

CHAPTER XXXVII

AN ODD TALE ABOUT A FELLOW BOARDER

During his first year at Wausau, Grandfather took his meals at the home of Mrs. Beddell, who had rightly won a reputation for being an excellent cook. As a further attraction to Mrs. Beddell's boarding house, might be mentioned the fact that Mrs. Beddell had a couple of good-looking daughters who acted as waitresses. Among the twenty diners was a bachelor, Schilling by name - no longer young - who looked with favoring eye upon the younger of these daughters and, without marring the rest of the story, it might be recorded at this point that at a later date Schilling married this younger daughter.

Here also was Miss Merk, who taught in the high school, and Miss Dickey, who taught eighth grade. These young ladies frequently amused themselves and the rest of their table by bantering Schilling. Miss Merk was quick of wit and Miss Dickey had an inimitable giggle. Miss Merk's witty jabs always followed by Miss Dickey's giggle finally got Schilling's goat to such an extent that he asked to be moved to another table.

In his place came a fierce-looking middle aged man from the Wild West, with big sombrero hat and, like as not, so the boarders thought, with pistols in his pockets. His name was Fleming. He was reported to be distantly related to Alexander, a wealthy lumberman, and although he had no visible reason for being in Wausau, continued to stay throughout the Winter and Spring. He was large of stature, rather uncouth in appearance, with a dangerous look and a gruff voice that rather cowed the diners and made him

seem an unsafe mark for Miss Merk's wit and Miss Dickey's giggle.

Schilling, just before he left our table, had told us a story of the funniest thing he ever saw - namely how somewhere he had been he saw a lumberjack eat a whole bowl of gravy for soup. All had laughed heartily at this tale, but when a couple of days later Fleming at noon-day dinner appropriated the bowl of pork gravy and proceeded to eat it for soup, all looked wistfully at the departing gravy, but Miss Merk did not venture to offer a facetious remark and Miss Dickey did not giggle. Fleming for some reason or other did not appear for supper, but next morning showed up for breakfast looking hale and hearty.

About this time one of the preachers in the city, tiring of talking to empty pews, began to publish sensational titles for his sermons. Fleming, seeing one of these announcements, stated at supper Sunday evening that he was going to hear "Hell Expounded". One of the boarders who had not quite caught the drift of his remark inquired: "Alex. who pounded?" The man-eating glare produced by this remark convinced the boarders that the cowpuncher from the Wild West was not to be trifled with.

Shortly after this a poem by Fleming appeared on the front page of the Wausau Pilot and the town fairly doubled up with laughter. The poem consisted of nouns and adjectives strung together without verbs, also without rhyme or melody or any semblance of meaning. When the boarding house had recovered from a good laugh at the poem, all the boarders gravely complimented Fleming on his poem and exhorted him to write another. Each time a poem appeared, the boarding house would have a grand laugh behind Fleming's back and then when they saw him, with most serious faces would

insistently urge him to compose another.

One day he hinted that as a painter he was even better than as a poet; if so, he certainly should be encouraged. Soon the boarding house was all agog with interest in the great painting which Fleming was producing. Everyone begged a chance to see the painting even before it was completed. It was, however, too sacred to show to profane eyes; but one day after some coaxing he invited Miss Merk and Grandfather to go to his room to see the completed masterpiece. At first Grandfather was greatly puzzled as to what the picture was supposed to represent, but after Fleming explained that it was a deer standing in a lake at dawn, it struck Miss Merk and Grandfather as just too funny for words and with great difficulty they restrained their mirth until out of Fleming's hearing.

Meanwhile, the local art dealer had gone into raptures over the painting. He had told Fleming, so Fleming reported to us, that Fleming's painting was better than the picture which Alexander Stewart, the millionaire who lived in the big house on the hill, had recently purchased for \$10,000. A tangible evidence of the truth of Fleming's report could be seen in the stunning and expensive frame which the art dealer had sold him to set off properly so superb a canvas.

Fleming said that when summer came he was going to get a job as guard at the Chicago World's Fair for a time and then make a trip around South America painting Cape Horn on the way around, apparently never having heard of rough sea likely to be encountered. On the way up the West Coast he said he was going to explore the Amazon and no one ventured to suggest that the Amazon was on the other side of South America. The trip was

gravely accepted as likely to prove a thrilling exploit. Fleming did go to Chicago and made, they say, a "swell" guard, but in the Fall returned to Wausau.

Meanwhile, one of the wealthiest lumbermen in Wisconsin, Champaign of Merrill, had died, leaving his widow a million dollars and a stable full of fancy riding and driving horses. The widow was quite at a loss what to do about the horses and someone suggested she get Fleming to look after the stable. Now if Fleming was the state's best joke as a poet and painter, when it came to riding or driving a horse, he could compel admiration even from the most mirthful, and when the widow Champaign saw her stable manager in new and striking livery drive a span of her prancing steeds, it put a flutter right in her very heart. Soon the town was stunned to learn that the Widow Champaign had married again and that the Wild West Fleming was now the spender of Champaign's millions.

The transformation of the uncouth wild man from the plains, who had eaten the bowl of pork gravy for soup, into the Beau Brummel in tall silk hat, gallantly helping ex-Mrs. Champaign out of the carriage, struck Grandfather as one of the greatest laughs of his life. The ghost of old man Champaign must certainly have gotten a thrill out of the performance.

As Grandfather writes this, he can hardly restrain his mirth, the recollection of Fleming in frock coat and high silk hat and snobbish upturn to his nose daintily helping the blushing widow from her carriage appears so excruciatingly funny.