# Round the Circle

O. Henry

“Find yo’ shirt all right, Sam?” asked Mrs. Webber, from her chair under the live-oak, where she was comfortably seated with a paperback volume for company.

“It balances perfeckly, Marthy,” answered Sam, with a suspicious pleasantness in his tone. “At first I was about ter be a little reckless and kick ‘cause ther buttons was all off, but since I diskiver that the button holes is all busted out, why, I wouldn’t go so fur as to say the buttons is any loss to speak of.”

“Oh, well,” said his wife, carelessly, “put on your necktie—that’ll keep it together.”

Sam Webber’s sheep ranch was situated in the loneliest part of the country between the Nueces and the Frio. The ranch house—a two-room box structure—was on the rise of a gently swelling hill in the midst of a wilderness of high chaparral. In front of it was a small clearing where stood the sheep pens, shearing shed, and wool house. Only a few feet back of it began the thorny jungle.

Sam was going to ride over to the Chapman ranch to see about buying some more improved merino rams. At length he came out, ready for his ride. This being a business trip of some importance, and the Chapman ranch being almost a small town in population and size, Sam had decided to “dress up” accordingly. The result was that he had transformed himself from a graceful, picturesque frontiersman into something much less pleasing to the sight. The tight white collar awkwardly constricted his muscular, mahogany-colored neck. The buttonless shirt bulged in stiff waves beneath his unbuttoned vest. The suit of “ready-made” effectually concealed the fine lines of his straight, athletic figure. His berry-brown face was set to the melancholy dignity befitting a prisoner of state. He gave Randy, his three-year-old son, a pat on the head, and hurried out to where Mexico, his favorite saddle horse, was standing.

Marthy, leisurely rocking in her chair, fixed her place in the book with her finger, and turned her head, smiling mischievously as she noted the havoc Sam had wrought with his appearance in trying to “fix up.”

~Well, ef I must say it, Sam,” she drawled, “you look jest like one of them hayseeds in the picture papers, ‘stead of a free and independent sheepman of the State o’ Texas.”

Sam climbed awkwardly into the saddle.

“You’re the one ought to be ‘shamed to say so,” he replied hotly. “‘Stead of ‘tendin’ to a man’s clothes you’re al’ays setting around a-readin’ them billy-by-dam yaller-back novils.”

“Oh, shet up and ride along,” said Mrs. Webber, with a little jerk at the handles of her chair; “you always fussin’ ‘bout my readin’. I do a-plenty; and I’ll read when I wanter. I live in the bresh here like a varmint, never seein’ nor hearin’ nothin’, and what other ‘musement kin I have? Not in listenin’ to you talk, for it’s complain, complain, one day after another. Oh, go on, Sam, and leave me in peace.”

Sam gave his pony a squeeze with his knees and “shoved” down the wagon trail that connected his ranch with the old, open Government road. It was eight o’clock, and already beginning to be very warm. He should have started three hours earlier. Chapman ranch was only eighteen miles away, but there was a road for only three miles of the distance. He had ridden over there once with one of the Half-Moon cowpunchers, and he had the direction well-defined in his mind.

Sam turned off the old Government road at the split mesquite, and struck down the arroyo of the Quintanilla. Here was a narrow stretch of smiling valley, upholstered with a rich mat of green, curly mesquite grass; and Mexico consumed those few miles quickly with his long, easy lope. Again, upon reaching Wild Duck Waterhole, must he abandon well-defined ways. He turned now to his right up a little hill, pebble-covered, upon which grew only the tenacious and thorny prickly pear and chaparral. At the summit of this he paused to take his last general view of the landscape for, from now on, he must wind through brakes and thickets of chaparral, pear, and mesquite, for the most part seeing scarcely farther than twenty yards in any direction, choosing his way by the prairie-dweller’s instinct, guided only by an occasional glimpse of a far distant hilltop, a peculiarly shaped knot of trees, or the position of the sun.

Sam rode down the sloping hill and plunged into the great pear flat that lies between the Quintanilla and the Piedra.

In about two hours he discovered that he was lost. Then came the usual confusion of mind and the hurry to get somewhere. Mexico was anxious to redeem the situation, twisting with alacrity along the tortuous labyrinths of the jungle. At the moment his master’s sureness of the route had failed his horse had divined the fact. There were no hills now that they could climb to obtain a view of the country. They came upon a few, but so dense and interlaced was the brush that scarcely could a rabbit penetrate the mass. They were in the great, lonely thicket of the Frio bottoms.

It was a mere nothing for a cattleman or a sheepman to be lost for a day or a night. The thing often happened. It was merely a matter of missing a meal or two and sleeping comfortably on your saddle blankets on a soft mattress of mesquite grass. But in Sam’s case it was different. He had never been away from his ranch at night. Marthy was afraid of the country—afraid of Mexicans, of snakes, of panthers, even of sheep. So he had never left her alone.

It must have been about four in the afternoon when Sam’s conscience awoke. He was limp and drenched, rather from anxiety than the heat or fatigue. Until now he had been hoping to strike the trail that led to the Frio crossing and the Chapman ranch. He must have crossed it at some dim part of it and ridden beyond. If so he was now something like fifty miles from home. If he could strike a ranch— a camp—any place where he could get a fresh horse and inquire the road, he would ride all night to get back to Marthy and the kid.

So, I have hinted, Sam was seized bv remorse. There was a big lump in his throat as he thought of the cross words he had spoken to his wife. Surely it was hard enough for her to live in that horrible country witnout having to bear the burden of his abuse. He cursed himself grimly, and felt a sudden flush of shame that over-glowed the summer heat as he remembered the many times he had flouted and railed at her because she had a liking for reading fiction.

“Ther only so’ce ov amusement ther po’ gal’s got,” said Sam aloud, with a sob, which unaccustomed sound caused Mexico to shy a bit. A-livin with a sore-headed kiote like me—a low-down skunk that ought to be licked to death with a saddle cinch—a-cookin’ and a-washin’ and a-livin’ on mutton and beans and me abusin’ her fur takin’ a squint or two in a little book!”

He thought of Marthy as she had been when he first met her in Dogtown—smart, pretty, and saucy—before the sun had turned the roses in her cheeks brown and the silence of the chaparral had tamed her ambitions.

“Ef I ever speaks another hard word to ther little gal,” muttered Sam, “or fails in the love and affection that’s coming to her in the deal, I hopes a wildcat’ll t’ar me to pieces.”

He knew what he would do. He would write to Garcia & Jones, his San Antonio merchants where he bought his supplies and sold his wool, and have them send down a big box of novels and reading matter for Marthy. Things were going to be different. He wondered whether a little piano could be placed in one of the rooms of the ranch house without the family having to move out of doors.

In nowise calculated to allay his self-reproach was the thought that Marthy and Randy would have to pass the night alone. In spite of their bickerings, when night came Marthy was wont to dismiss her fears of the country, and rest her head upon Sam’s strong arm with a sigh of peaceful content and dependence. And were her fears so groundless? Sam thought of roving, marauding Mexicans, of stealthy cougars that sometimes invaded the ranches, of rattlesnakes, centipedes, and a dozen possible dangers. Marthy would be frantic with fear. Randy would cry, and call for dada to come.

Still the interminable succession of stretches of brush, cactus, and mesquite. Hollow after hollow, slope after slope—all exactly alike —all familiar by constant repetition, and yet all strange and new. If he could only arrive ~somewhere.~

The straight line is Art. Nature moves in circles. A straightforward man is more an artificial product than a diplomatist is. Men lost in the snow travel in exact circles until they sink, exhausted, as their footprints have attested. Also, travellers in philosophy and other mental processes frequently wind up at their starting-point.

It was when Sam Webber was fullest of contrition and good resolves that Mexico, with a heavy sigh, subsided from his regular, brisk trot into a slow complacent walk. They were winding up an easy slope covered with brush ten or twelve feet high.

“I say now, Mex,” demurred Sam, “this here won’t do. I know you’re plumb tired out, but we got ter git along. Oh, Lordy, ain’t there no mo’ houses in the world!” He gave Mexico a smart kick with his heels.

Mexico gave a protesting grunt as if to say: “What’s the use of that, now we’re so near?” He quickened his gait into a languid trot. Rounding a great clump of black chaparral he stopped short. Sam dropped the bridle reins and sat, looking into the back door of his own house, not ten yards away.

Marthy, serene and comfortable, sat in her rocking-chair before the door in the shade of the house, with her feet resting luxuriously upon the steps. Randy, who was playing with a pair of spurs on the ground, looked up for a moment at his father and went on spinning the rowels and singing a little song. Marthy turned her head lazily against the back of the chair and considered the arrivals with emotionless eyes. She held a book in her lap with her finger holding the place.

Sam shook himself queerly, like a man coming out of a dream, and slowly dismounted. He moistened his dry lips.

“I see you are still a-settin’,” he said, “a-readin’ of them billy-by-dam yaller-back novils.”

Sam had traveled round the circle and was himself again.