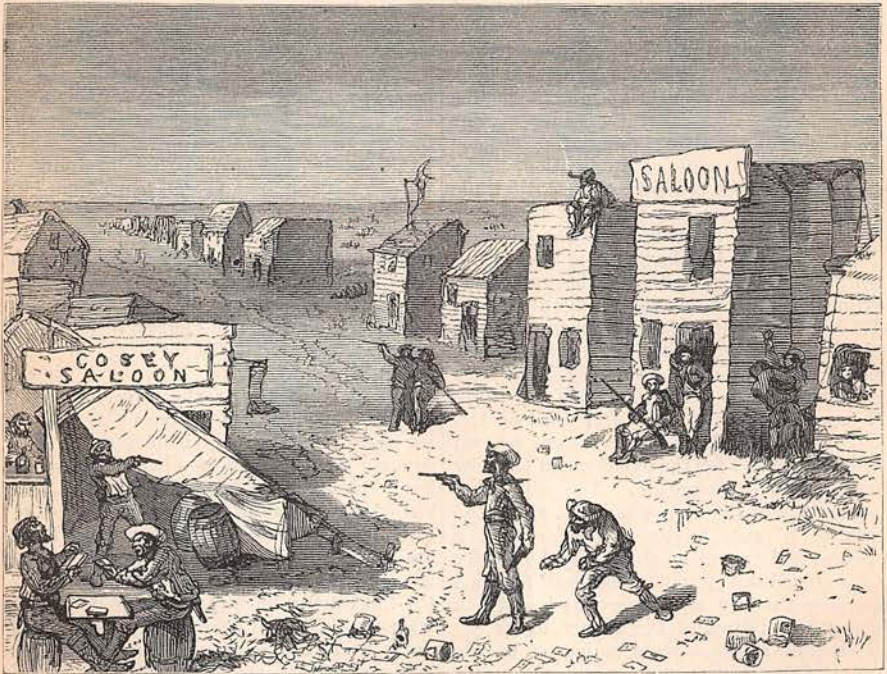


AIR TOWNS AND THEIR INHABITANTS.



TOWN OF COYOTE.

THE world has its air towns as well as its air castles. Yet while the latter vanish like punctured bubbles, noiselessly and harmlessly, the first disappear in a puff of the locomotive's smoke, with a crash and consequences rather disagreeable to interested ears.

Ever since the giant, Steam, strode Westward in his seven-league land-grant boots, each momentary resting-place has become a new-born city. Child of a nursling railroad, the infant town has often rended the heavens with its birth-shout, while Fate prepared to throttle it at tooth-cutting. The incisors, however, have usually developed before decease sufficiently for every one to be bitten who fondled the infant. And the sponsors have usually cut their wisdom-teeth about the same period.

That portion of our continent between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains has of late years borne upon its face not only the wrinkles of numerous projected as well as finished railways, but, like pimples upon a sot's countenance, an irruption of towns has broken violently out—the impurities of new States and Territories drunk with glittering projects. Not only have these menaced and then taken temporary seat along and upon the backbone of the continent, but its broad face has been pit-

ted by what may well have been termed angry ulcers, slow of cure.

The Pacific railways have been responsible for more and worse towns than any other single cause. Every temporary terminus of track-laying became, for the time being, a city, wicked, wonderful, and short-lived. Dull Care and Prudence fled as fugitives out of these butterfly swarms, and only found refuge in the lonely "dug-outs" of pioneer farmers. Shame flaunted her scarlet rags from the dance-house's open door, and saluted passenger trains with an air full of violin scrapings, feet beatings, and "all han's roun', swing yer partners." Life was merry, after a fashion; and Love, no longer snowy-pinioned, but soiled and *passé*, leaned on a bar instead of a bow, and gave ever-constant evidence of having been out overnight with Bacchus.

It was the writer's destiny to be associated for some years with the organization of towns for what was then the Eastern Division of the Union Pacific Railway—a line running from Kansas City, on the Missouri River, to Denver. The first portion of the road, that east of Fort Harker, the centre of the State of Kansas, was through an agricultural region, and with that our article has nothing to do. From where the "Harker Bluffs" looked out upon the silent plains,

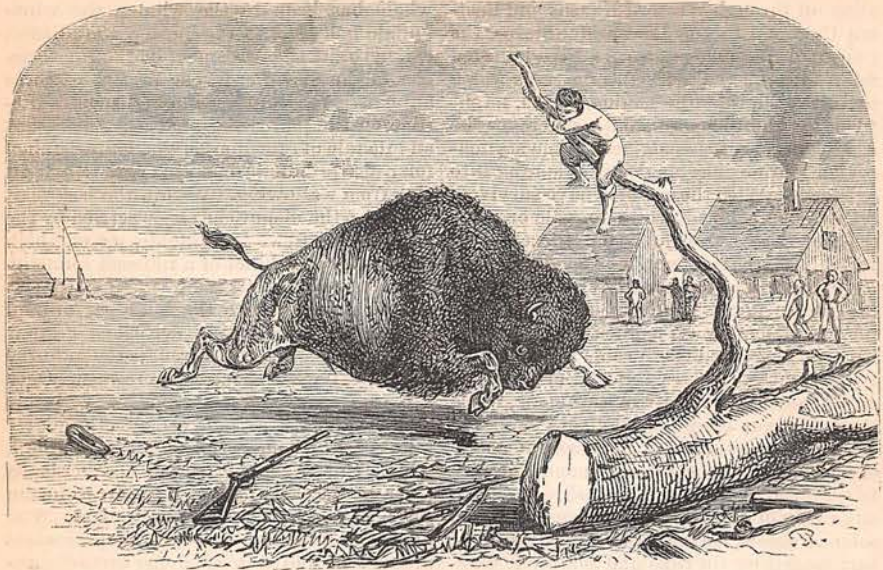
away off through Western Kansas and Eastern Colorado to the Rocky Mountains, the iron road was being placed. Five hundred miles through the red man's pastures was a path leveled, that the genius, Steam, might tread it; and along this path, wherever the Aladdin lamp of the engine became stationary for a brief time, magic cities sprang into existence. With those which have survived, future generations have to do. Be ours the task to rescue from oblivion those towns which were, but are not.

Coyote was a temporary terminus of the railroad in 1868. On every side the dreary rolling plains lay up against the cloudless horizon. Sky and earth came together like two tenantless wastes, relieved only by the golden sun rolling daily over the one, while the mushroom town looked up at it from the other. A crazy street of shanties and a mob of men had been flung down among the buffaloes—the wreck of other mushroom cities, and the habitants of their purlieus. Canvas saloons, sheet-iron hotels, and sod dwellings, surrounded by tin cans and scattered playing-cards, the latter so out of form by repeated turnings from the bottom that even a Coyote gambler could not manipulate them. And it was interesting to see Boreas and Notus take a hand with these discarded trumps. Before the breath of the north wind they would rise into air, the queens dancing like so many witches in effigy, as, close over the smooth surface, they fled south. A few moments and the barren earth would be swept clean, while the pasteboards, accompanied by stray newspapers and old hats, were fluttering, like a flight of white birds, out of sight. Three days, the usual life of a full-grown prairie gale, might pass, and then, as the north wind met the forces of the south, and fled back over this disputed territory of the tempests, the tenantless air became alive again. Far off on the heel of the vanquished and the crest of the victor wind came the white-winged coveys of cards, like the curses of the proverb, on their way home to roost. At night-fall they had collected beside the track and among the houses, and were again thick as leaves in autumn. Had it been possible for conscience to prick through a Coyote gambler's skin, how it might have gratified him to see the marked Jack that had fleeced the last stranger rise up like a grasshopper and fly south, beyond the possibility of becoming State's evidence! And how annoying to wake up and find the knave again under his window!

Coyote was in the midst of the buffalo country. For a hundred miles on either side carcasses disfigured the land. The meat, cut into strips or lying on sheds, thereby becoming merchantable "jerked," was every where. At night wolf baiters, armed with strychnine and lard, sallied out and daubed the bones. What the amber

whale has been to the whaler, the white buffalo has been to the hunter. Traditions existed that there roamed, in the inner circles of the vast herds, one or two of these animals. Yet hunters who had spent a lifetime on the plains declared the report but an idle tale of greenhorns, who had mistaken for a white buffalo one covered with light clay from wallowing. Within the last year, however, the dispute has been settled by the acquisition of two individuals, one of which is now in the cabinet of a railroad company at Kansas City.

So numerous were the buffaloes around Coyote that on several occasions I knew them to dash directly through the suburbs of the town when chased by horsemen. Once I witnessed a singular scene—a veritable duel between the youngest and the oldest inhabitant. A mangy, ill-humored old bull, which had been left behind the herds on their southward march, wandered during the night close to an outlying house. The first to discover him was "Kid," a precocious urchin who had been a "shiner up" of leather and crier of papers East. With that love of travel peculiar to Young America, this waif had stolen rides on the cars until at last tossed out, a friendless stray, on this desolate spot of desert. When a sleepy restaurant man in the early morning opened his door, and, rubbing two very red eyes, discovered this lump of humanity curled up by the boards, he naturally inquired, in the dialect of the district, "Who in thunder are you?" And prompt came the answer, "I's a kid, Sir, from New York." Perhaps the boy expected, from the odd reply, the result that followed. It certainly gained him favor among that rough crew. Since then Kid had been a hewer of wood and drawer of water for chance pennies. On this particular morning, when the traveled boot-black saw the bison, his ambition took in at one grasp the project of killing it. Slipping quietly into the house, and dragging forth a hunter's musket, Kid rested it upon a cotton-wood log and fired. The buffalo was ruminating quietly, looking off upon the plain, when surprised by this bombardment in the rear. Quickly wheeling, Kid was discovered on the log preparing to cheer. There was no retreat in that bison. Down came the immense head into position like a battering-ram, up went the tail erect and stiff, like a bar suddenly pulled to let on power, and down upon Young New York came *Bos americanus*. Kid clambered on to the remnant of a projecting branch, and dropped down like a ripe persimmon when the buffalo smote his support. Alarmed by the roar of the gun at that early hour, people rushed out of neighboring houses, to discover the following odd tableau. Close under the side of a log was a boy, hugging the timber as affectionately as if forming part of its bark.



KID AND THE BUFFALO.

Trying to pick the youth out on his horns was a veteran bison bull. But try as he might, the black spears could only graze Kid's ragged pants. Whenever this occurred, a yell came forth from under the log which would have done no discredit to a young Apache. It did not speak well for the humanity of the spectators that they enjoyed the spectacle very much as they would a dog-fight, and allowed the bull to exhaust his fruitless efforts and walk away before Kid was placed upon his feet again.

Coyote soon disappeared. The temporary terminus moved forward to Sheridan. If the noise of house-building, the blow of the hammer and tear of the saw, are sweet music to the workman's ear, however jarring to that of the neighborhood, no such plea can be put forth for the sounds which proclaim a prairie building's removal in situations where each man is his own carpenter. A liberal application of nails has done the duty elsewhere assigned to tenons, and the consequent breaking of boards and voice of the axe are discord most wonderful. Happy then the neighbor who may be deaf! The tempers of the workmen change for the worse, and there seems to be a general dis-jointing of dispositions as well as beams.

In one short week not a house but that of the railroad section men remained. Thousands of oyster and fruit cans alone marked the spot where vice had lately rioted.

Sheridan was Coyote enlarged. We christened it after the gallant Phil, then stationed at Hays. When the general was introduced to his namesake, he remarked that, as a seat of war, it strongly resembled the Shenandoah Valley. The yelling and firing

of our Irish mob on pay-day reminded him of Stonewall Jackson's battalions.

Sheridan was situated on the side of a desolate ravine. The everlasting plain embraced it. Two solitary *buttes*, named "Hurlbut" and "Lawrence," had been placed on guard over the region by nature, and looked as wretched and dismal as sentinels in a penal settlement. A month's hammering, and the new town was built. Before one street had been surveyed, however, the engineer was called upon to locate a graveyard. This he did upon a ridge overlooking the town. "I'll give you a high lot" was a threat in Sheridan, and meant six feet of soil on the hill-side. During the first week three of the inhabitants moved into that quarter, all going, as the phrase has it in that country, "with their boots on." During the winter the number increased to twenty-six.

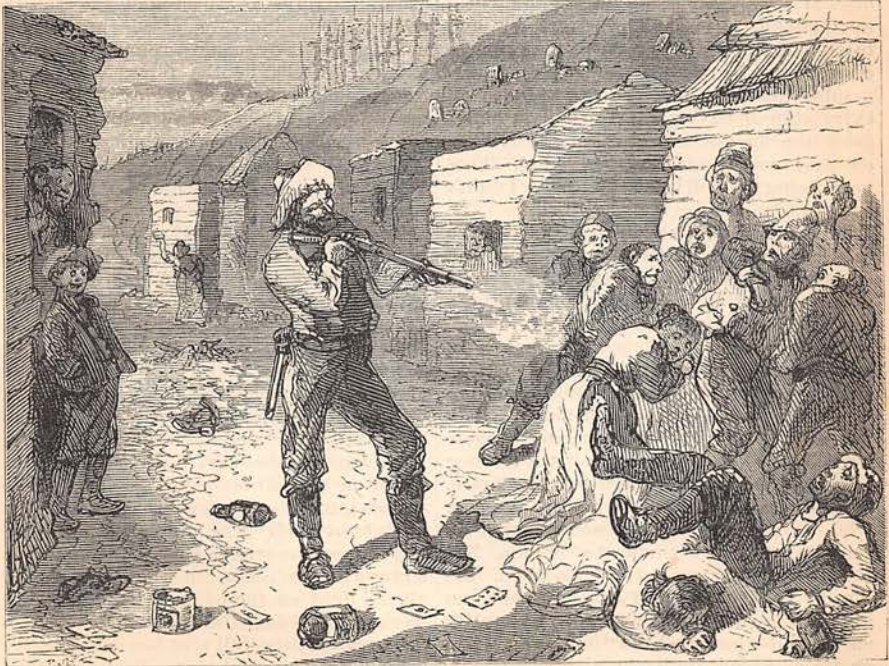
There were many queer characters developed in this rough town. For instance, a pettifogger from rural New York became "Neb, the devil's own." Neb was an abbreviation of Nebuchadnezzar, which title he won from "taking" so naturally to grass, or, more correctly, to the prairie, when it was necessary to hide on account of misdeeds. Had any one been interested enough to make weekly inquiries about Neb's whereabouts, the answer would generally have been, "Out at grass." On two occasions he assisted men to enter eternity without previously using a boot-jack. Once when an Irish mob was celebrating pay-day in "Rat Row," a favorite street of the Paddies, Neb ran out of the hotel opposite, and emptied sixteen shots from a Henry rifle among the

Patricks and Bridgets. No one was killed, but the "devil's own" found it necessary to go into exile on the back of a stray mule, followed for hundreds of yards by a howling mob and shower of bullets. When, one week later, Neb appeared in Sheridan society again, he wore a pair of Uncle Samuel's bracelets, and was charged with counterfeiting said Samuel's paper. From the rickety jail he was taken the ensuing night and hung to a railroad trestle adjoining town. It then transpired that he had been chief of a gang who manufactured the "queer" in a "dug-out" near Sheridan. Under the body, as mourner, next morning was found his daughter, who had never been seen in that vicinity before. She was a bright, sweet-faced girl, from the vicinity of Rutland, Vermont, and, it was learned, had been summoned West that week by her father for the purpose of accompanying him to California. Neb had accumulated quite a little sum of money, and evidently intended settling down for life elsewhere, when the last fatal spree settled him under the wailing grass, over which he had so often fled like a fox. Some effort was made to send the young girl back, but her better nature was crushed by the shame of her father's life and death. Poor thing! I saw her some months afterward, and felt that better would it have been had Death spread his cold but charitable wings over the daughter when he smote the father.

Judge Lynch was Justice's favorite official, and the railroad trestle the gallows tree, which bore monthly and sometimes daily fruit. Passengers standing on the platforms of the cars have occasionally drawn back in affright as they beheld gazing up at them the distorted, grinning face of some Texas Jack or California Joe, swinging back and forth like a pendulum before the prairie gale.

Vigilance juries sometimes brought in queer verdicts in Judge Lynch's Sheridan Circuit. For instance, one man arrested on suspicion called the court names, and incurred the following sentence, "This yere court feels herself insulted without due cause, and orders the prisoner strung up for contempt." And strung up he straightway was.

Another character of celebrity in Sheridan was "Ascension Stephen." This worthy was a half-witted Millerite, who climbed the two buttes once or twice every month, with a saloon table-cloth in his pocket that might answer for wrapper when the great trumpet should sound. Fine evenings were often spent by him in this weary and lonely waiting, and on one occasion he frightened the wits out of some drunken Irishmen by rushing down the hill toward them as they were returning from a wild debauch. So well did the table-cloth do duty on this occasion that, for the first time in months, the Irishmen reached their homes sober. A more ef-



OLD NEB IN RAT ROW.

fective temperance banner never fluttered in the breeze.

One reply of Stephen's was worthy of a less addled brain than his, from its giving a satisfactory reason why Adventists should cleave to property even on the eve of ascension day. He was asked to give up his shanty and an old horse possessed by him on the day preceding that which he declared should witness the dissolution of Sheridan and all things terrestrial.

"Why should you keep this property?" said his covetous questioner: "you brought nothing into the world, and you can take nothing out."

"True enough, mon," said Stephen, in his odd brogue; "but dinna ye ken the Lord says, 'Occupy till I come?'"

Morals in this mushroom town were among the articles of commerce. No one tried to possess any, unless money was to be made by it. An occasional individual thought it worth while to abjure women, wine, and cards long enough to inspire confidence and run away with some of his fellow-townsmen's ducats. From motives of courtesy, occasional women were called wives, but it was well to avoid inquisitiveness on the subject. I remember one day when a certain couple arrived by stage. It was easy to see they were fugitives. Of the two the woman was the oldest, and it appeared to be rather a case in which she was running off with the man. They soon obtained passage in a Mexican train for Santa Fé. Two days afterward a pursuing husband arrived in Sheridan. His questions were few and to the point. Having learned that the fugitives were two days' journey away on the desolate plain, he simply fired up with an extra chip of navy plug, thrust both hands deep into his pockets, and remarked, "The old gal's tongue cuts like a cart whip. 'Fore next spring there'll be one man sorry I didn't catch up."

Twelve miles from Sheridan, and close to the Colorado line, Fort Wallace stood guard. Its bright flag, far away over the waste, could be seen for miles. This piece of country is known to geologists as a peculiarly rich fossil belt, having yielded up some very valuable specimens. In a wild ravine just on the edge of the town the remains of a large saurian were discovered, and forwarded to Agassiz. Other valuable specimens were sent to the eminent naturalist Professor Cope, and some, which were new to science, named by him. An eccentric Sheridan man who had contributed his discovery was astounded by having it named after him. But the Latin ending was entirely too much. Before, he had been a sort of street authority on geological matters, and was wont to mystify such "bull-whackers" and "foragers" as had an itching for learning by allusions to primary, tertiary, cretaceous, and so forth, mix-

ed in for the sake of sound, and at the expense of sense. With the scientific name came two letters from scientific men. This sudden immortality struck him dumb. He remarked to me, sorrowfully, "Knowing about as much of fossils as an oyster does, I shall keep my mouth about as closely shut."

All over this fossil belt the remains of the monsters of the primitive world are thickly strewn. Huge saurians, locked for thousands of centuries in their vise-like prison, are constantly being exposed by the elements to the gaze of the nineteenth century. While we doubt a modern sea-serpent as impossible, we discover fossilized marine monsters which could easily have swallowed the biggest snake ever run foul of by honest mariner. Time was when this now desolate plain lay under a tropical sun, a beautiful succession of green pastures and sparkling lakes. Here the lion roared and the tiger crept noiselessly on his prey, while the elephant traveled leisurely along with his trunk, and the rhinoceros offered a horn to the primeval man when he came that way. And this latter personage, if we may believe some of the authorities, not only existed during the latter part of this period, but, with the strength of a gorilla and the club of a Hercules, dashed in the skulls of such beasts as were necessary for his food.

But perhaps the period of time immediately preceding this, when the sea covered the plain, was even more interesting. Huge snake-like forms swarmed upon the waters, among them individuals which, without moving the body, could explore with their long necks the depths forty feet below. And often the fierce struggles of so many great creatures must have made the deep "boil like a pot," while flying saurians, with leathery wings covering a spread of twenty feet, beat the air above, and viewed the combat.

The game of this region now is buffalo, antelope, elk, and wolves. The water-courses are insignificant and destitute of trees. The principal river, the Smoky Hill, sinks into the sand, underneath which it flows on, a living stream.

Many episodes of these air towns do not partake of the usual serio-comic character, but are all tragedy. Gunshot Frank and Sour Bill, two noted bullies, quarreled. Each armed himself with a revolver, put a spade on the left shoulder, and with a few friends started off for a spot near the buttes to fight a duel. The plan was that after arriving on the ground each man should dig a grave for the other, and then, exchanging places, fight on the edges. But before the work was half done Gunshot made an imprudent remark, and Bill shot him through the abdomen. The dead man's friends at once fell upon the murderer, and one of them

broke in his skull with the spade. At night two men slept in the graves their own hands had helped to dig. The most astonishing crop the plains ever produced was the one of "Bill" heroes. If an ambitious frontiersman named William chanced to see an Indian or kill a few bison, he at once took unto his name an addition, and became a character. But let it not be supposed he was a hero among his companions. To them he ever remained plain Bill, or, at the best, with a Jones or Brown added, as the case might be. I remember one particular teamster whose name was William Hobbs. He could not have placed a bullet from his carbine in a barn door at one hundred paces. And yet, without any provocation whatever, he seized upon the word California and wore it, although that wonderful State had never, to my certain knowledge, been favored with his presence. This man had not been cut out for a hero. His becoming one was in direct violation of nature's laws. He was fat, short of wind, red-faced, and timid as a hare. As the frontiersmen expressed it, having never lost any Indians, he could not be induced by any consideration to find one. However, by lying in wait for tourists and correspondents, he often managed to get business as a guide. He had donned a suit of buckskin made in St. Louis, and would state to the gaping stranger, "My name's California Bill here; over *thar* it's 'Pache, on 'count of my fightin' the tribe." He could not have told one of the latter from a Digger; yet soon the Eastern papers came back with thrilling descriptions of this noted scout and Indian slayer. "Iron muscles wrapped in buckskin, piercing eyes, a dead shot at red-skins," and so forth. And yet I have known this dead shot to miss, four times in succession, a bison at fifty yards; and on one occasion, having mistaken a Mexican herder for an Indian, he fled so fast and far that he lost hat and pistol and ruined his horse. After this he was fain to go East and perambulate Broadway in long hair and dirty buckskin, and be heralded by open-mouthed newsboys as "Forny Bill, the feller what chaws up the Injun nation." These specimens are also apt to fall upon some cheap story writer, who embalms them as heroes, and gives them the *entrée* of saloons and hotels. But when forced back by want to the haunts of the frontier, the breeches of skin, broad hat, and swagger are put away, and the usual garments of the plain adopted. Out there, where the poverty of spirit lurking beneath is known, a lion's skin does not change the character of the animal borrowing it.

Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill, whom I met often on the plains, much more fairly deserved their names. The former I knew first as teamster, then bar-tender, and finally scout. He certainly knew more about the

plains than any one I ever met. Wild Bill, during the years that I was cognizant of his actions, filled at intervals the positions of scout, saloon-keeper, refugee, and sheriff. The number of persons I knew him to kill was five, three at Hays and two at Abilene. It seems as if such men as Bill were designed by Providence to act as a sort of carnivore for keeping down the increase of their species. In all of my residence upon the frontier, during which time sixty-two graves were filled by violence, in no case was the murder otherwise than a benefit to society. The dangerous class killed within its own circle, but never courted justice by shedding better blood. Orderly people looked on with something like satisfaction, as at wolves rending each other. The snarl was the click of a revolver, and the bite followed the bark. These were the men who gloried in snuffing out a candle or a life at thirty paces.

I remember one instance in which the power of mind over the brute force represented by these characters was oddly developed. The writer was one of a party which embraced Senator "Ben Wade," and which had paused for a night's rest at the new town. Retiring to our rooms in the hastily constructed hotel, we listened on the creaking beds to the strange sounds around. The partitions between apartments were but six feet high, and sound flowed freely over the whole floor. Under the window was a tumult of drunken Texans, and a man in some far-off room was having a desperate struggle with his boots. They were tight, and he was "tight;" and after a fruitless struggle we heard him crawling between the sheets with the remark, "If the landlord wants them boots off, let him come and take them off himself." We knew when any body was turning over, or when a brush was laid down in any part of the house. Every creak and stamp and snore was reported faithfully to our ears. Presently there arose an unusual brawl in the office below, and up the main stairs came stumbling a drunken Texan. He knew that Senator Wade was in town, but had no idea he was in this particular house. We could hear him all the way up anathematizing the Senator, and Fate in a wild freak plunged him into the room adjoining "honest Ben's." Sprawling upon the bed, our Texan, in drunken accents, commenced informing the powers of the night that he wished the Indians would "scalp old Ben Wade," as he had no business "comin' into this yere country." Over and over again was the wish loudly expressed, to the annoyance of all on the floor, but none dared remonstrate. Soon the Senator's bed creaked ominously. We were alarmed. Ohio wrath was evidently rising, and visions of bloody encounters with long-haired Texans came before us. As the rude speech again came forth, a deep voice

issued out of the Senator's castle. Slowly and emphatically, as if addressing his colleagues, came the words, "Old Ben Wade had rather be scalped by the Indians than kept awake all night by the twaddle of a drunken fool." Texas was struck dumb. The physical bully quailed from unexpected contact with the intellectual giant. Up to that moment none of the guests had known of Mr. Wade's presence. As the silence continued in the Texan's apartment, there came subdued snickers from all around, then one bold laugh, and immediately after a chorus of cheers and shouts from every sleeping-pen. In the midst of these the man from the tall grass country shuffled down stairs.

Among Sheridan's very peculiar characters the strangest one was known as Jesso—a shrunken little figure, with a humped back and shriveled left hand: On the deformed trunk rested a well-balanced head, with quick, full eyes, and a face very difficult to read. In it was a touch of humor, much of bitterness, and a suggestion of malice. When Nature painted the face, she had, like an artist hurried at her work, touched up the rough features with suggestions of passions in so faint an outline that you broke their thread of character whenever attempting to grasp it. This man was one of those contradictions in life whom it would have been unsafe to judge by either phrenological or instinctive rules. In the frontier vernacular, he "wouldn't do to swear by." His name was taken from his favorite expression, "Jes-so." At first I had thought it a corruption of Jesse, until I noticed his strange use of the two words. Every thing, whether it was a matter of a dinner or a death, was "Jes-so." Had you flung the lie in his teeth or given him a blow, he would have first said, "Jes-so," and then pierced your heart with a bullet.

This hero had first appeared in Sheridan as conductor of a Mexican wagon train. With him came a young girl, rather fair to look upon, and bearing the fiery dash of the sun-land in her eyes. It transpired that she was one of the many foundling waifs of New Mexico, and had been raised from childhood by the dwarf. His shrunken hand was the result of its being crushed under a heavy wagon wheel while its companion was pulling the child out of danger. Whether he had for the girl other than a step-father's love will never be known. He had brought her thus far east to be away from the wretched immorality of New Mexico. Bad enough himself, yet he would not see the young life so dear to him sink down in that terrible whirlpool. Jesso was jealously watchful, and the girl spoiled and capricious. With some of the beauty of Mexico's maidens, she had all of their coquetry. Before his life had measured out one brief week in Sheridan the dwarf en-

joyed two fights on account of the adopted daughter. Ere a fortnight passed she was missing one bright morning, as was also a light-fingered "Bunny," or "Bonny," the hero of one of the previous quarrels.

It was a bad sight to see the dwarf that morning. He crept around town like a wild-cat whetting its claws on the gravelly soil, and preparing to spring. Ruggles, the postmaster, asked him if he should pursue, and he gasped out a wicked, merciless "Jes-so." There was "more of hell," the P.M. said, in that look than he had ever expected to see on earth. The eyes had the red madness of a soul on fire. They were windows reflecting the dull glare of leaping flames within. Before noon Jesso had left town. Perry, the hotel-keeper, gathering moss-agates on the buttes, saw him, like a wolf upon a trail, steal off among the ravines along the Santa Fé road. Two weeks afterward a Mexican train arrived in town, and the wagon-master reported the following occurrence. Near the crossing of the Purgatory his men, while grazing the oxen, came upon two dead bodies thus grotesquely situated:

There was an old feed-box for a table, and on each side sat a corpse—one of a woman, the other of a man. Evidently placed in a sitting posture after death, their heads had fallen close together, and the hands, which lay upon each other, covered a Catholic prayer-book. The work of murder had been bunglingly done in the case of the girl, as if the slayer's hand had half refused the task. The wagon-master even thought, from the clotted blood on her hair and the character of the wounds, that she might have fallen while warding off from her companion the blows of the sudden night attack. It was a ghastly marriage the murderer had performed, in uniting the stiffening fingers of the sorrowful couple while Death stood by as priest. The dreadful coolness of the avenger who could thus slay, and then arrange the dead in mimicry of marriage, belonged peculiarly to the plain.

It was a month or more before Jesso returned to Sheridan. Interest in the matter had then died out, and I do not know whether any questions about it were ever asked. The dwarf drank and fought and gambled, and was one of the "characters" as before.

The most remarkable man, as a specimen of plain-craft, that I ever met on the frontier was Comstock. Learning the rudiments of his future pursuit while yet a child, his playthings had been revolvers and knives. Unlike the great army of pretenders who have flashed across the pages of plain-land fiction, he was an Indian scout and soldiers' guide after the pattern which went out of fashion with Boone and his ilk. From the

sole of his nervous foot to the locks of his raven hair he stood out a bold man in council and a sleuth-hound on the trail. He was employed at Fort Wallace, and for a short period preceding his death at Fort Hays, in government service. This scout was the only one I ever knew who would execute the daring task of riding into hostile Indian camps with messages from United States officers. Was a request for a council with the tribes to be sent, he bore it. Alone, on the back of a fleet mule, a compromise himself between the Indian and the pale-face, he would take his way out into the wild waste, and fade against the horizon on a mission the further end of which seemed to lie at the feet of death. Comstock's mother was said to have been a Delaware. Small and sinewy in person and dark in feature, this man's power lay in his grand eyes. Large and wild in their light, they seemed to flash over and around you, as if searching for a revolver at your back. I saw him first while standing in the door of a stage ranch at Pond Creek. He paused for an instant in front while on his way with a message from the commandant at Wallace to a hostile tribe on the Republican. Stopping but a moment to speak with Nichols, the ranch-keeper, he leveled those shining eyes at me with the precision a man would have used with field-glasses. It was but an instant, and he was off, yet I felt that I had been photographed, and could be hunted the world over by him did he ever have occasion. I thought of it afterward as the most unpleasant optical experience of my life. This man's unpretending exploits would furnish a volume of really valuable history, all the more to be prized from a certainty of being under rather than over drawn. And it would be refreshing to have one tale of genuine border experience, after the flood of stuff which has borne forward to fame our modern buckskin heroes. Yet Comstock had a full share of those blemishes which are held by all but ideal Leatherstockings. To revenge a swindle of a few dollars he shot an unarmed man in the sutler's store at Wallace. The victim was a former partner; and twisting in and out among the barrels and boxes in an agony of fear, he pleaded for life piteously and vainly. This murder, however, darkened and hung over the slayer's life like a cloud. Hitherto his reputation had been fair; now he felt the blot upon it. Always superstitious by virtue of his mother's blood, he brooded in silence, and fancied evil influences existing in certain signs and days. But he was still the man of all others for military necessities. His knowledge of Indian character and habits was perfect. I remember one instance in which he foretold to a day the death of some wood-choppers. These men had been cutting down a small

grove of trees—a patch of foliage on a hundred miles of desert. Comstock warned them to beware, stating that the trees had for ages been the resting-places for the dead of the tribes crossing there. These red rovers never bury a corpse, but lash it to the limbs of a tree, or stretch it out on a high platform underneath. Notwithstanding the well-meant warning, the choppers plied their axes, and the scout affirmed that at the next full moon the savages would avenge the sacrilege. The desecrators laughed: no Indians had been in the country for months, apparently, and the wood could be safely housed in the fort before they knew that the first axe had sounded its alarm among their dead.

When the next full moon shed its light down among the fallen trees the beams fell upon the pale faces of two dead choppers. Some wandering savage, flitting by like a shadow, had seen the white men at their task, and carried the news to his distant village.

Not many months after this occurrence Death laid violent hands upon the bold scout who had so often laughed in his face. He had been dispatched by General Sheridan with a message to some Sioux, who were wavering between peace and war. Three days afterward the other scout returned alone, and reported that Comstock had been shot in the back as they were returning by a small body of "dog soldiers," who had trailed them from the council. There was a strong suspicion, however, at Fort Hays that the eagle-eyed scout had been killed by his companion for the sake of his gold, a quantity of which he always carried belted around the person.

The passenger over the plains to-day will find at the station of Sheridan a solitary house, that of the railroad section hands. There are no streets, and no other vestiges of former habitation, except empty cans and old boots. The position of any former block could not be found without a new survey. Even the vaunted Philadelphia lawyer would not be able to fasten a mortgage within fifty yards of the lot he might wish to seize upon. Future generations of surveyors may have to determine upon the cellar of the "Dew-Drop Inn" for an initial point, as hundreds of Sheridan's old toppers will live long enough to point out to strangers with unerring memory the spot where the gentle Dew-Drop rested while it moistened parched lips. No title-deeds of the town property were ever recorded, and an air castle could not have faded out more completely than has the air town. It may, however, claim future recognition, as the region has been thickly sowed with bullets, for the noble twenty-six who homesteaded "high lots" did not absorb all the missiles that were directed at human life.