

Fixing Up Five Pines

by Lydia M.D. O'Neil



A FLY buzzing around Five Pines's nose woke him up. He shoed the fly away with an impatient cuss-word and a wiggle of his head; but instead of jumping out of bed, he lay still, looking with newly roused discontent at everything within his range of vision.

The grocery-bill was the cause of it. In the long-credit days, you just let your bill run for a year or so, till you sold off your yearlin's, and then you paid it, and didn't bother much about what was on it. But now, since the war, it was spot cash, and you got the habit of counting up prices. And they were surely something scandalous! Bacon, tobacco, salt, flour, potatoes, sugar—everything was 'way up!

There was a business there was some money in!

What with the fact that you had to buy or lease your range, and the increase in taxes and the cost of feed and transportation to K. C., and having to pay your hired hands more wages, and even lariats gone up about a hundred per cent, there wasn't anything in cattle any more.

But the grocery business—that was the

thing! There wasn't any blackleg in that, your canned tomatoes never died of scrub-poisoning, the loboos never got off with any of your dried apricots, and if a drought came along, why, so much the better; people had to buy more stuff from you, because they couldn't raise it themselves.

So that was the idea; sell the ranch and buy a grocery. *There* was a business that there was some profit in; and moreover it wasn't so lonesome—people coming in all the time, gathering around the stove on chilly days, fetching in all the news before it was six weeks stale.

Five Pines wiggled a big toe decisively. Sell the ranch, that's what! Only—there was the rub—whom could he sell to? Money was none too plentiful any more, and there was another bond drive pretty near due. And Five Pines didn't have the persuasive eloquence of the purveyors of patriotic securities.

Five Pines scratched his shin with his heel, and told himself that he ought to be kicking himself for not having sold out a year ago, when he had had the chance. Just a measly five thousand dollars difference between what he had asked and what he was offered, and he

had let it stand in his way! That young fellow from back East—what—what *was* his name, anyway?

A bunch of corralled calves set up their morning bawl, and Five Pines climbed into his clothes. Ulysses was cooking breakfast and Dewey Van Valkenburgh, called Dewey Van for short, was out somewhere catching a pony. These three comprised the personnel of the Five Pines Ranch, so named from the five tall conifers that stood in a straight and solemn row on the bluff just back of the house.

Five Pines poured maple-syrup into his coffee and sprinkled sugar over the flapjacks, and when breakfast was over he forgot to borrow a match from Dewey Van, to be whittled into a toothpick. It was plain that he had something on his mind.

Ulysses was half through with the dishes and Dewey Van was done making up the bunks when he spoke it.

“Ulysses,” he began, “that feller from back East that was out here tourin’ a year back; what might his name be?”

“The one that had an idee he wanted a ranch?”

“The same.”

“Mm! Winchester, I believe.”

“Manchester,” put in Dewey Van. “Jim Manchester.”

Ulysses reckoned that was right.

“And he lives where, now?”

Ulysses couldn’t say. Dewey Van remembered, though, that he had scratched his name and address on a rock, up under one of the five pines. Not a very big rock. Maybe the scratch-marks would be worn off by this time, anyhow.

“You go up and see,” directed Five Pines.

Dewey Van hunted around for an hour, and finally found the rock on which Manchester had scratched his address. And it was there yet, very plainly—“3476 Hayward Avenue, Buffalo, New York.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Five Pines in satisfaction. “*Now* you and Liss can go vaccinate them calves.”

Five Pines set the typewriter on the kitchen table and reached for a sheet of paper, bearing a picture of a Hereford cow and calf in the upper left-hand corner.

He began:

MR. JAMES MANCHESTER

Dear Sir; I take my pen in hand—

He had had the typewriter for three years now, but he would never get over the habit of taking his pen in hand; it sounded quite dignified, and besides, that was the way that he had been taught to begin a letter. So his long forefinger poked at the keys in slow precision:

—my pen in hand to inform you that I am intending to sell out the 5 pines ranch and go into the grocery business. There is more-

He stopped suddenly. He had been going to say there was more money in it, but that would never do. That being the case, Mr. Manchester might profit by the tip and go into the grocery business himself. Now, how should he finish that unlucky sentence? There is more—their is more—ah, yes!

—there is more pines here now than there was a year ago, as little ones are coming up all the time, but we still call it the 5 pines. As you was desirous of buying it about a year back, I thought I would give you first chance now. I guess we can get to agree on the price, so if you want it, let me know. Yrs and oblige.

WILLIS B. DANGERFIELD

(5 pines* Dangerfield)

“Just a measly five thousand!” complained Five Pines to himself, as he carefully dotted

the five i's in his signature. "Twenty-five thousand, and you kept a holdin' out for thirty! Oh, what a fool you are, Five Pines, considerin' as how this is mostly leased land anyways!"

The letter sealed and stamped, Five Pines saddled his horse and went to town to mail it. It might mean a twenty-mile trip for nothing, or it might mean twenty-five thousand dollars. Anyway, it was done.

Coming back, Five Pines passed the schoolhouse at recess time; the eight or ten children from various ranches were playing noisily in front of the building, while the teacher, Miss Fola Beach, stood at the door, watching them. Five Pines swept off his high-crowned sombrero and bowed. Miss Beach returned him the faintest perceptible nod.

It occurred to Five Pines that it was nearly time for school to close; about the second week in May, he believed, for there was only an eight-months' term. Somebody, he wasn't sure whether it was Ulysses or Dewey Van, had said that Miss Fola was going back East where she came from, and he was glad of it, 'cause she was too hard to get acquainted with.

"And she sure is!" agreed Five Pines, riding on. "Been here all term and none of us got more than a noddin' acquaintance with her. Pretty little thing, too!" And seeing a young rattle-snake by the side of the road, Five Pines dismounted to kill it and promptly forgot Miss Fola Beach.

The business of vaccinating and branding and ear-marking went steadily on and at intervals Five Pines went to town for mail and groceries. No word came from James Manchester for three weeks; Five Pines about gave him up; then came a brief letter.

It began breezily:

Hello, Five Pines! How are you, how are Liss and Dewey Van, how's everybody?

Sure I'd like to own Five Pines—who wouldn't? I've always wanted a ranch, and yours just struck me right. But you see I've got married since I was out there—that's why you failed to hear from me sooner, been visiting wife's folks—and so I'm taking orders now from the sex that knows how to give 'em. We'll be out to give Five Pines a look-over this summer—going to try to get out for the Cowboys' Reunion at Vegas on July 4, and if Elsie likes Five Pines I'll buy it. Thirty-five thousand, I think, your price was; anyhow, that's all I can afford to pay. Elsie thinks she'd like the place fine, but you never can tell about women. So-long; best regards to all. Same old

JIMMY MANCHESTER.

Five Pines gasped twice—once in bliss and once in deepest woe. Manchester stood ready to pay ten thousand more than his original offer, due to a faulty memory no doubt; but the deal hinged on whether or not Elsie liked the place!

And Elsie, if she was like most women, wouldn't be guided by facts or figures, by the gallons of water that each well would pump in a day, or the price of fat steers at K. C. She wouldn't care anything about the feeding value of yucca, when chopped and mixed with cotton-seed meal; she'd go simply on appearances! And there, Five Pines felt that his place was weighed and found wanting. If she liked the looks of the place, he would be thirty-five thousand dollars in; and if she didn't—farewell to all sweet dreams of a grocery gold-mine!

Five Pines rode home dismally. Arrived, he called Ulysses out in front of the buildings, collared him, and turned him about to face the house and grounds.

"Would a lady like that?" he demanded. "Would she, now?"

"Would a lady—"

“Yeah! Would a lady like that?”

“Like what?”

“Everything! All that grand panoram’—log-house, crooked picket-fence, bear-grass a growin’ in the yard, broken winder stuffed up with Dewey Van’s old pants—would a lady like it?”

“Why,” stammered Liss, “if you’re a thinkin’ of gettin’ married, Five Pines, I don’t know of any lady as would turn you down. If she didn’t like things she could fix ’em, couldn’t she?”

Five Pines looked at Liss as if he would like to annihilate him if he wasn’t so sorry for him.

He unsaddled his horse and sought Dewey Van, who was off mending fences. He was through with Ulysses, who plainly had no brains. He proffered Manchester’s letter to Dewey Van, who read it through leisurely and immediately saw the point.

Furthermore, he recognized that this was a case which required concentration of thought, for he laid down the hammer and the staple-puller, and, holding his head between his two hands, began to think.

He thought steadily for fifteen consecutive minutes. Then the big idea took shape within his brain.

“I tell you what I’d do, Five Pines,” he said. “You’re out for to please a lady, if I understand correct.”

Five Pines intimated that he was out to please a lady thirty-five thousand dollars’ worth.

“And you and me and Liss bein’ men, so to speak, we couldn’t be expected to know what might please a lady and what mightn’t. So the thing to do, Five Pines, is to get a lady here to superintend the job of fixin’ things up to suit this other lady.”

“Now that’s what I call brilliant!” shouted Five Pines. “That’s what we sure will do!”

A sudden thought dismayed him.

“Only,” he added, “who in blazes will we get?”

“Mis’ Taney,” suggested Dewey Van.

“Mis’ Taney was reared up in a dug-out! What’s *she* know?”

“Mis’ McGlynn.”

“Mis’ McGlynn has spent most of her life gypsyin’ from here to Texas an’ back, in a canvas-covered wagon with a wash-tub tied to the rear. Miss Lesser, old lady Boxen Mis’ Prairie Williams, they never none of ’em been East nor anywheres they might learn what back East ladies like.”

“I know!” exclaimed Dewey Van jubilantly. “Miss Fola Beach! There you got her, a back-East lady right to hand!”

“I got her!” groaned Five Pines. “I ain’t got even a speakin’ acquaintance with her!” He eyed Dewey Van thoughtfully. “But you have, Dewey Van—and so has Liss. You scored one that time, Dewey Van! Miss Beach is exactly the lady we need. All we got to do is git her.”

“That’s right,” agreed Dewey Van. “You just write her a note on the typewriter—”

“Oh, gosh, no! I couldn’t do that. She’s awful hard to get acquainted with—if I’d write her a note it would shy her right sway. What we’ll do is, you go and fetch her.”

Dewey Van tried to remonstrate, but could only gurgle.

“That’s the ticket,” continued Five Pines evenly. “You go and fetch her. Just explain to her, offhand like, how we’re needin’ a person of her capabilities for a little job—and we’ll pay her well for her services—an’ fetch her—”

“I can’t!” exclaimed Dewey Van. “She won’t talk to me—she don’t like me—she’s different from girls round here! *Awful* hard to git acquainted with! Liss, now—she likes Liss—she takes to Liss somethin’ wonderful! Just marvelous, how high she esteems Liss!”

“All right, then. Well let Liss fetch her. You’re a wonder, Dewey Van! You do have

some great ideas!"

Ulysses, generally agreeable and anxious to please, balked for once in his life, swearing that Dewey Van was seventeen kinds of a liar, and that any standing he might be said to have with Miss Beach was absolutely non-existent. In the end, all his objections were overruled; early the next morning his pony was saddled and he was instructed to proceed straight to the schoolhouse and acquaint Miss Beach with the job that was cut out for her.

"Suppose she won't come?" suggested Liss.

"You fetch her!" ordered Five Pines. "You'll think the Zuni Mountains fell on you if you don't!"

Ulysses departed. The ride between jail and scaffold couldn't have been shorter. Before him the schoolhouse loomed as large as a battleship with all its guns trained on one target—Ulysses.

The door was open, but there came from within no customary singsong recitation of the multiplication-table.

Well, it had to be faced!

Miss Beach looked up as his shadow obscured the doorway. Ulysses awkwardly removed his sombrero.

"Well?" inquired Miss Beach.

"I—good morning, ma'am. Kids all late to school?"

"School is closed," she replied. "Closed yesterday. I am just finishing some reports."

"You—you goin' away, ma'am?"

She nodded. "To-morrow. Anything I can do for you?"

Ulysses grew hot. Very hot. So hot that he prickled, and reached around to rub his back, just below the shoulders. He was shy enough at best, even with the rollicking Western girls that he knew comparatively well; and with this back-East girl, so reserved, so distant, so cultured that even the few freckles on her nose were of an aristocratic type—oh, it was awful!

"I—Mr. Dangerfield, ma'am," he stuttered. "Not Mr. Tom Dangerfield—Mr. Five Pines—Willis—"

The gray eyes questioned.

"Kin he—borrow a lead-pencil, ma'am?"

"Certainly."

She picked up a pencil from the desk and handed it to Liss, who backed out wildly.

What imp of perversity had put those words into his mouth, anyway? He hadn't meant to say them—he was trying hard to tell what Five Pines wanted, surely!

He started to ride homeward; then remembered that the Zuni Mountains were due to fall on him. An idea born of desperation blazed in his brain.

He went back. Concealed, he waited till Miss Beach was through with her reports. She locked the door, descended the steps, and started down the road to Boxen's ranch where she boarded.

Something sang in the air, fell over her head, and drew taut about her arms, just above the elbows. It was Liss's lariat and the other end was fast to the horn of Liss's saddle; and Liss himself was edging toward her, coiling up the slack as he came.

"Beg you pardon, ma'am," he was saying, "but I just gotter do it! Mr. Dangerfield's orders, ma'am—not Mr. Tom Dangerfield—Mr. Five Pines—the Zuni Mountains will fall on me if I don't!"

With that, his long, lean arms reached down and gathered her up into the saddle—and off he galloped toward Five Pines, explaining nothing, listening not at all to her indignant, frightened outburst. And arrived at the ranch, he loosened the lariat and plumped her down into Dangerfield's arms.

"Ah!" exclaimed Five Pines, a little surprised that Liss had succeeded. "Very kind of you, ma'am! Now—do you like that? Bein' a lady, do you say you'd like that?"

"She don't know what you're talkin'

about,” blurted Ulysses. “I didn’t tell her—I just fetched her.”

“Oh, you dumb idiot!” bawled Five Pines, aghast, while Miss Beach looked from Ulysses to him and back again.

“And I think it’s about time for somebody to make some explanations,” she said, deciding it was Dangerfield who was responsible, after all. “I’ve been kidnaped by one of your men—brought here forcibly—”

Five Pines set about to explain.

Miss Beach listened patiently, and when he got to the end, and she realized that he was offering her five hundred good American dollars to superintend the fixing over of Five Pines Ranch so a lady would like it, she sat down upon a chopping-block and rocked with laughter.

“Afraid of me!” she squealed. “And I’ve been so afraid of you folks, all the time—oh, you don’t know what it is to be so frightfully, painfully shy and self-conscious as I’ve been! Brought up alone, by a deaf grandmother—no brother or sister or playmate—and then, a year ago, compelled to earn my own living—oh, it’s been hard! Fifty times I’ve tried to gather courage to talk to some of you gentlemen, or go to a dance or a sunrise party—but I just couldn’t! Let’s begin on the tin cans! Dig a big hole and we’ll bury them!”

“A sizeable job,” remarked Five Pines. “Liss go and get the spades.”

“We don’t need to dig any hole,” said Dewey Van. “We got one.”

“Where?” demanded Five Pines.

“Why, that dry well of yourn.”

“Oh, shucks! That’s only two hundred and seventy feet deep and a foot across! That won’t hold ’em!”

Miss Beach shrieked with glee.

“We’ll make it hold ’em! We’ll telescope ’em—put the condensed-milk cans in the tomato-cans and the canned-soup cans in the peach-cans—come on! We can finish that job

to-day!”

Every morning, early, Miss Beach drove up from Boxen’s and all day long she planned and gave directions and ordered materials—lumber and cement and dotted Swiss and things; and Five Pines bought them and Liss and Dewey Van hauled them home, and then did with them as Miss Beach directed.

Not for worlds, she said, would she have the roomy old log-building torn down; it was just the foundation to work upon. But the picket-fence came down, and a low, broad stone wall went up in its place; and new windows were put in, with pretty, soft curtains; and there was much staining of interior woodwork, and a new roof, and a lot of new chairs and things which had the happy knack of looking aristocratically old; and there was a pair of old-fashioned candle-sticks on the mantelpiece above the stone fireplace—where’s the southwestern ranch without a stone fireplace? But there was an acetylene lighting-plant, too, in case Elsie might be overcritical of the contrast between Five Pines and Buffalo. And the forty-two-piece dinner-set which Five Pines had won at a raffle, decorated all over with big Tiger-Lilies, *that* went down the drill-hole on top of the tin cans. Miss Beach dropped each piece in separately herself, and grinned a little every time she heard one break.

At last it was finished. Nothing, declared Miss Beach, remained to be done. If Elsie didn’t like that, then there wasn’t any pleasing her, that was all.

Five Pines and Ulysses and Dewey Van stood back with folded arms and squinted at the effect, and agreed with her. It was different from anything that they had foreseen; but it was art, because Miss Beach said so, and it was homelike, comfortable—because they knew it. There wasn’t anything in town that could approach it either for solid comfort or untiring beauty.

"I guess Miss Beach is right," said Dewey Van. "You got Five Pints as good as sold, so you might's well be pickin' out your grocery."

"That's the sorry part of it," Said Miss Beach; and she said it as if she meant it. "Such a beautiful ranch, and such nice, sleek cattle, and such a pretty home—and you're going to let somebody else have it, and content yourself dealing out eggs by the dozen and cabbages by the pound. Well! My work is done, anyway—and to-morrow I must be going back East."

Dewey Van looked out at the window, and Ulysses looked out at the door. They liked Miss Beach—she wasn't a bit hard to get acquainted with, after you got started; they hated to let her go, and didn't like the idea of Jim Manchester's Elsie stepping into Five Pines.

Five Pines wrote a check for five hundred dollars and laid it in Miss Beach's pink palm.

"Thank you," said Miss Beach listlessly. It meant a great deal to her, but the work they had just completed had meant more.

"Well," said Five Pines, "if you're all through, I'll drive you back to Boxen's, and go on to town for the mail."

"I'm ready," said Miss Beach, pinning on her hat. She shook hands with Dewey Van and Ulysses, and stepped into the buggy; and, arriving at Boxens some thirty minutes later, she shook hands with Five Pines and smiled a bright good-by.

"And I wish you luck with the grocery, Mr. Dangerfield," she said, "It's really a nice business—good-paying, too."

"Yes'm," answered Five Pines, a little sourly. "And, thank you for—for everything!"

There was a letter from Buffalo in his box. Jim Manchester wrote:

Dear old Five Pines;
It surely is the truth that you can't tell a thing

about women. Elsie just decided that she doesn't want a ranch at all. Somebody told her there were rattlesnakes out there, and that settled it. Thought I'd write you so you wouldn't be disappointed holding it for me. Regards to Liss, Dewey Van, and all the boys at the round-up next fourth.

J.M.

Five Pines tried awfully hard to be indignant. There he had gone and spent piles and piles, fixing up for Elsie, and now she wasn't coming! It was enough to make a man swear. But down in his heart he wasn't cussing, but singing: "She ain't a coming! She ain't a coming! Glory be, she ain't a coming!" And he hurried back to Boxen's.

Miss Beach was fastening the straps on her trunk. She was to leave at seven in the morning, and had everything in readiness. Five Pines, walking into the sitting-room, where she was on her knees beside the trunk, handed her the letter, which she read with a surprised look on her face.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "How disappointing! And you'd fixed everything so nicely, too! I'm so sorry. Mr. Dangerfield!" Five Pines looked at her for a moment, then—

"I ain't," he declared boldly. Mrs. Boxen was half deaf, and, anyhow, he didn't care who heard him. "I'm glad. I'm so glad I could whoop! Miss Beach, I don't know as I'm so set on the grocery business as I was a while back; only here's the rub, with nobody up there to Five Pines to keep things runnin' smooth. Liss and Dewey Van and me will just naturally let the yard get all littered up with tin cans and things like it used to be. Miss—Miss Fola, we need a manageress up there. If a—say, a half interest in the place would appeal to you any—of course, I know I'm not educated or anything, but I'm young enough to learn a lot yet—and I'm quite willin', too, if you'd be willin' to undertake the tutorin'—"

“Why, Five Pines!” said Miss Beach softly, gray eyes shining into his. “Why, Willis!”

“Well,” he said, surprised that it had been

so easy after all. “if that’s settled, Fola, maybe I might just as well take that trunk of yours right on up to Five Pines.”