged floor.

“Jeeming Cristopher!”—so ran his lines—“thought that rattler was a gin-u-ine one. Ding baste my skin if I didn’t. Seemed to me I heard him rattle. Look at the blamed, unconverted insect a-layin’ under that pear. Little more, and somebody would a-been snake-bit.”

With these artful dodges, contributed by Lonney’s faithful coterie, with the sonorous Kinney perpetually sounding the picture’s merits, and with the solvent prestige of the pioneer Briscoe covering it like a precious varnish, it seemed that the San Saba country could not fail to add a reputation as an art centre to its well-known superiority in steer-roping contests and achievements with the precarious busted flush. Thus was created for the picture an atmosphere, due rather to externals than to the artist’s brush, but through it the people seemed to gaze with more of admiration. There was a magic in the name of Briscoe that counted high against faulty technique and crude colouring. The old Indian fighter and wolf slayer would have smiled grimly in his happy hunting grounds had he known that his dilettante ghost was thus figuring as an art patron two generations after his uninspired existence.

Came the day when the Senate was expected to pass the bill of Senator Mullens appropriating two thousand dollars for the purchase of the picture. The gallery of the Senate chamber was early preempted by Lonny and the San Saba lobby. In the front row of chairs they sat, wild-haired, self-conscious, jingling, creaking, and rattling, subdued by the majesty of the council hall.

The bill was introduced, went to the second reading, and then Senator Mullens spoke for it dryly, tediously, and at length. Senator Kinney then arose, and the welkin seized the bellrope preparatory to ringing. Oratory was at that time a living thing; the world had not quite come to measure its questions by geometry and the multiplication table. It was the day of the silver tongue, the sweeping gesture, the decorative apostrophe, the moving peroration.

The Senator spoke. The San Saba contingent sat, breathing hard, in the gallery, its disordered hair hanging down to its eyes, its sixteen-ounce hats shifted restlessly from knee to knee. Below, the distinguished Senators either lounged at their desks with the abandon of proven statesmanship or maintained correct attitudes indicative of a first term.

Senator Kinney spoke for an hour. History was his theme—history mitigated by patriotism and sentiment. He referred casually to the picture in the outer hall—it was unnecessary, he said, to dilate upon its merits—the Senators had seen for themselves. The painter of the picture was the grandson of Lucien Briscoe. Then came the word—pictures of Briscoe’s life set forth in thrilling colours. His rude and venturesome life, his simple-minded love for the commonwealth he helped to upbuild, his contempt for rewards and praise, his extreme and sturdy independence, and the great services he had rendered the state. The subject of the oration was Lucien Briscoe; the painting stood in the background serving simply as a means, now happily brought forward, through which the state might bestow a tardy recompense upon the descendent of its favourite son. Frequent enthusiastic applause from the Senators testified to the well reception of the sentiment.

The bill passed without an opening vote. To-morrow it would be taken up by the House. Already was it fixed to glide through that body on rubber tires. Blandford, Grayson, and Plummer, all wheel-horses and orators, and provided with plentiful memoranda concerning the deeds of pioneer Briscoe, had agreed to furnish the motive power.

The San Saba lobby and its *protégé* stumbled awkwardly down the stairs and out into the Capitol yard. Then they herded closely and gave one yell of triumph. But one of them—Buck-Kneed Summers it was—hit the key with the thoughtful remark:

“She cut the mustard,” he said, “all right. I reckon they’re goin’ to buy Lon’s steer. I ain’t right much on the parlyment’ry, but I gather that’s what the signs added up. But she seems to me, Lonny, the argyment ran principal to grandfather, instead of paint. It’s reasonable calculatin’ that you want to be glad you got the Briscoe brand on you, my son.”

That remarked clinched in Lonny’s mind an unpleasant, vague suspicion to the same effect. His reticence increased, and he gathered grass from the ground, chewing it pensively. The picture as a picture had been humiliatingly absent from the Senator’s arguments. The painter had been held up as a grandson, pure and simple. While this was gratifying on certain lines, it made art look little and slab-sided. The Boy Artist was thinking.

The hotel Lonny stopped at was near the Capitol. It was near to the one o’clock dinner hour when the appropriation had been passed by the Senate. The hotel clerk told Lonny that a famous artist from New York had arrived in town that day and was in the hotel. He was on his way westward to New Mexico to study the effect of sunlight upon the ancient walls of the Zuñis. Modern stones reflect light. Those ancient building materials absorb it. The artist wanted this effect in a picture he was painting, and was traveling two thousand miles to get it.

Lonny sought this man out after dinner and told his story. The artist was an unhealthy man, kept alive by genius and indifference to life. He went with Lonny to the Capitol and stood there before the picture. The artist pulled his beard and looked unhappy.

“Should like to have your sentiments,” said Lonny, “just as they run out of the pen.”

“It’s the way they’ll come,” said the painter man. “I took three different kinds of medicine before dinner—by the tablespoonful. The taste still lingers. I am primed for telling the truth. You want to know if the picture is, or if it isn’t?”

“Right,” said Lonny. “Is it wool or cotton? Should I paint some more or cut it out and ride herd a-plenty?”

“I heard a rumour during pie,” said the artist, “that the state is about to pay you two thousand dollars for this picture.”

“It’s passed the Senate,” said Lonny, “and the House rounds it up to-morrow.”

“That’s lucky,” said the pale man. “Do you carry a rabbit’s foot?”

“No,” said Lonny, “but it seems I had a grandfather. He’s considerable mixed up in the colour scheme. It took me a year to paint that picture. Is she entirely awful or not? Some says, now, that the steer’s tail ain’t badly drawed. They think it’s proportioned nice. Tell me.”

The artist glanced at Lonny’s wiry figure and nut-brown skin. Something stirred him to a passing irritation.

“For Art’s sake, son,” he said, fractiously, “don’t spend any more money for paint. It isn’t a picture at all. It’s a gun. You hold up the state with it, if you like, and get your two thousand, but don’t get in front of any more canvas. Live under it. Buy a couple of hundred ponies with the money—I’m told they’re that cheap—and ride, ride, ride. Fill your lungs and eat and sleep and be happy. No more pictures. You look healthy. That’s genius. Cultivate it.” He looked at his watch. “Twenty minutes to three. Four capsules and one tablet at three. That’s all you wanted to know, isn’t it?”

At three o’clock the cowpunchers rode up for Lonny, bringing Hot Tamales, saddled. Traditions must be observed. To celebrate the passage of the bill by the Senate the gang must ride wildly through the town, creating uproar and excitement. Liquor must be partaken of, the suburbs shot up, and the glory of the San Saba country vociferously proclaimed. A part of the programme had been carried out in the saloons on the way up.

Lonny mounted Hot Tamales, the accomplished little beast prancing with fire and intelligence. He was glad to feel Lonny’s bowlegged grip against his ribs again. Lonny was his friend, and he was willing to do things for him.

“Come on, boys,” said Lonny, urging Hot Tomales into a gallop with his knees. With a whoop, the inspired lobby tore after him through the dust. Lonny led his cohorts straight for the Capitol. With a wild yell, the gang endorsed his now evident intention of riding into it. Hooray for San Saba!

Up the six broad, limestone steps clattered the broncos of the cowpunchers. Into the resounding hallway they pattered, scattering in dismay those passing on foot. Lonny, in the lead, shoved Hot Tamales direct for the great picture. At that hour a downpouring, soft light from the second-story windows bathed the big canvas. Against the darker background of the hall the painting stood out with valuable effect. In spite of the defects of the art you could almost fancy that you gazed out upon a landscape. You might well flinch a step from the convincing figure of the life-size steer stampeding across the grass. Perhaps it seemed thus to Hot Tamales. The scene was in his line. Perhaps he only obeyed the will of his rider. His ears pricked up; he snorted. Lonny leaned forward in the saddle and elevated his elbows, wing-like. Thus signals the cowpuncher to his steed to launch himself full speed ahead. Did Hot Tamales fancy he saw a steer, red and cavorting, that should be headed off and driven back to the herd? There was a fierce clatter of hoofs, a rush, a gathering of steely flank muscles, a leap to the jerk of the bridle rein, and Hot Tamales, with Lonny bending low in the saddle to dodge the top of the frame, ripped through the great canvas like a shell from a mortar, leaving the cloth hanging in ragged shreds about a monstrous hole.

Quickly Lonny pulled up his pony, and rounded the pillars. Spectators came running, too astounded to add speech to the commotion. The sergeant-at-arms of the House came forth, frowned, looked ominous, and then grinned. Many of the legislators crowded out to observe the tumult. Lonny’s cowpunchers were stricken to silent horror by his mad deed.

Senator Kinney happened to be among the earliest to emerge. Before he could speak Lonny leaned in his saddle as Hot Tamales pranced, pointed his quirt at the Senator, and said, calmly:

“That was a fine speech you made to-day, mister, but you might as well let up on that ‘propriation business. I ain’t askin’ the state to give me nothin’. I thought I had a picture to sell to it, but it wasn’t one. You said a heap of things about Grandfather Briscoe that makes me kind of proud I’m his grandson. Well, the Briscoes ain’t takin’ presents from the state yet. Anybody can have the frame that wants it. Hit her up, boys.”

Away scuttled the San Saba delegation out of the hall, down the steps, along the dusty street.

Halfway to the San Saba country they camped that night. At bedtime Lonny stole away from the campfire and sought Hot Tamales, placidly eating grass at the end of his stake rope. Lonny hung upon his neck, and his art aspirations went forth forever in one long, regretful sigh. But as he thus made renunciation his breath formed a word or two.

“You was the only one, Tamales, what seen anything in it. It *did* look like a steer, didn’t it, old hoss?”