

# A Deal in Wild Lands

OR, THE  
FIGHT FOR THE MUSSELSHELL MILLIONS.

BY LEON LEWIS.

## CHAPTER I.

### STARTLING NEWS FROM THE MUSSELSHELL.

Hiram Skidder, for many years a prominent merchant of Chicago, sat in his private office one afternoon, debating the question of making an assignment. He was not only pinched for money, but his credit had been utterly demolished, as the result of certain "fronked" transactions which had been widely whispered under cover of secrecy. It is needless to say that the state of mind in which he found himself was unenviable. His smoothly shaven face had become rigid in its outlines, and his eyes were staring, forbidding, and at times evilly intent.

"At the moment we look upon him, he had just entered upon the examination of his afternoon's mail—a task he had found at once irksome, monotonous, and annoying. "Duns, threats, and reproaches—this is the burden of their whole song," he muttered, suspending operations a moment. "I'll see if I can't get together a few additional thousands and vanish."

"I am come to stay," Uncle Hiram, announced the girl quietly. "I am alone in the world—"

"My father died last year, as mother wrote you," explained Elsie. "Mamma has followed him, and her voice grew broken. She died last week. Uncle Hiram, and when she was dying she told me to come to you. She sent you her dearest love, regretting keenly—"

"Ah, yes," and the merchant yawned. "I have lost sight of my sister during the past few years. It is true. I received a letter in which she said her husband was dead, but I never found time to answer it. My business cares have always been heavy. I visited your parents in Inglesheim ten years ago, when you were a mere child. They were very prosperous in those days—owned a grocery store, with houses and lots, horses, and so forth. Your father had few expenses in that little village. I suppose, Elsie, you have inherited a handsome property?"

"Quite the contrary, uncle. My father made some investments which turned out badly, including his joint purchase with you of those wild lands on the Musselshell River, in Montana. He was also burned out, and failed in business three months before he died."

"Ah, failed, did he?" said the merchant, cheerfully. "Was it a bad failure?"

"It swamped us completely, uncle—left us in poverty."

The merchant nodded understandingly. "Well, I'd like to buy that property back from you, Perry," he announced, with assumed "carelessness," and of course I'll frankly give you my reasons."

"The cashier again intimidated by an inclination that he was all attention, and Hiram Skidder continued: "I desire to send my son out there, not merely to establish him in an independent position but to get him out of the dangerous path he is now following. As you may have heard, or even read in the papers, he has been in a number of disreputable affairs, and I fear another face. Before he could speak, however, the aperture widened, and a second person entered the merchant's presence. The newcomer was the niece who had just been so rudely repudiated.

"What a rare, witching girl she was! She had the wild fire grace of a fawn; a slender, swaying figure; a sweet, pure, girlish face, framed in flowing hair, and a pair of lovely brown eyes, innocent, truthful and unconsciously appealing eyes from which looked a woman's thoughtful soul that had learned too early the bitterness of life.

"Are you my niece Hiram?" she asked. "I am Elsie Tower, your sister's only daughter."

"Elsie Tower?" repeated the merchant, with a stare of surprise. "The daughter of my only sister Mary?"

"The same, uncle."

"The merchant shook her hand feebly a single instant, and invited her by gesture to be seated.

"This is a great surprise," he said, resuming his seat. "What brings you to Chicago? Come on a little visit, eh? Better have staid in the country."

"I am come to stay," Uncle Hiram, announced the girl quietly. "I am alone in the world—"

"You are very condescending," sneered the merchant. "But the long and short of the whole matter is, I have no place for you!"

"No place for me in your house? No place for me in your store?"

"You seem to understand me. I have no place anywhere for you."

"The girl's countenance plainly expressed her surprise, indignation, and wounded feeling.

"Wouldn't cousin Hilda like me for a companion?" she asked.

"No; and if she would I couldn't consent to anything of the kind. She has too many companions already. Besides, she's going out of town."

"Will you at least give me money enough to take me out to Montana to my other uncle, Jeremiah Skidder," pursued Elsie.

"No, Elsie; and that would be a very bad move for you. Your father and I sold our lands on the Musselshell to Perry Wynans, my cashier, for almost nothing, because they were reported worthless, and hence you have no resources in that direction. Your 'other uncle' is a lazy, shiftless, lying vagabond year or two in the midst of his present surroundings will prove his utter ruin."

"These plausible statements of Skidder's motives did not deceive Perry Wynans. He knew them to be untrue.

"I suppose you'll want something for the use of your money," pursued the merchant, with an insinuating smile.

"I must start for the Musselshell this very night. At the best I'm on the verge of failure. I am tired of these vain attempts to get on my feet again. All is lost here, and I have all to gain there. If I can get out there ahead of Perry Wynans, and catch him in some quiet corner, with no one looking and with those deeds on his person, before they've been recorded, I'll soon be master of the situation."

The look upon his face attested that he meant it, all things evil being written thereon—hate and greed, and even violence and robbery.

"The clerk withdrew, but the door had scarcely closed when it opened again, and he reappeared with an agitated bond, and one of the meanest men I've ever encountered."

"Then you refuse to interest yourself in any way for me, uncle Hiram?" inquired Elsie.

"I can't do otherwise," replied the merchant. "It was your father's place to provide for you. I don't wish to comment upon his failure in business and neglecting to provide for his family; but that he could expect me to repair his neglect is incredible."

"The girl arose sadly, sternly.

"We shall not agree, uncle Hiram, in regard to my father's course," she said. "He left his name to me spotless and honorable—an inheritance a thousand times more precious than all the money in the world. I would not exchange his reputation for all your wealth, sir."

"You are impatient," returned Skidder, angrily, arising.

"I have obeyed my mother's command, sir, and asked of you work and protection," added Elsie, with deep indignation. "I am all alone in the world, uncle Hiram—friendless, and to a very great extent, helpless, as a girl of seventeen must necessarily be. If you turn me away I have nowhere to go. I have but ten dollars remaining."

"Many a man and woman has begun life on less than that," said Skidder. "I cannot help you. You ought to have too much pride to trust yourself upon me as a pauper to be cared for."

"I've only Daisy left, Hiram, her mother having died several years ago. Perhaps you don't remember Daisy? She's a great girl of one-and-twenty."

"Yes, she has long been wanting to come to town to see the sights, and I couldn't refuse no longer. No, she's not waiting outside," he continued, as the merchant looked from a little window into the store. "She's at our hotel on Madison street. And how's your wife and the children?"

"I lost Mrs. Skidder years ago," replied the merchant, "but the children—a son of twenty-five and a girl of twenty-three—are quite well."

Jerry wagged his jaws nervously upon a huge quid of tobacco, and bestowed a keen glance of appreciation upon his surroundings, while Hiram looked him over with a curious and searching scrutiny.

The contrast between the brothers was rather striking, Jerry being at least ten years the oldest, and having a thin, weazeny frame, a pair of deeply sunken eyes, and a bony, angular visage. The old man was active and wiry, however, as became his bronzed and weather-beaten appearance, and could have readily "handled" his younger and bigger brother.

"You seem to be well fixed here, Hiram," he remarked, his gaze coming back to his brother's face. "Must have made an awful pile of money! How does it happen that you've never been out to Montana to see me?"

"I couldn't get the time, Jerry," said the visitor, with increased nervousness, "and that's why I yielded to Daisy about coming. The fact is, I want to buy those Musselshell lands of you and Tower!"

"(TO BE CONTINUED.)"

**A Floral Carol.**  
One of the greatest curiosities is the snow flower that blooms in the northern portion of Siberia, where the earth is continually covered with a coating of snow and frost. This wonderful plant shoots forth from the frozen soil on the first day of the year, and reaches the height of about three feet; it blooms on the third day, remains open twenty-four hours and then returns to its original elements. It shines for a single day, then the stem, leaves and flower are converted into snow. The leaves are three in number. The flower is star-shaped, its petals about as long as the leaves and about half an inch wide. On the third day the extremities of the leaves show little glistening specks, like diamonds, about the size of the head of a pin. These are the seeds of this queer flower. On one occasion some of these seeds were gathered and hastily transported to St. Petersburg. They were then placed in a bed of snow, where they were kept until the first of the following year, when the snow flower burst forth and was greatly admired and wondered at by all who saw

**Clinging to Old Methods.**  
The peons of Mexico are a queer set. Their ignorance and stupidity are equalled, perhaps, by no other race of people in the world. They are too stupid even to be instructed. I was down in the mining regions of Mexico for some time and had a good chance to observe their habits. They still persist in carrying the ore from the mines in bags on their backs. I knew a case where a contractor secured a number of wheelbarrows, thinking to help their laborers. They accepted barrows all right, but would not use them as they were intended to be used. Instead of wheeling them they would fill them up and carry the barrows with their contents on their backs, as they had done with their bags. Another amusing "case" of their stupidity was shown when an American living down there, purchased a stove for his servants, who were peons, to cook on. They would not touch the stove, but persisted in adhering to their old custom of sitting in front of a charcoal fire, fan in hand and waving it to make the pot boil. Their ignorance and density of understanding is deplorable.—Baltimore Herald.

**They Don't Like Corn.**  
It is truly a marvellous thing, this European indifference to corn. The people eat some such queer things over there that one would think that corn would seem a mighty blessing. In the course of two long journeys over various parts of Europe we have never but once found the cereal, and that was at a hotel almost entirely patronized by Americans and kept by a man who had lived in America, in Paris. We were talking of corn to an Englishman this summer.

"And," said he, "do you really eat it in the States?"

"Why, yes."

"We only feed it to animals."

"Well, then, you treat your animals better than yourselves."

He paused for a minute.

"Tell me," said he, "in what way do you eat it?"

"On the ear."

"The ear! Oh, fancy. How strange!"

And he looked quite shocked. — Rochester Post-Express.

Professor Swift, of Rochester, has discovered another new comet, but it has no tail. Times are pretty hard when a self-respecting comet cannot afford at least one tail.

## CHAPTER II.

### TRENSED OUT TO PERISH.

A knock was heard at the door at this moment, and one of the merchant's clerks stepped hesitatingly into his presence.

"If you please, Mr. Skidder," he announced, "here's a young woman, who wishes to see you."

The merchant glared at his dependent so angrily that he retreated involuntarily a step or two.

"How dare you come to me with messages from such creatures?" he demanded. "The second offense will cost you your place. If you had been longer in my service, sir, you would know that I never see beggars."

He waved his hand imperatively, but the clerk stood his ground, with the remark: "The young woman is no beggar, sir. She's your own niece."

"It's false!" roared the merchant. "I have no niece! She's an impostor! Call the police!"

The clerk withdrew, but the door had scarcely closed when it opened again, and he reappeared with an agitated bond, and one of the meanest men I've ever encountered."

"Then you refuse to interest yourself in any way for me, uncle Hiram?" inquired Elsie.

"I can't do otherwise," replied the merchant. "It was your father's place to provide for you. I don't wish to comment upon his failure in business and neglecting to provide for his family; but that he could expect me to repair his neglect is incredible."

## CHAPTER III.

### WELL WORTHY OF EACH OTHER.

As bad as he was, Hiram Skidder felt ashamed of the meanness and brutality with which he had treated his niece.

"Of course I should have been glad to give her a night's lodging, or anything of that sort, under other circumstances," he said to himself, when she had vanished. "But it was her misfortune to come here at the most awkward moment possible—just as I am preparing to leave these scenes forever. Perhaps—"

He was interrupted by voices near his door.

"What? You are Mr. Skidder's brother?" one of his clerks was saying.

"You jest but I am—his own and only brother, all the way from Montana," was the reply, "and you jest hustle and hump, will ye, young man! and let Hiram know that Jerry Skidder is waiting to see him!"

The merchant stepped briskly to the door, not without great surprise and curiosity, but also with an intense satisfaction at the prospect of further information from the Musselshell.

"Oh, it's you, Jerry?" he cried, with his most affable voice and manner, grasping the hand of his relative. "I am equally astonished and delighted at seeing you. Come in!"

Jeremiah Skidder hastened to comply, and the merchant closed the door behind him, after a warning frown at several clerks who were staring after the newcomer.

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