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THE SKY PILOT

By RALPH CONNOR

Author of "The Man From Gungahny" "Gungahny School Days" and "Black Rock"

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THE PILOT HIMSELF, TOO, WAS a new and wholesome experience. He was the first thing she had yet encountered that refused submission and the first human being that had failed to fall down and worship.

one and then another of the cattle began to toss their heads and bunch and bellow till the whole herd of 200 were after Joe.

"Two more minutes," said the Duke, "would have done for Joe, for I could never have reached him. But in spite of my most frantic warnings and signals, right into the face of that mad, bellowing, thundering mass of steers rode that little girl. Nerve! I have some myself, but I couldn't have done it.

"How did it end? Did they run them down?" I asked, with terror at such a result. "No; they crowded her toward the cut bank, and she was edging them off and was almost past when they came to a place where the bank bit in, and her iron mouthed brute wouldn't swerve, but went pounding on, broke through, plunged. She couldn't spring free because of Joe and pitched head-on over the bank, while the cattle went thundering past.

"I can't," she stamped. "And I shall do as I like!" "It is a great pity," he said, with provoking calm. "and, besides, it is weak and silly." His words were unfortunate.

The Duke was badly cut up. I had never seen him show any sign of grief before, but as he finished the story he stood ghastly and shaking. He read my surprise in my face and said: "Look here, old chap, don't think me quite a fool. You can't know what that little girl has done for me these years. Her trust in me—it is extraordinary how utterly she trusts me—somehow held me up to my best and back from perdition. It is the one bright spot in my life in this blessed country. Every one else thinks me a pleasant or unpleasant kind of fiend."



The whole herd were after Joe.

old smile. "A fuller knowledge would only justify the opinion." Then, after a pause he added: "But if Gwen goes I must pull out. I couldn't stand it." As we rode up the doctor came out.

"Well, what do you think?" asked the Duke. "Can't say yet," replied the old doctor, gruff with long army practice. "Bad enough. Good night."

"But the Duke's hand fell upon his shoulder with a grip that must have got to the bone, and in a husky voice he asked: "Will she live?"

The doctor squirmed, but could not shake off the crushing grip. "Here, you young tiger, let go! What do you think I am made of?" he cried angrily. "I didn't suppose I was coming to a bear's den or I should have brought a gun."

It was only by the most complete apology that the Duke could mollify the old doctor sufficiently to get his opinion. "No, she will not die! Great bit of stuff! Better she should die, perhaps! But can't say yet for two weeks. Now remember," he added sharply, looking into the Duke's woe-stricken face, "her spirits must be kept up. I have lied most fully and cheerfully to them inside. You must do the same." And the doctor strode away, calling out:

"Joe! Here, Joe! Where is he gone? Joe, I say! Extraordinary selection Providence makes at times; we could have spared that lazy half breed with pleasure! Joe! Oh, here you are! Where in thunder?" But hege the doctor stopped abruptly. The agony in the dark face before him was too much even for the bluff doctor. Straight and stiff Joe stood by the horse's head till the doctor had mounted. Then with a great effort he said:

"Little miss, she go dead?" "Dead!" called out the doctor, glancing at the open window. "Why, bless your old copper carcass, no! Gwen will show you yet how to rope a steer." Joe took a step nearer, and, lowering his tone, said: "You speak me true? Me man, me no poosue." The piercing black eyes searched the doctor's face. The doctor

hesitated a moment, and then, with an air of great candor, he said cheerily: "That's all right, Joe. Miss Gwen will cut circles round your old cayuse yet. But remember," and the doctor was very impressive, "you must make her laugh every day."

Joe folded his arms across his breast and stood like a statue till the doctor rode away. Then, turning to us, he granted out: "Him good man, eh?" "Good man," answered the Duke, adding, "but remember, Joe, what he told you to do—must make her laugh every day."

Poor Joe! Humor was not his forte, and his attempt in this direction in the weeks that followed would have been humorous were they not so pathetic. How I did my part I cannot tell. Those weeks are to me now like the memory of an ugly nightmare. The ghostly old man moving out of and into his little daughter's room in useless, dumb agony, Ponka's woe-stricken Indian face, Joe's extraordinary and unusual but loyal attempts at fun making—grotesquely sad, and the Duke's unvarying and invincible cheeriness—these furnish light and shade for the picture my memory brings me of Gwen in those days.

For the first two weeks she was simply heroic. She bore her pain without a groan, submitted to the imprisonment, which was harder than pain, with angelic patience. Joe, the Duke and I carried out our instructions with careful exactness to the letter. She never doubted, and we never let her doubt, but that in a few weeks she would be on the pinto's back again and after the cattle. She made us pass our word for this till it seemed as if she must have read the falsehoods on our brows.

"To lie cheerfully with her eyes upon one's face calls for more than I possess," said the Duke one day. "The doctor should supply us tonics. It is an arduous task."

And she believed us absolutely, and made plans for the fall round up and for hunts and rides till one's heart grew sick. As to the ethical problem involved, I decline to express an opinion, but we had no need to wait for our punishment. Her trust in us, her eager and confident expectation of the return of her happy, free, outdoor life, these brought to us, who knew how vain they were, their own adequate punishment for every false assurance we gave. And how bright and brave she was those first days! How resolute to get back to the world of air and light outside!

But she had need of all her brightness and courage and resolution before she was done with her long fight.

CHAPTER XII. GWEN'S CANYON.

GWEN'S hope and bright courage, in spite of all her pain, were wonderful to witness. But all this cheery hope and courage and patience snuffed out as a candle, leaving noisome darkness to settle down in that sick room, from the day of the doctor's consultation.

The verdict was clear and final. The old doctor, who loved Gwen as his own, was inclined to hope against hope, but Fawcett, the clever young doctor from the distant town, was positive in his opinion. The scene is clear to me now, after many years. We three stood in the outer room, the Duke and her father were with Gwen. So earnest was the discussion that none of us heard the door open just as young Fawcett was saying in incisive tones:

"No! I can see no hope. The child can never walk again." There was a cry behind us. "What! Never walk again? It's a lie!" There stood the Old Timer, white, fierce, shaking.

"Hush!" said the old doctor, pointing at the open door. He was too late. Even as he spoke there came from the inner room a wild, unearthly cry as of some dying thing, and, as we stood gazing at one another with awe-stricken faces, we heard Gwen's voice as in quick, sharp pain. "Daddy! Daddy! Come! What do they say? Tell me, daddy. It is not true! It is not true! Look at me, daddy!"

She pulled up her father's haggard face from the bed. "Oh, daddy, daddy, you know it's true. Never walk again!" She turned with a pitiful cry to the Duke, who stood white and stiff, with arms drawn tight across his breast, on the other side of the bed.

"Oh, Duke, did you hear them? You told me to be brave, and I tried not to cry when they hurt me. But I can't be brave! Can I, Duke? Oh, Duke! Never to ride again!" She stretched out her hands to him. But the Duke, leaning over her and holding her hands fast in his, could only say brokenly over and over: "Don't, Gwen! Don't, Gwen, dear!"

But the pitiful, pleading voice went on: "Oh, Duke! Must I always lie here? Must I? Why must I?" "God knows," answered the Duke bitterly, under his breath, "I don't!" She caught at the word.

"Does he?" she cried eagerly. Then she paused suddenly, turned to me and said, "Do you remember he said some day I could not do as I liked?" I was puzzled.

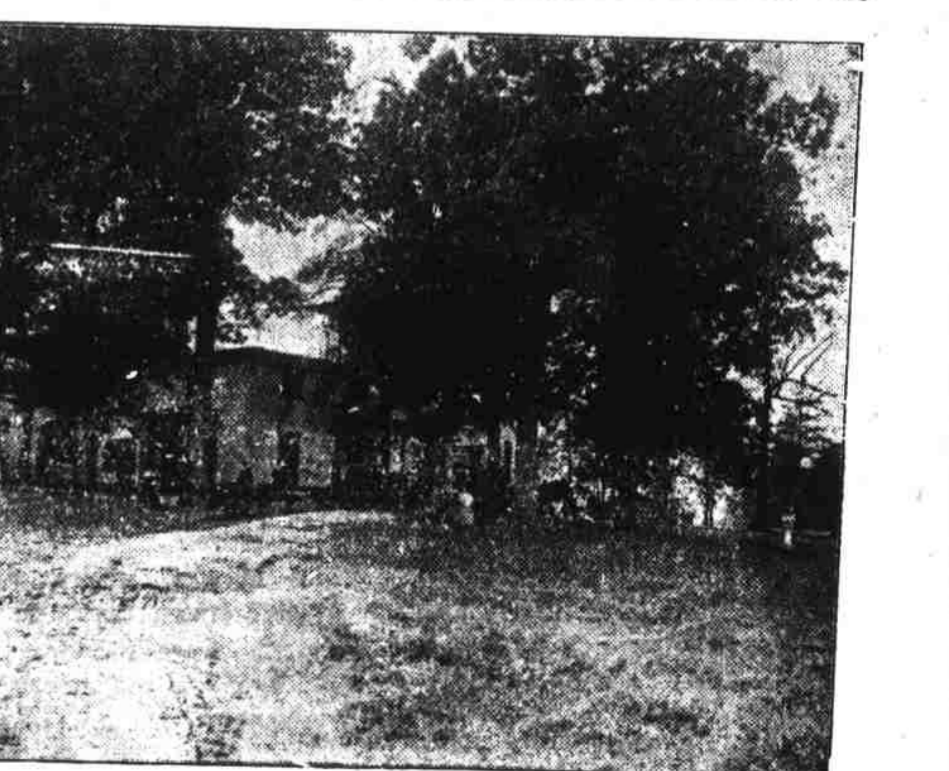
"The Pilot?" she cried impatiently. "Don't you remember? And I said I should do as I liked till I died." I nodded my head and said, "But you know you didn't mean it."

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