**Madame Bo-Peep, of the Ranches**

O. Henry

“AUNT ELLEN,” said Octavia, cheerfully, as she threw her black kid gloves carefully at the dignified Persian cat on the window-seat, “I’m a pauper.”

“You are so extreme in your statements, Octavia, dear,” said Aunt Ellen, mildly, looking up from her paper.

“If you find yourself temporarily in need of some small change for bonbons, you will find my purse in the drawer of the writing desk.”

Octavia Beaupree removed her hat and seated herself on a footstool near her aunt’s chair, clasping her hands about her knees. Her slim and flexible figure, clad in a modish mourning costume, accommodated itself easily and gracefully to the trying position. Her bright and youthful face, with its pair of sparkling, life-enamoured eyes, tried to compose itself to the seriousness that the occasion seemed to demand.

“You good auntie, it isn’t a case of bonbons; it is abject, staring, unpicturesque poverty, with ready-made clothes, gasolined gloves, and probably one o’clock dinners all waiting with the traditional wolf at the door. I’ve just come from my lawyer, auntie, and, ‘Please, ma’am, I ain’t got nothink ‘t all. Flowers, lady? Buttonhole, gentleman? Pencils, sir, three for five, to help a poor widow?’ Do I do it nicely, auntie, or, as a bread-winner accomplishment, were my lessons in elocution entirely wasted?”

“Do be serious, my dear,” said Aunt Ellen, letting her paper fall to the floor, “long enough to tell me what you mean. Colonel Beaupree’s estate — ”

“Colonel Beaupree’s estate,” interrupted Octavia, emphasizing her words with appropriate dramatic gestures, “is of Spanish castellar architecture. Colonel Beaupree’s resources are — wind. Colonel Beaupree’s stocks are — water. Colonel Beaupree’s income is — all in. The statement lacks the legal technicalities to which I have been listening for an hour, but that is what it means when translated.”

“Octavia!” Aunt Ellen was now visibly possessed by consternation. “I can hardly believe it. And it was the impression that he was worth a million. And the De Peysters themselves introduced him!”

Octavia rippled out a laugh, and then became properly grave.

“De mortuis nil, auntie — not even the rest of it. The dear old colonel — what a gold brick he was, after all! I paid for my bargain fairly — I’m all here, am I not? — items: eyes, fingers, toes, youth, old family, unquestionable position in society as called for in the contract no wild-cat stock here.” Octavia picked up the morning paper from the floor. “But I’m not going to ’squeal’ — isn’t that what they call it when you rail at Fortune because you’ve, lost the game?” She turned the pages of the paper calmly. “‘Stock market’ — no use for that. ‘Society’s doings’ — that’s done. Here is my page — the wish column. A Van Dresser could not be said to ‘want’ for anything, of course. ‘Chambermaids, cooks, canvassers, stenographers—”

“Dear,” said Aunt Ellen, with a little tremor in her voice, “please do not talk in that way. Even if your affairs are in so unfortunate a condition, there is my three thousand — ”

Octavia sprang up lithely, and deposited a smart kiss on the delicate cheek of the prim little elderly maid.

“Blessed auntie, your three thousand is just sufficient to insure your Hyson to be free from willow leaves and keep the Persian in sterilized cream. I know I’d be welcome, but I prefer to strike bottom like Beelzebub rather than hang around like the Peri listening to the music from the side entrance. I’m going to earn my own living. There’s nothing else to do. I’m a — Oh, oh, oh! — I had forgotten. There’s one thing saved from the wreck. It’s a corral — no, a ranch in — let me see — Texas: an asset, dear old Mr. Bannister called it. How pleased he was to show me something he could describe as unencumbered! I’ve a description of it among those stupid papers he made me bring away with me from his office. I’ll try to find it.”

Octavia found her shopping-bag, and drew from it a long envelope filled with typewritten documents.

“A ranch in Texas,” sighed Aunt Ellen. “It sounds to me more like a liability than an asset. Those are the places where the centipedes are found, and cowboys, and fandangos.”

“‘The Rancho de las Sombras,’” read Octavia from a sheet of violently purple typewriting “‘is situated one hundred and ten miles southeast of San Antonio, and thirty-eight miles from its nearest railroad station, Nopal, on the I. and G. N. Ranch, consists of 7,680 acres of wellwatered land, with title conferred by State patents, and twenty-two sections, or 14,080 acres, partly under yearly running lease and partly bought under State’s twentyyear-purchase act. Eight thousand graded merino sheep, with the necessary equipment of horses, vehicles and general ranch paraphernalia. Ranch-house built of brick, with six rooms comfortably furnished according to the requirements of the climate. All within a strong barbed-wire fence.

“‘The present ranch manager seems to be competent and reliable, and is rapidly placing upon a paying basis a business that, in other hands, had been allowed to suffer from neglect and misconduct.

“‘This property was secured by Colonel Beaupree in a deal with a Western irrigation syndicate, and the title to it seems to be perfect. With careful management and the natural increase of land values, it ought to be made the foundation for a comfortable fortune for its owner.’”

When Octavia ceased reading, Aunt Ellen uttered something as near a sniff as her breeding permitted.

“The prospectus,” she said, with uncompromising metropolitan suspicion, “doesn’t mention the centipedes, or the Indians. And you never did like mutton, Octavia. I don’t see what advantage you can derive from this — desert.”

But Octavia was in a trance. Her eyes were steadily regarding something quite beyond their focus. Her lips were parted, and her face was lighted by the kindling furor of the explorer, the ardent, stirring disquiet of the adventurer. Suddenly she clasped her hands together exultantly.

“The problem solves itself, auntie,” she cried. “I’m going to that ranch. I’m going to live on it. I’m going to learn to like mutton, and even concede the good qualities of centipedes — at a respectful distance. It’s just what I need. It’s a new life that comes when my old one is just ending. It’s a release, auntie; it isn’t a narrowing. Think of the gallops over those leagues of prairies, with the wind tugging at the roots of your hair, the coming close to the earth and learning over again the stories of the growing grass and the little wild flowers without names! Glorious is what it will be. Shall I be a shepherdess with a Watteau hat, and a crook to keep the bad wolves from the lambs, or a typical Western ranch girl, with short hair, like the pictures of her in the Sunday papers? I think the latter. And they’ll have my picture, too, with the wild-cats I’ve slain, single-handed, hanging from my saddle horn. ‘From the Four Hundred to the Flocks’ is the way they’ll headline it, and they’ll print photographs of the old Van Dresser mansion and the church where I was married. They won’t have my picture, but they’ll get an artist to draw it. I’ll be wild and woolly, and I’ll grow my own wool.”

“Octavia!” Aunt Ellen condensed into the one word all the protests she was unable to utter.

“Don’t say a word, auntie. I’m going. I’ll see the sky at night fit down on the world like a big butter-dish cover, and I’ll make friends again with the stars that I haven’t had a chat with since I was a wee child. I wish to go. I’m tired of all this. I’m glad I haven’t any money. I could bless Colonel Beaupree for that ranch, and forgive him for all his bubbles. What if the life will be rough and lonely! I — I deserve it. I shut my heart to everything except that miserable ambition. I — oh, I wish to go away, and forget — forget!”

Octavia swerved suddenly to her knees, laid her flushed face in her aunt’s lap, and shook with turbulent sobs.

Aunt Ellen bent over her, and smoothed the copperybrown hair.

“I didn’t know,” she said, gently; “I didn’t know — that. Who was it, dear?

When Mrs. Octavia Beaupree, née Van Dresser, stepped from the train at Nopal, her manner lost, for the moment, some of that easy certitude which had always marked her movements. The town was of recent establishment, and seemed to have been hastily constructed of undressed lumber and flapping canvas. The element that had congregated about the station, though not offensively demonstrative, was clearly composed of citizens accustomed to and prepared for rude alarms.

Octavia stood on the platform, against the telegraph office, and attempted to choose by intuition from the swaggering, straggling string, of loungers, the manager of the Rancho de las Sombras, who had been instructed by Mr. Bannister to meet her there. That tall, serious, looking, elderly man in the blue flannel shirt and white tie she thought must be he. But, no; he passed by, removing his gaze from the lady as hers rested on him, according to the Southern custom. The manager, she thought, with some impatience at being kept waiting, should have no difficulty in selecting her. Young women wearing the most recent thing in ash-coloured travelling suits were not so plentiful in Nopal!

Thus keeping a speculative watch on all persons of possible managerial aspect, Octavia, with a catching breath and a start of surprise, suddenly became aware of Teddy Westlake hurrying along the platform in the direction of the train — of Teddy Westlake or his sunbrowned ghost in cheviot, boots and leather-girdled hat — Theodore Westlake, Jr., amateur polo (almost) champion, all-round butterfly and cumberer of the soil; but a broader, surer, more emphasized and determined Teddy than the one she had known a year ago when last she saw him.

He perceived Octavia at almost the same time, deflected his course, and steered for her in his old, straightforward way. Something like awe came upon her as the strangeness of his metamorphosis was brought into closer range; the rich, red-brown of his complexion brought out so vividly his straw-coloured mustache and steel-gray eyes. He seemed more grown-up, and, somehow, farther away. But, when he spoke, the old, boyish Teddy came back again. They had been friends from childhood.

“Why, ‘Tave!” he exclaimed, unable to reduce his perplexity to coherence. ” How — what — when — where?”

“Train,” said Octavia; “necessity; ten minutes ago; home. Your complexion’s gone, Teddy. Now, how — what — when — where?”

“I’m working down here,” said Teddy. He cast side glances about the station as one does who tries to combine politeness with duty.

“You didn’t notice on the train,” he asked, “an old lady with gray curls and a poodle, who occupied two seats with her bundles and quarrelled with the conductor, did you?”

“I think not,” answered Octavia, reflecting. “And you haven’t, by any chance, noticed a big, gray-mustached man in a blue shirt and six-shooters, with little flakes of merino wool sticking in his hair, have you?”

“Lots of ’em,” said Teddy, with symptoms of mental delirium under the strain. Do you happen to know any such individual?”

“No; the description is imaginary. Is your interest in the old lady whom you describe a personal one?”

“Never saw her in my life. She’s painted entirely from fancy. She owns the little piece of property where I earn my bread and butter — the Rancho de las Sombras. I drove up to meet her according to arrangement with her lawyer.”

Octavia leaned against the wall of the telegraph office. Was this possible? And didn’t he know?

“Are you the manager of that ranch?” she asked weakly.

“I am,” said Teddy, with pride.

“I am Mrs. Beaupree,” said Octavia faintly; “but my hair never would curl, and I was polite to the conductor.”

For a moment that strange, grown-up look came back, and removed Teddy miles away from her.

“I hope you’ll excuse me,” he said, rather awkwardly. “You see, I’ve been down here in the chaparral a year. I hadn’t heard. Give me your checks, please, and I’ll have your traps loaded into the wagon. José will follow with them. We travel ahead in the buckboard.”

Seated by Teddy in a feather-weight buckboard, behind a pair of wild, cream-coloured Spanish ponies, Octavia abandoned all thought for the exhilaration of the present. They swept out of the little town and down the level road toward the south. Soon the road dwindled and disappeared, and they struck across a world carpeted with an endless reach of curly mesquite grass. The wheels made no sound. The tireless ponies bounded ahead at an unbroken gallop. The temperate wind, made fragrant by thousands of acres of blue and yellow wild flowers, roared gloriously in their ears. The motion was aërial, ecstatic, with a thrilling sense of perpetuity in its effect. Octavia sat silent, possessed by a feeling of elemental, sensual bliss. Teddy seemed to be wrestling with some internal problem.

“I’m going to call you madama,” he announced as the result of his labours. “That is what the Mexicans will call you — they’re nearly all Mexicans on the ranch, you know. That seems to me about the proper thing.”

“Very well, Mr. Westlake,” said Octavia, primly.

“Oh, now,” said Teddy, in some consternation, “that’s carrying the thing too far, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry me with your beastly etiquette. I’m just beginning to live. Don’t remind me of anything artificial. If only this air could be bottled! This much alone is worth coming for. Oh, look I there goes a deer!”

“Jack-rabbit,” said Teddy, without turning his head.

“Could I — might I drive?” suggested Octavia, panting, with rose-tinted cheeks and the eye of an eager child.

“On one condition. Could I — might I smoke? ”

“Forever!” cried Octavia, taking the lines with solemn joy. “How shall I know which way to drive?”

“Keep her sou’ by sou’east, and all sail set. You see that black speck on the horizon under that lowermost Gulf cloud? That’s a group of live-oaks and a landmark. Steer halfway between that and the little hill to the left. I’ll recite you the whole code of driving rules for the Texas prairies: keep the reins from under the horses’ feet, and swear at ’em frequent.”

“I’m too happy to swear, Ted. Oh, why do people buy yachts or travel in palace-cars, when a buckboard and a pair of plugs and a spring morning like this can satisfy all desire?”

“Now, I’ll ask you,” protested Teddy, who was futilely striking match after match on the dashboard, “not to call those denizens of the air plugs. They can kick out a hundred miles between daylight and dark.” At last he succeeded in snatching a light for his cigar from the flame held in the hollow of his hands.

“Room!” said Octavia, intensely. “That’s what produces the effect. I know now what I’ve wanted — scope — range — room! ”

“Smoking-room,” said Teddy, unsentimentally. “I love to smoke in a buckboard. The wind blows the smoke into you and out again. It saves exertion.”

The two fell so naturally into their old-time goodfellowship that it was only by degrees that a sense of the strangeness of the new relations between them came to be felt.

“Madama,” said Teddy, wonderingly, “however did you get it into your bead to cut the crowd and come down here? Is it a fad now among the upper classes to trot off to sheep ranches instead of to Newport?”

“I was broke, Teddy,” said Octavia, sweetly, with her interest centred upon steering safely between a Spanish dagger plant and a clump of chaparral; “I haven’t a thing in the world but this ranch — not even any other home to go to.”

“Come, now,” said Teddy, anxiously but ineredulously, “you don’t mean it?”

“When my husband,” said Octavia, with a shy slurring of the word, “died three months ago I thought I had a reasonable amount of the world’s goods. His lawyer exploded that theory in a sixty-minute fully illustrated lecture. I took to the sheep as a last resort. Do you happen to know of any fashionable caprice among the gilded youth of Manhattan that induces them to abandon polo and club windows to become managers of sheep ranches?”

“It’s easily explained in my case,” responded Teddy, promptly. “I had to go to work. I couldn’t have earned my board in New York, so I chummed a while with old Sandford, one of the syndicate that owned the ranch before Colonel Beaupree bought it, and got a place down here. I wasn’t manager at first. I jogged around on ponies and studied the business in detail, until I got all the points in my head. I saw where it was losing and what the remedies were, and then Sandford put me in charge. I get a hundred dollars a month, and I earn it.”

“Poor Teddy!” said Octavia, with a smile.

“You needn’t. I like it. I save half my wages, and I’m as hard as a water plug. It beats polo.”

“Will it furnish bread and tea and jam for another outcast from civilization?”

“The spring shearing,” said the manager, “just cleaned up a deficit in last year’s business. Wastefulness and inattention have been the rule heretofore. The autumn clip will leave a small profit over all expenses. Next year there will be jam.”

When, about four o’clock in the afternoon, the ponies rounded a gentle, brush-covered hill, and then swooped, like a double cream-coloured cyclone, upon the Rancho de las Sombras, Octavia gave a little cry of delight. A lordly grove of magnificent live-oaks cast an area of grateful, cool shade, whence the ranch had drawn its name, “de las Sombras” — of the shadows. The house, of red brick, one story, ran low and long beneath the trees. Through its middle, dividing its six rooms in half, extended a broad, arched passageway, picturesque with flowering cactus and hanging red earthern jars. A “gallery,” low and broad, encircled the building. Vines climbed about it, and the adjacent ground was, for a space, covered with transplanted grass and shrubs. A little lake, long and narrow, glimmered in the sun at the rear. Further away stood the shacks of the Mexican workers, the corrals, wool sheds and shearing pens. To the right lay the low hills, splattered with dark patches of chaparral; to the left the unbounded green prairie blending against the blue heavens.

“It’s a home, Teddy,” said Octavia, breathlessly; that’s what it is — it’s a home.”

“Not so bad for a sheep ranch,” admitted Teddy, with excusable pride. “I’ve been tinkering on it at odd times.”

A Mexican youth sprang from somewhere in the grass, and took charge of the creams. The mistress and the manager entered the house.

“Here’s Mrs. MacIntyre,” said Teddy, as a placid, neat, elderly lady came out upon the gallery to meet them. “Mrs. Mac, here’s the boss. Very likely she will be wanting a hunk of ham and a dish of beans after her drive.”

Mrs. MacIntyre, the housekeeper, as much a fixture on the place as the lake or the live-oaks, received the imputation of the ranch’s resources of refreshment with mild indignation, and was about to give it utterance when Octavia spoke.

“Oh, Mrs. MacIntyre, don’t apologize for Teddy. Yes, I call him Teddy. So does every one whom he hasn’t duped into taking him seriously. You see, we used to cut paper dolls and play jackstraws together ages ago. No one minds what he says.”

“No,” said Teddy, “no one minds what he says, just so he doesn’t do it again.”

Octavia cast one of those subtle, sidelong glances toward him from beneath her lowered eyelids — a glance that Teddy used to describe as an upper-cut. But there was nothing in his ingenuous, weather-tanned face to warrant a suspicion that he was making an allusion — nothing. Beyond a doubt, thought Octavia, he had forgotten.

“Mr. Westlake likes his fun,” said Mrs. Maclntyre, as she conducted Octavia to her rooms. “But,” she added, loyally, “people around here usually pay attention to what he says when he talks in earnest. I don’t know what would have become of this place without him.”

Two rooms at the east end of the house had been arranged for the occupancy of the ranch’s mistress. When she entered them a slight dismay seized her at their bare appearance and the scantiness of their furniture; but she quickly reflected that the climate was a semi-tropical one, and was moved to appreciation of the well-conceived efforts to conform to it. The sashes had already been removed from the big windows, and white curtains waved in the Gulf breeze that streamed through the wide jalousies. The bare floor was amply strewn with cool rugs; the chairs were inviting, deep, dreamy willows; the walls were papered with a light, cheerful olive. One whole side of her sitting room was covered with books on smooth, unpainted pine shelves. She flew to these at once. Before her was a well-selected library. She caught glimpses of titles of volumes of fiction and travel not yet seasoned from the dampness of the press.

Presently, recollecting that she was now in a wilderness given over to mutton, centipedes and privations, the incongruity of these luxuries struck her, and, with intuitive feminine suspicion, she began turning to the fly-leaves of volume after volume. Upon each one was inscribed in fluent characters the name of Theodore Westlake, Jr.

Octavia, fatigued by her long journey, retired early that night. Lying upon her white, cool bed, she rested deliciously, but sleep coquetted long with her. She listened to faint noises whose strangeness kept her faculties on the alert — the fractious yelping of the coyotes, the ceaseless, low symphony of the wind, the distant booming of the frogs about the lake, the lamentation of a concertina in the Mexicans’ quarters. There were many conflicting feelings in her heart — thankfulness and rebellion, peace and disquietude, loneliness and a sense of protecting care, happiness and an old, haunting pain.

She did what any other woman would have done — sought relief in a wholesome tide of unreasonable tears, and her last words, murmured to herself before slumber, capitulating, came softly to woo her, were “He has forgotten.”

The manager of the Rancho de las Sombras was no dilettante. He was a “hustler.” He was generally up, mounted, and away of mornings before the rest of the household were awake, making the rounds of the flocks and camps. This was the duty of the majordomo, a stately old Mexican with a princely air and manner, but Teddy seemed to have a great deal of confidence in his own eyesight. Except in the busy seasons, he nearly always returned to the ranch to breakfast at eight o’clock, with Octavia and Mrs. Maclntyre, at the little table set in the central hallway, bringing with him a tonic and breezy cheerfulness full of the health and flavour of the prairies.

A few days after Octavia’s arrival he made her get out one of her riding skirts, and curtail it to a shortness demanded by the chaparral brakes.

With some misgivings she donned this and the pair of buckskin leggings he prescribed in addition, and, mounted upon a dancing pony, rode with him to view her possessions. He showed her everything — the flocks of ewes, muttons and grazing lambs, the dipping vats, the shearing pens, the uncouth merino rams in their little pasture, the water-tanks I prepared against the summer drought — giving account of his stewardship with a boyish enthussiasm that never flagged.

Where was the old Teddy that she knew so well? This side of him was the same, and it was a side that pleased her; but this was all she ever saw of him now. Where was his sentimentality — those old, varying moods of impetuous love-making, of fanciful, quixotic devotion, of heart-breaking gloom, of alternating, absurd tenderness and haughty dignity? His nature had been a sensitive one, his temperament bordering closely on the artistic. She knew that, besides being a follower of fashion and its fads and sports, he had cultivated tastes of a finer nature. He had written things, he had tampered with colours, he was something of a student in certain branches of art, and once she had been admitted to all his aspirations and thoughts. But now — and she could not avoid the conclusion — Teddy had barricaded against her every side of himself except one — the side that showed the manager of the Rancho de las Sombras and a jolly chum who had forgiven and forgotten. Queerly enough the words of Mr. Bannister’s description of her property came into her mind — “all inclosed within a strong barbed-wire fence.”

“Teddy’s fenced, too,” said Octavia to herself.

It was not difficult for her to reason out the cause of his fortifications. It had originated one night at the Hammersmiths’ ball. It occurred at a time soon after she had decided to accept Colonel Beaupree and his million, which was no more than her looks and the entrée she held to the inner circles were worth. Teddy had proposed with all his impetuosity and fire, and she looked him straight in the eyes, an said, coldly and finally: “Never let me hear any such silly nonsense from you again.” “You won’t,” said Teddy, with an expression around his mouth, and — now Teddy was inclosed within a strong barbed-wire fence.

It was on this first ride of inspection that Teddy was seized by the inspiration that suggested the name of Mother Goose’s heroine, and he at once bestowed it upon Octavia. The idea, supported by both a similarity of names and identity of occupations, seemed to strike him as a peculiarly happy one, and he never tired of using it. The Mexicans on the ranch also took up the name, adding another syllable to accommodate their lingual incapacity for the final “p,” gravely referring to her as “La Madama Bo-Peepy.” Eventually it spread, and “Madame BoPeep’s ranch” was as often mentioned as the “Rancho de las Sombras.”

Came the long, hot season from May to September, when work is scarce on the ranches. Octavia passed the days in a kind of lotus-eater’s dream. Books, hammocks, correspondence with a few intimate friends, a renewed interest in her old water-colour box and easel — these disposed of the sultry hours of daylight. The evenings were always sure to bring enjoyment. Best of all were the rapturous horseback rides with Teddy, when the moon gave light over the wind-swept leagues, chaperoned by the wheeling night-hawk and the startled owl. Often the Mexicans would come up from their shacks with their guitars and sing the weirdest of heart-breaking songs. There were long, cosy chats on the breezy gallery, and an interminable warfare of wits between Teddy and Mrs. MacIntyre, whose abundant Scotch shrewdness often more than overmatched the lighter humour in which she was lacking.

And the nights came, one after another, and were filed away by weeks and months — nights soft and languorous and fragrant, that should have driven Strephon to Chloe over wires however barbed, that might have drawn Cupid himself to hunt, lasso in hand, among those amorous pastures — but Teddy kept his fences up.

One July night Madame Bo-Peep and her ranch manager were sitting on the east gallerv. Teddy had been exhausting the science of prognostication as to the probabilities of a price of twenty-four cents for the autumn clip, and had then subsided into an anesthetic cloud of Havana smoke. Only as incompetent a judge as a woman would have failed to note long ago that at least a third of his salary must have gone up in the fumes of those imported Regalias.

“Teddy,” said Octavia, suddenly, and rather sharply, “what are you working down here on a ranch for?”

“One hundred per,” said Teddy, glibly, “and found.”

“I’ve a good mind to discharge you.”

“Can’t do it,” said Teddy, with a grin.

“Why not?” demanded Octavia, with argumentative heat.

“Under contract. Terms of sale respect all unexpired contracts. Mine runs until 12 P. m., December thirty-first. You might get up at midnight on that date and fire me. if you try it sooner I’ll be in a position to bring legal proceedings.”

Octavia seemed to be considering the prospects of litigation.

“But,” continued Teddy cheerfully, “I’ve been thinking of resigning anyway.”

Octavia’s rocking-chair ceased its motion. There were centipedes in this country, she felt sure; and Indians, and vast, lonely, desolate, empty wastes; all within strong barbed-wire fence. There was a Van Dresser pride, but there was also a Van Dresser heart. She must know for certain whether or not he had forgotten.

“Ah, well, Teddy,” she said, with a fine assumption of polite interest, “it’s lonely down here; you’re longing to get back to the old life — to polo and lobsters and theatres and balls.”

“Never cared much for balls,” said Teddy virtuously.

“You’re getting old, Teddy. Your memory is failing. Nobody ever knew you to miss a dance, unless it occurred on the same night with another one which you attended. And you showed such shocking bad taste, too, in dancing too often with the same partner. Let me see, what was that Forbes girl’s name — the one with wall eyes — Mabel, wasn’t it?”

“No; Adéle. Mabel was the one with the bony elbows. That wasn’t wall in Adéle’s eyes. It was soul. We used to talk sonnets together, and Verlaine. Just then I was trying to run a pipe from the Pierian spring.”

“You were on the floor with her,” said Octavia, undeflected, “five times at the Hammersmiths’.”

“Hammersmiths’ what? ” questioned Teddy, vacuously.

“Ball — ball,” said Octavia, viciously. “What were we talking of?”

“Eyes, I thought,” said Teddy, after some reflection; “and elbows.”

“Those Hammersmiths,” went on Octavia, in her sweetest society prattle, after subduing an intense desire to yank a handful of sunburnt, sandy hair from the head lying back contentedly against the canvas of the steamer chair, “had too much money. Mines, wasn’t it? It was something that paid something to the ton. You couldn’t get a glass of plain water in their house. Everything at that ball was dreadfully overdone.”

“It was,” said Teddy.

“Such a crowd there was!” Octavia continued, conscious that she was talking the rapid drivel of a schoolgirl describing her first dance. “The balconies were as warm as the rooms. I — lost — something at that ball.” The last sentence was uttered in a tone calculated to remove the barbs from miles of wire.

“So did I,” confessed Teddy, in a lower voice.

“A glove,” said Octavia, falling back as the enemy approached her ditches.

“Caste,” said Teddy, halting his firing line without loss. “I hobnobbed, half the evening with one of Hammersmith’s miners, a fellow who kept his hands in his pockets, and talked like an archangel about reduction plants and drifts and levels and sluice-boxes.”

“A pearl-gray glove, nearly new,” sighed Octavia, mournfully.

“A bang-up chap, that McArdle,” maintained Teddy approvingly. ” A man who hated olives and elevators; a man who handled mountains as croquettes, and built tunnels in the air; a man who never uttered a word of silly nonsense in his life. Did you sign those leaserenewal applications yet, madama? They’ve got to be on file in the land office by the thirty-first.”

Teddy turned his head lazily. Octavia’s chair was vacant.

A certain centipede, crawling along the lines marked out by fate, expounded the situation. It was early one morning while Octavia and Mrs. Maclntyre were trimming the honeysuckle on the west gallery. Teddy had risen and departed hastily before daylight in response to word that a flock of ewes had been scattered from their bedding ground during the night by a thunder-storm.

The centipede, driven by destiny, showed himself on the floor of the gallery, and then, the screeches of the two women giving him his cue, he scuttled with all his yellow legs through the open door into the furthermost west room, which was Teddy’s. Arming themselves with domestic utensils selected with regard to their length, Octavia and Mrs. Maclntyre, with much clutching of skirts and skirmishing for the position of rear guard in the attacking force, followed.

Once outside, the centipede seemed to have disappeared, and his prospective murderers began a thorough but cautious search for their victim.

Even in the midst of such a dangerous and absorbing adventure Octavia was conscious of an awed curiosity on finding herself in Teddy’s sanctum. In that room he sat alone, silently communing with those secret thoughts that he now shared with no one, dreamed there whatever dreams he now called on no one to interpret.

It was the room of a Spartan or a soldier. In one corner stood a wide, canvas-covered cot; in another, a small bookcase; in another, a grim stand of Winchesters and shotguns. An immense table, strewn with letters, papers and documents and surmounted by a set of pigeonholes, occupied one side.

The centipede showed genius in concealing himself in such bare quarters. Mrs. Maclntyre was poking a broom-handle behind the bookcase. Octavia approached Teddy’s cot. The room was just as the manager had left it in his hurry. The Mexican maid had not yet given it her attention. There was his big pillow with the imprint of his head still in the centre. She thought the horrid beast might have climbed the cot and hidden itself to bite Teddy. Centipedes were thus cruel and vindictive toward managers.

She cautiously overturned the pillow, and then parted her lips to give the signal for reinforcements at sight of a long, slender, dark object lying there. But, repressing it in time, she caught up a glove, a pearl-gray glove, flattened — it might be conceived — by many, many months of nightly pressure beneath the pillow of the man who had forgotten the Hammersmiths’ ball. Teddy must have left so hurriedly that morning that he had, for once, forgotten to transfer it to its resting-place by day. Even managers, who are notoriously wily and cunning, are sometimes caught up with.

Octavia slid the gray glove into the bosom of her summery morning gown. It was hers. Men who put themselves within a strong barbed-wire fence, and remember Hammersmith balls only by the talk of miners about sluiceboxes, should not be allowed to possess such articles.

After all, what a paradise this prairie country was! How it blossomed like the rose when you found things that were thought to be lost! How delicious was that morning breeze coming in the windows, fresh and sweet with the breath of the yellow ratama blooms! Might one not stand, for a minute, with shining, far-gazing eyes, and dream that mistakes might be corrected?

Why was Mrs. Maclntyre poking about so absurdly with a broom?

“I’ve found it,” said Mrs. MacIntyre, banging the door. “Here it is.”

“Did you lose something? asked Octavia, with sweetly polite non-interest.

“The little devil!” said Mrs. Maclntyre, driven to violence. “Ye’ve no forgotten him alretty?”

Between them they slew the centipede. Thus was he rewarded for his agency toward the recovery of things lost at the Hammersmiths’ ball.

It seems that Teddy, in due course, remembered the glove, and when he returned to the house at sunset made a secret but exhaustive search for it. Not until evening, upon the moonlit eastern gallery, did he find it. It was upon the hand that he had thought lost to him forever, and so he was moved to repeat certain nonsense that he had been commanded never, never to utter again. Teddy’s fences were down.

This time there was no ambition to stand in the way, and the wooing was as natural and successful as should be between ardent shepherd and gentle shepherdess.

The prairies changed to a garden. The Rancho de las Sombras became the Ranch of Light.

A few days later Octavia received a letter from Mr. Bannister, in reply to one she had written to him asking some questions about her business. A portion of the letter ran as follows:

“I am at a loss to account for your references to the sheep ranch. Two months after your departure to take up your residence upon it, it was discovered that Colonel Beaupree’s title was worthless. A deed came to light showing that he disposed of the property before his death. The matter was reported to your manager, Mr. Westlake, who at once repurchad the property. It is entirely beyond my powers of conjecture to imagine how you have remained in ignorance of this fact. I beg you that will at once confer with that gentleman, who will, at least, corroborate my statement.”

Octavia sought Teddy, with battle in her eye.

“What are you working on this ranch for?” she asked once more.

“One hundred — ” he began to repeat, but saw in her face that she knew. She held Mr. Bannister’s letter in her hand. He knew that the game was up.

“It’s my ranch,” said Teddy, like a schoolboy detected in evil. “It’s a mighty poor manager that isn’t able to absorb the boss’s business if you give him time.”

“Why were you working down here?” pursued Octavia still struggling after the key to the riddle of Teddy.

“To tell the truth, ‘Tave,” said Teddy, with quiet candour, “it wasn’t for the salary. That about kept me in cigars and sunburn lotions. I was sent south by my doctor. ‘Twas that right lung that was going to the bad on account of over-exercise and strain at polo and gymnastics. I needed climate and ozone and rest and things of that sort.”

In an instant Octavia was close against the vicinity of the affected organ. Mr. Bannister’s letter fluttered to the floor.

“It’s — it’s well now, isn’t it, Teddy?”

“Sound as a mesquite chunk. I deceived you in one thing. I paid fifty thousand for your ranch as soon as I found you had no title. I had just about that much income accumulated at my banker’s while I’ve been herding sheep down here, so it was almost like picking the thing up on a bargain-counter for a penny. There’s another little surplus of unearned increment piling up there, ‘Tave. I’ve been thinking of a wedding trip in a yacht with white ribbons tied to the mast, through the Mediterranean, and then up among the Hebrides and down Norway to the Zuyder Zee.”

“And I was thinking,” said Octavia, softly, “of a wedding gallop with my manager among the flocks of sheep and back to a wedding breakfast with Mrs. MaeIntyre on the gallery, with, maybe, a sprig of orange blossom fastened to the red jar above the table.”

Teddy laughed, and began to chant:

“Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep, And doesn’t know where to find ’em. Let ’em alone, and they’ll come home, And — ”

Octavia drew his head down, and whispered in his ear, But that is one of the tales they brought behind them.