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ON VELVET

by Eugene Manlove Rhodes

Did I ever tell you how I first met up with Dolly Varden? Me and Tip Chandler was on a pasear to the Albuquerque fair, havin' nefarious designs on the purses offered for roping and riding.

I used to fancy my style of handling big loops to be some sudden and opprobrious, and Tip he allowed he could grease his heels and ride any beast that wore hair; he could, too--but then, you see, every thirty miles or so there's at least one man who can ride wild horses as well as any other man on earth, as far as just, keeping one leg on one side of said horse and somewheres between the ears and tail is concerned.

But not getting throwed, and riding easy and graceful enough to get a decision, is two entirely various circumstances. So Tip ascertained; and it was likewise noticed that I wasn't nigh so cunning with my line as I had fondly imagined. I tied my steers in just under a minute, but Clay McGonnigle tied his in twenty-six seconds.

To let a five-year-old steer have a hundred feet, running like a Pennsylvania Republican, and overtake, catch, throw and tie him in twenty-six seconds ls simultaneous some, I'm telling you. That lad who can do it is sure on to his job. We both got nada nada--left, beat, also ran. So we went down to Old Town in search of consolation and diversions, while waiting for the train. We was obtaining a pretty good assortment of surcease from sorrows, I reckon for I had backed a perfect gentleman and stranger into a corner and

was divulgin' details of my sad history to him--how I had loved and lost one amongst ten thousand, all on account of her having a defect in her speech (her not being able to say yes none whatever); how many hours start I had the night I left Van Zandt to avoid throat trouble, and other causalities that I generally keeps stored away in a safe-deposit drawer.

He was a real dainty party, was the stranger; white hands; Herford shirt; little, pointed, shiny shoes; hard-boiled hat; clean shaven and spoken; all spick and span. He seemed some simple-minded and credulous, too, and I was just growing expansive when Tip he lurches over and rescues said stranger from me.

"You tell your troubles to the sher'f Springtime," he says. You mar the festive--fest--feativities. Avaunt! Thish ish my dear ol' frien'--companion of my pureninnocent chil'hood. Thishish Dolly. Lesh sing--all---togeizzer---

When I got to Albuquerque I taken down my sign.
 Tirri lala tirrilala, lay!
 O, when I got to Albuquerque I taken down my sign;
 For they're all educated there in the riding line.
 Tirri lala tirrilala, lay!"

"I beg your pardon," says the stranger, nice and pretty, "but did not you gentlemen participate in the steer-roping; and bronco-riding contest this afternoon?"

Tip got unsteadily to his feet, looking most conscientious and anxious. "How do you spell it?" he says, pit-a-patting one vest pocket after another. "Where did I put that pencil? I don't exactly know what you mean by part-participate, but I reckon we

roped and rode-but why jump on a man when he is down? It brings a tear to my eyes yet to think of it."

"Really," begins the stranger, his eyes bulgin' out, but I out him off:

"Say no more, Chauncey; make no apologies, we beseech you. All is forgiven."

"Forgiven?" says the stranger. "And pray what have I done to be forgiven?"

"We forgive you" says Tip, almost in tears. "We were striving to forget to remember them episodes in our autobiographies. But we forgive you---let me grasp that manly hand. Waiter! More nepenthes--I would fain forget. But we had a bully excuse for being beat" --and he brightens up a bit. "There was better men there than us. That ought to square us with the boys, I guess. 'Scuse me, gentlemens--absent-mindedness of grief--Misher Springtime Morgan--Misher Dolly Varden--childhoosh friend. Waiter!"

"Glad. to meet you, Mr. Varden," I observes.

"The pleasure is mine," says Dolly. "I am so interested in Your--er--wild and romantic life. Do you live in the immediate vicinity?"

I let my lower jaw drop down on my collar-bone "Huh?" I says, and Dolly colors up like a girl.

"I mean do you live far from here?"

"Why, no; we live down at Dundee. We work at the 7TX outfit"

"But how far is it? And do you suppose I could obtain board from your employer? I would enjoy it so much if I could catch a passing glimpse of your wild, free life. The subject has always had the utmost fascination for me when I have read of it. And I

would so like to learn to ride. My ticket allows me a stopover, and I should very much like to see ranch life at first hand--and observe your quaint customs and habits at point-blank. Will you give me riding lessons, Mr.--Mr.--" and he looked at Tip.

"Boyoosh ol' frien'," says Tip. "Old oaken schoolhouse hung in the well--Name of Doe--John Doe. Played togezzzer on the vine-clad hills of old whatshisname. Together we herded woolly-sheep, and played the flute at noon under the spreading chestnut tree, glarin' in the eyeballs of the fierce Numidian liar. Waiter!"

And he fell with his head under him.

"We shall be real proud to have you come down and a stay as long as you want Dolly," says I. "You'll like the boys, and there's a lot of new men Gear has shipped in to talk to when you feel lonesome, and get tired of translating your statements. We'll open a keg of nails, and you'll see a real good time. Shake hands to our better acquaintance."

Dolly shook. Then he screwed his face up till he looked for all the world like Tip (who was now sleeping out loud), spread his legs to brace himself", and waved an eloquent hand. He said: "Waiter!"

Now observe the strategy on my part. I knowed that the boys was goin' to be mighty voluble about Tip and me not even taking down second money at the Carnival. I figured out that if I brought Dolly down to amuse them it might divert their attentions a lot and let us down easy.

I tell you, when a lot of punchers gets talkative about one subject that-a-way, it makes the talkee some restive and inclined

to Oh! For the wings or a dove! So I thought to provide them with some innocent distraction and at the same time enlighten Dolly's intellects. For when an inquirin' tenderfoot meets up with the proper parties he sure is due to have his horizons widened a-plenty.

We took the bobtail, on the little old jerkwater branch of the Santa Fe, soon in the morning--about two o'clock I guess, Dolly was chock full of enthusiasm and Tip entertained him with movin' tales of the domestic felicities of the 7TX rancheros in their cooking arrangements. When we pulled into Dundee 'twas scarce day, and a pleasant, fresh morning. Dolly he throwed a fit.

We allowed the dawn--he called it dawn--was most exquisitely beautiful and poetic; wanted to stop and listen to the mocking-bird singin' over to the Bar Cross; thirteen mountain ranges there was in sight and he wanted to know the names and ages of all of them right off. I had been there two years and hadn't learned them all yet. How far was they? Was there Indians there, and bear and deer and mines and all that?

The 7TX headquarters was right there in town, and when we got over there Creed, the cook, had breakfast under way; and Foster was just starting to wrangle horses in the pasture. He looks at us a second, and lets out a yell, pullin' the tarp off Martin's head. "Wake up! Just see what Springtime has done for us. Get up! You don't know what you're missing."

Martin sets up, rubs his eyes and looks around. "What bank did you-all deposit your prize money in?" he begins, and just then he beholds Dolly. He feels all around under the head of his bed with one hand, keepin' his eyes on Dolly.

"What strange things you do see when you ain't got no gun," he grumbled. "Did you catch it slipping into water, after night?"

Tip goes to the chuck-box and hammers on a pan. "Hear ye! Hear ye!" he bawls, and the boys begins to stick their heads out to see what was up. "Boys, this is Dolly Varden. Dolly, this is the boys. Me and Springtime has represented you to him as being perfect gentlemen. Do not make liars of us, lest a worse thing befall you. I have spoken."

"Mr. Dolly," I adds, pursuing of my deep designs, "wants to learn to ride and I'm going to give him lessons."

Now I might have known there was something wrong, for them boys was so wholly engrossed with Dolly and his fool questions that they clean forgets to guy me and Tip. But I thought it was my diplomacies workln' out as per spaciflcations. It is a good idea to laugh, whenever you have an excuse, in this world. Later on you may not have a laugh a-coming.

Well, Dolly asks more cross-examinations than anyone I ever heard of. Did they always sleep right out of doors, and get up so early? (Think of that now--it was most sun up then.) Did they not nave a table? How did they bake bread without a stove? Where was the stable? What, didn't feed the horses hay? Nor corn either? Why, how did they live? I never seen so ignorant a man.

He looks horrified when the cook yells "come and get it," and we all does a catch-as-catch-can around the chuck-box for the plates and otIler tools. But he caught the general idea prompt, and loaded up his plate with beefsteaks and hot biscuits, potatoes and canned corn, till I thought he'd have to put sideboards on it.

Then he began giving an exhibition of spontaneous consumption. Cook looks into his bake-oven, then at Dolly's plate and back

into his ovens, real pained. then he says reproachful:

"It wasn't burning."

Dolly reached over for the fried onions. "Beg pardon--were you addressing me?"

"You needn't have taken the grub up" --pointedly. "It won't burn."

"Oh!" And blamed if he didn't set down his plate, and get out a note-book. "This is a delightful experience. How was that, again?" and he laughs like sixty.

After breakfast I told Dolly he'd better rest up some that day and we'd take our riding lesson tomorrow, but he says he ain't tired, and is anxious to start in right now. "That is, if you have any quite gentle horses, you know."

So Martin says: "Oh, yes, we've got lots of good horses. Guess you'd better take Old Velvet. He rides easy. You can use Al's saddle."

Now Velvet was a plumb desperado, never so happy as when he was a-throwin' hoofsprings, and disturbin' the peace. We called him Velvet 'cause the man that owned him was always just so much better off.

I gets Dolly talkin' to Martin and Foster, and Tip and I slips out to the corrals, 'Cause Velvet was sure bad to get up to at first. After you'd get your hand on his nose he'd stand all right to be saddled, and act decent till you got on him. So Tip drops his twine on him and we chokes him a while till I gets a half-hitch on his nose. Then we saddled him and put the other horses in the back pen, so he could ride in the corral where it was sandy. He was a nice little feller and we didn't want him hurt.

"It's a shame to take the money," said Tip. "Let the sacri-

fice proceed.

We hollered and the push comes over from the commissary, the boys grlnnln' real amiable at something. I was draggin' out my horse and smiling some.

Dolly unlimbers his catechism and begins getting the range. How many horses did each one have? Did we own them ourselves? Did the company furnish our saddles, too? Then what if our saddles got broke? Didn't we curry our horses? Would they work in harness? And so on, 'till I felt sneakin' to be taking advantage of the poor feller.

"wait a minute," said Martin, "and I'll go down to the pump-house with you." He ropes out old Sleepy and after saddling, goes over to the boys and they sorter draws off from me and Dolly and Tip, talkin' in undertones.

Dolly looks some inqulrin' and distrustful at this, and I hastened to reassure him.

"Bob'll be along in a minute. He's just giving the boys their powders."

"Their--excuse me?"

"He's just making medicine. We three don't get, any on account of being up all night and our other misfortunes."

Poor Dolly looked plumb mysterious.

"Giving medicine?" he echoes, "Impossible! I never saw a set of men who looked more hardy and healthy."

I sat down in the sand. "Mr. Martin occupies the exalted position of wagon-boss, foreman, big medicine-man. The rest of us are common old cow-servants. He is now telling them what to do. To make it plainer, he is engaged in issuing directions as to

the pernicious activities in contemplation for the day. Got that?"

Before he could answer Martin calls him. "All ready, Mr. Varden?"

"Ah--my name is not Varden," smiles Dolly, "Mr.--Mr. Doe was --that is--he misunderstood."

"He does whenever he can get at it," says Martin. "Never mind --Varden'll do. Let's ride."

Dolly goes up and takes hold of the horn of the saddle with one hand and tile cantle with the other, standing way back behind the stirrup. Velvet turned his head and looks at him in amazement.

"For the Lord's sake, Springtime," says Tip, "tell him to cheek that horse or he'll be killed."

"Not I, gadzooks. On with the dance--on with the dance."

"Then I will. Hey you--cuidado--that horse'll kick your fool head off."

The tenderfoot jumps back and looks at me, grieved. "You didn't tell me this horse'd kick."

"Well, he sure will," says Tip "if you hold him that-a-way. You wanter cheek him."

"Cheek him?" says Dolly bewildered like. "I--I don't understand."

Tip showed him how to hold up a bronc's head, patient as a ticket-agent, and then he growls out:

"You'd better give it up or you'll be killed. Why them little shoes of yourn'll go clean through the stirrup the first rattle out of the box, and you'll be dragged. You'd better drop it."

Dolly looked some red in the face, but he speaks up, his

voice tremblin' with emotion.

"No--Mr. Springtime has kindly agreed to teach me to ride, and if he don't, I'm not goin' to back out."

"Then for any sake," implores Tip, "borrow a pair of boots from someone."

"Boots? What for?"

"So the heel will keep your foot from going through the stirrups, of course."

"Oh! I--I thought you just wore high heels because they--er--looked--er--picturesque!"

"My crown and harp! I give up," groaned Tip.

Bobby Martin let 'im have a pair of boots and spurs, and he hobbled awkwardly out to the pen again, reached his hands out gingerly, and stroked Velvet's neck with the end of his fingers. "Good horsie," he said. "Nice old horsie!"

Velvet sniffed at him, then bit at his arm--and the boys sniggered.

"Betcher two to one he don't stay on three jumps," whispers George Foster to Tip.

"Aw--go on--you want a sure thng, you--you piker."

Tip was more'n half mad. "Say, kid, that, horse'll just wipe up the ground with you. You're liable to get hurt."

"Oh, let him be," says Martin, "he ain't afraid. I'm just the same way. Riding a buckner never bothers me--after the first Jump. I'm on the ground then, wonderin' if I'll ever see my saddle again."

The tenderfoot he gathers up the reins and tries to put his foot in the stirrup.

"Hah-h-h!" snorts old Velvet, and he flings his head around and goes up in the air. He slings the tenderfoot about ten feet, but he holds on to the bridle-reins.

"Let, me hold him while you get on," I suggests. "Or I'll let the hammer down if you want to."

Dolly looks at me. His Derby had rolled off, his hair was full of sand, his nice tie was all mussed. "Let the hammer down? pardon me--I do not comprehend. The hammer? How extraordinary!"

"Let me uncock him, I mean."

"Really, I fear I do not catch your meaning--- "

"Oh, Dolly, Dolly," I sighs. "Allow me--I beseech you--to bestride--yonder quadruped--until I--have--taught him the--error of--his ways--and--somewhat assuaged--no, mitigated--the ferocity --of his--disposition. You seem to be a plucky little swine, and I'd hate to see you hurt."

"Oh!" Dolly arched his eyebrows. And without any warning he made a jump like a bob-cat, landing in the saddle, thumbs our outlaw as he goes sun-fishing through the gate bucking like a fiend, and squealin' like a stuck pig. Then he rakes his spurs up one shoulder and down one flank, goin' and comin'. "Whoopee!" he yells. "A bucker, are ye? Well, I'm somewhat of a bucker myself. The pitcher that goes too often to the well must be broken! Swaller yer neck, you moccasin-eyed man-eater! My foot is on my native heath--my name's Macginnis!"

He hangs the spurs in the flank cinch, reaches down and takes the bridle off. They was rail-fencing around in a circle now, back close to the gate, and Velvet weakening. Dolly Looks me right in the eye.

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Springtime," he says, smilin' sweetly; thwacking old Velvet down the hind legs with the bridle, "for your kind offer to let the hammer down. Giddap, Dobbin! Can you let me have a settin' of brown leghorn aigs?"

And he produces a forty-some-odd, one of these here old hog-legs like a brevet cannon, from about his person somewhere and goes sashayin' off toward the post office shootin' at tin cans, contrary to the statoot made and provided, encouraging Velvet copious with the bridle.

I looked around. The boys was all rollin' in the sand and embracin' each other 'cept Tip. He had climbed up on the fence and was settin' there most abstracted with his back to the orgies, gazin' out over the absorbin' landscape at things unseen with the eye of faith. I flings my quirt at his head, and then goes over and kicks Foster, being Prevented by anatomical reasons from reachin' myself.

"Prithee, kind sir," and I poured sand down his neck, "tell me of your courtesy exactly who in the hot hereafter is yonder gay deceiver, anyhow, lest I slay you?"

They all answers in chorus--that is, all the old hands: "It's --Pat--Pat John--John Graham--the Bar Cross Liar. He's been to California two or three years goin' to school. And come back for you to learn him to ride!"

Ten dollars that cost me for beer. But I got even with him later. It's a long worm that has no turning.

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