

Ananias Green

B.M. BOWER

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PINK, because he knew well the country and because Irish, who also knew it well, refused point-blank to go into it again, rode alone except for his horses down into the range of the Rocking R. General roundup was about to start, and there was stock bought by the Flying U which ranged north of the Bear Paws.

The owner of the Rocking R was entertaining a party of friends at the ranch; friends quite new to the West and its ways, and they were intensely interested in all pertaining thereto. Pink gathered that much from the crew.

Sherwood Branciforte was down in the blacksmith shop at the Rocking R, watching Andy Green hammer a spur-shank straight. Andy was a tamer of wild ones, and he was hard upon his riding gear. Sherwood had that morning watched with much admiration the bending of that same spurshank, and his respect for Andy was beautiful to behold.

"Lord, but this is a big, wild country," he was saying enthusiastically.

"Wild," said Andy. "Yes, you've got us sized up correct." He went on hammering, and humming under his breath.

"Oh, but I didn't mean that," the young man protested. "What I meant was breezy and picturesque. Life and men don't run in grooves."

"No, nor horses," assented Andy. He was remembering how that spurshank had become bent.

"You did some magnificent riding this morning, by Jove! Strange that one can come out here into a part of the country absolutely new and raw "

"Oh, it ain't so raw as you might think," Andy defended jealously, "nor yet new."

"Of course it is new! You can't," he said, "point to anything man-made that existed a hundred years ago; scarcely fifty, either. Your civilization is yet in the cradle a lusty infant." Sherwood Branciforte had given lectures before the YMCA of his home town, and young ladies had spoken of him as "gifted."

Andy Green squinted at the shank before he made reply. Andy, also, was "gifted," in his modest Western way. "A country that can now and then show the papers for a civilization old as the Phoenixes of Egypt," he said, in a drawling tone that was absolutely convincing, "ain't what I'd call raw."

Andy decided that a little more hammering right next the rowel was necessary, and bent over the anvil solicitously. Even the self-complacency of Sherwood Branciforte could not fail to note his utter indifference. Branciforte was not accustomed to indifference. He blinked.

"My dear fellow, do you realize what that statement might seem to imply?" he said.

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Andy, being a cowpuncher of the brand known as a "real," objected strongly both to the term and the tone. He stood up and stared down at the other disapprovingly. "I don't as a general thing find myself guilty of talking in my sleep. We ain't no infant-in-the-cradle, mister. We had civilization here when the Pilgrim Fathers' rock wasn't nothing but a pebble to let fly at the birds!"

"Indeed!" sneered Sherwood Branciforte.

Andy clicked his teeth together, which was a symptom it were well for the other to recognize but did not. Then Andy smiled, which was another symptom. He fingered the spur absently, laid it down and reached for his papers and tobacco sack.

"Of course, you mean all right, and you ain't none to blame for what you don't know, but you're talking wild. When you tell me I can't point to nothing man-made that's fifty years old, you make me feel sorry for yuh. I can take you to something that's older than swearing; and I reckon that art goes back a long ways."

"Are you crazy, man?" Sherwood Branciforte exclaimed incredulously.

"Not what you can notice. You wait while I explain. Once last fall I was riding by my high lonesome away down next the river, when my horse went lame on me from slipping on a shale bank, and I was set afoot. Uh course, you being plumb ignorant of our picturesque life, you don't half know all that might signify to imply." This last in open imitation of Branciforte. "It implies that I was in one hell of a fix, to put it elegant. I was sixty miles from anywhere, and them sixty half the time standing one end and lapping over on themselves.

"So there I was, and I wasn't in no mood to view the beauties uh nature. I was high and dry and the walking was about as poor as I ever seen; and my boots was highheel and rubbed blisters before I'd covered a mile of that territory. I wanted water, and I wanted it bad. Before I got it I wanted it a heap worse." He stopped, cupped his slim fingers around a match blaze.

Branciforte sat closer. He almost forgot the point at issue in the adventure.

"Along about dark, I camped for the night under a big, bare-faced cliff, made a bluff at sleeping and cursed my bum luck. At sunup I rose and wandered around like a doggy when it's first turned loose on the range. All that day I perambulated over them hills, and I will say I wasn't enjoying the stroll none. You're right when you say things can happen, out here. Getting lost and afoot in the Badlands is one.

"That afternoon I dragged myself up to the edge of a deep coulee and looked over to see if there was any way of getting down. There was a bright green streak down there that couldn't mean nothing but water. And over beyond, I could see the river that I'd went and lost. I looked and looked, but the walls looked straight as a Boston's man's pedigree. And then the sun come out from behind a cloud and lit up a spot that made me forget for a minute that I was thirsty as a dog and near starved besides.

"I was looking down on the ruins and yet it was near perfect-of an old castle. Every stone stood out that clear and distinct I could have counted 'em. There was a tower at one end, partly fell to pieces but yet enough left to easy tell what it was. I could see it bad kind of loopholes in it. There was an open place where I took it the main entrance bad used to be; what I'd call the official entrance. But there was other entrances besides, and some of 'em was made by time and hard weather. There was what looked like a ditch running around my side of it, and a bridge. Uh course, it was all needing repairs bad.

"I laid there for quite a spell looking it over. It didn't look to me like it ought to be there at all, but in a school geography or a history."

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"The deuce! A castle in the Badlands!" said Branciforte.

"That's what it was, all right. I found a trail it would make a mountain sheep seasick to follow, and I got down into the coulee. It was lonesome as sin, and spooky; but there was a good spring close by, and a creek running from it, and you can gamble I filled up on it a-plenty. Then I shot a rabbit or two that was banging out around the ruins, and camped there till next day, when I found a pass out, and got my bearings by the river and come on into camp. So when you throw slurs on our plumb newness, I've got the cards to call yuh. That castle wasn't built last summer, Mister. And whoever did build it was some civilized. So there yuh are."

Andy took a last, lingering pull at the cigarette stub, flung it into the blackened forge, and picked up the spur. He settled his bat on his head, and started for the door and the sunlight.

"Oh, but say! Didn't you find out anything about it afterwards? There must have been something "

"If it's relics uh the dim and musty past yuh mean, there was; relics to burn. I kicked up specimens of ancient dishes, and truck like that, while I was prowling around for firewood. And inside the castle, in what I reckon was used for the main hall, I run acrost a skeleton. That is, part of one."

"But, man alive, why haven't you made use of a discovery like that?" Branciforte followed him out, lighting his pipe with fingers that trembled. "Don't you realize what a thing like that means?"

Andy turned and smiled lazily down at him. "At the time I was there, I was all took up with the idea uh getting home. I couldn't eat skeletons, Mister, nor yet the remains uh prehistoric dishes. A man could starve to death while he examined it thorough. And so far as I know there ain't any record of it. I never heard no one mention building it, anyhow."

Andy stooped and adjusted the spur to his heel to see if it were quite right, and went off to the stable bumming under his breath.

Branciforte stood at the door of the blacksmith shop and gazed after him, puffing meditatively at his pipe. "Lord! the ignorance of these Western folk! To run upon a find like that, and to think it less important than getting home in time for supper. To let a discovery like that lie forgotten, a mere incident in a day's travel! That fellow thinks more, right now, about his horse going lame and himself raising blisters on his heels, than of Jove, what ignorance!"

Branciforte knocked his pipe gently against the doorcasing, put it into his coat pocket and hurried into the house.

That night the roundup pulled in to the home ranch.

The visitors, headed by their host, swooped down upon the roundup wagons just when the boys were gathered together for a cigarette or two apiece and a little talk before rolling in. There was no night guarding to do. Sherwood Branciforte hunted out Andy Green where he lay at ease with head and shoulders propped against a wheel of the bedwagon and gossipped with Pink and a few others.

"Look here, Green," he said in a voice to arrest the attention of the whole camp, "I wish you'd tell the others that tale you told me this afternoon—about that ruined castle down in the hills. Mason, here, is a newspaper man; he scents a story for his paper. And the rest refuse to believe a word I say."

"I'd hate to have a rep like that, Mr. Branciforte," Andy said, and turned his big, honest gray eyes to where stood the women—two breezy young persons with sleeves rolled to tanned elbows and cowboy hats of the musical comedy brand. Also they had gay silk handkerchiefs knotted picturesquely around their throats. There was

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another, a giggly, gurgly lady with gray hair fluffed up.

"Do tell us, Mr. Green," this young-old lady urged. "It sounds so romantic."

"It's funny you never mentioned it to any of us," put in the "Old Man" suspiciously.

Andy pulled himself up into a more decorous position, and turned his eyes towards his boss. "I never knew yuh took any interest in relic hunting," he explained mildly.

"Sherwood says you found a skeleton!" said the young-old lady, shuddering pleasurably.

"Yes, I did find one or part of one," Andy admitted reluctantly.

"What were the relics of pottery like?" demanded one of the cowboy-hatted girls, as if she meant to test him. "I do some collecting of that sort of thing."

Andy threw away his cigarette, and with it all compunction. "Well, I wasn't so much interested in the dishes as in getting something to eat," he said. "I saw several different kinds. One was a big, awkward looking thing and was pretty heavy, and had straight sides. Then I come across one or two more that was ornamented some. One had what looked like a fish on it, and the other I couldn't make out very well. They didn't look to be worth much, none of 'em."

"Green," said his employer steadily, "was there such a place?"

Andy returned his look honestly. "There was, and there is yet, I guess," he said. "I'll tell you how you can find it and what it's like—if yuh doubt my word."

Andy glanced around and found every man, including the cook, listening intently. He picked a blade of new grass and began splitting it into tiny threads. The host found boxes for the women to sit upon, and the men sat down upon the grass.

"Before I come here to work, I was riding for the Circle C. One day I was riding away down in the Badlands alone and my horse slipped in some shale rock and went lame; strained his shoulder so I couldn't ride him. That put me afoot, and climbing up and down them bills I lost my bearings and didn't know where I was at for a day or two. I wandered around aimless, and got into a strip A country that was new to me and plumb lonesome and wild.

"That second day is when I happened across this ruin. I was looking down into a deep, shut-in coulee, hunting water, when the sun come out and shone straight on to this place. It was right down under me; a stone ruin, with a tower on one end and kinda tumbled down so it wasn't so awful high the tower wasn't. There was a a "

"Moat," Branciforte suggested.

"That's the word a moat around it, and a bridge that was just about gone to pieces. It had loopholes, like the pictures of castles, and a "

"Battlement?" ventured one of the musical-comedy cowgirls.

Andy had not meant to say battlement; of a truth, his conception of battlements was extremely hazy, but he caught up the word and warmed to the subject. "Battlement? Well I should guess yes! There was about as elegant a battlement as I'd want to see anywhere. It was sure a peach. It was " he hesitated for a fraction of a second. "It was high as the tower, and it had figures carved all over it; them kind that looks like kid drawing in school, with

bows and arrows stuck out in front of 'em, threatening "

"Not the old Greek!" exclaimed one of the girls.

"I couldn't say as to that," Andy made guarded reply, "I never made no special study of them things. But they was sure old."

"About how large was the castle?" put in the man who wrote things. "How many rooms, say?"

"I'd hate to give a guess at the size. I didn't step it off, and I'm a poor guesser. The rooms I didn't count. I only explored around in the main hall, like, a little. But it got dark early, down in there, and I didn't have no matches to waste. And next morning I started right out at sunup to find the way home. No, I never counted the rooms. I don't reckon, though, that there was so awful many. Anyway, not more than fifteen or twenty. Ruins don't interest me much, though I was kinda surprised to run acrost that one, all right, and I'm willing to gamble there was warm and exciting times down there when the place was in running order."

"A castle away out here! Just think, good people, what that means! Romance, adventure and scientific discoveries! We must go and explore the place. Why can't we start at once in the morning? This gentleman can guide us there."

"It ain't easy going," Andy remarked, conscientiously. "It's pretty rough; some place, you'd have to walk and lead your horses."

They swept aside the discouragement.

"We'd need pick and shovels, and men to dig," cried one enthusiast. "Uncle Peter can lend us some of his men. There may be treasure to unearth. There may be anything that is wonderful and mysterious. Uncle Peter, get your outfit together; you've boasted that a roundup can beat the army in getting under way quickly. Now let us have a practical demonstration. We want to start by six o'clock all of us, with a cook and four or five men to do the excavating." It was the voice of the girl whom her friends spoke of as "the life of the party" the voice of the-girl-who-does-things.

"It's sixty-five miles from here, good and strong and mostly up and down," put in Andy.

"'Quoth the raven!'" mocked the-girl-who-does-things. "We are prepared to face the ups and downs. Do we start at six, Uncle Peter?"

Uncle Peter glanced sideways at the roundup boss. To bring it to pass, he would be obliged to impress the roundup cook and part of the crew. It was breaking an unwritten law of the rangeland, and worse, it was doing something unbusinesslike and foolish. But not even the owner of the Rocking R may withstand the pleading of a pretty woman. Uncle Peter squirmed, but he promised.

"We start at six; earlier if you say so."

The roundup boss gave his employer a look of disgust and walked away. The crew took it that he went off to some secluded place to swear.

Thereafter there was much discussion of ways and means, and much enthusiasm among the visitors from the East, equalled by the depression of the crew, for cowboys do not, as a rule, take kindly to pick and shovel, and the excavators had not yet been chosen from among them. They were uneasy, and they stole frequent, betraying glances at one another.

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All of which amused Pink much. Pink would like to have gone along, and would certainly have offered his services, but for the fact that his work there was done and he would have to start back to the Flying U just as soon as one of his best saddlehorses, which had cut its foot, was able to travel. That would be in a few days, probably. So Pink sighed and watched the preparations enviously.

Since he was fairly committed into breaking all precedents, Uncle Peter plunged recklessly. He ordered the messwagon to be restocked and prepared for the trip, and he took the bed-tent and half the crew. The foreman he wisely left behind with the remnant of his outfit. They were all to eat at the house while the messwagon was away, and they were to spread their soogans which is to say beds where they might, if the bunkhouses proved too small or too hot.

The foreman, outraged beyond words, saddled at daybreak and rode to the nearest town, and the unchosen half turned out in a body to watch the departure of the explorers, which speaks eloquently of their interest; for off duty cowboys are prone to sleep long.

Andy Green, as guide, bolted ahead of the party that he might open the gate. Bolted is a good word, for his horse swerved and kept on running, swerved again, and came down in a heap. Andy did not get up, and the women screamed. Then Pink and some others hurried out and bore Andy, groaning, to the bunkhouse.

The visitors from the East gathered, perturbed, around the door, sympathetic and dismayed. It looked very much as if their exploration must end where it began, and the-girl-who-does-things looked about to weep, until Andy, still groaning, sent Pink out to comfort them.

"He says you needn't give up the trip on his account," Pink announced musically from the doorway. "He's drawing a map and marking the coulee where the ruin is. He says most any of the boys that know the country at all can find the place for yuh. And he isn't hurt permanent; he strained his back so he can't ride, is all." Pink dimpled at the young-old lady who was admiring him frankly, and withdrew.

Inside, Andy Green was making pencil marks and giving the chosen half-explicit directions. At last he folded the paper and handed it to one called Sandy.

"That's the best I can do for yuh," Andy finished. "I don't see how yuh can miss it if yuh follow that map close. And if them gay females make any kick on the trail, you just remind 'em that I said all along it was rough going. So long, and good luck."

So with high-keyed, feminine laughter and much dust, passed the exploring party from the Rocking R.

"Say," Pink began two days later to Andy, who was sitting on the shady side of the bunkhouse staring absently at the skyline. "There's a word uh praise I've been aiming to give yuh. I've seen riding, and I've done a trifle in that line myself and learned some uh the tricks. But I want to say I never did see a man flop his horse any neater than you done that morning. I'll bet there ain't another man in the outfit got next your play. I couldn't uh done it better myself. Where did you learn that? Ever ride in Wyoming?"

Andy turned his eyes, but not his head which was a way he had and regarded Pink slantwise for at least ten seconds.

"Yes, I've rode in Wyoming," he answered quietly. "What's the chance for a job, up your way? Is the Flying U open for good men and true?"

"It won't cost yuh a cent to try," Pink told him. "How's your back? Think you'll be able to ride by the time Skeeter is able to travel?"

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Andy grinned. "Say," he confided suddenly, "if that hoss don't improve plumb speedy, I'll be riding on ahead. I reckon I'll be able to travel before them explorers get back, my friend."

"Why?" Pink asked boldly.

"Why? Well, the going is some rough, down that way. If they get them wagons half way to the coulee marked with a cross, they'll sure have to attach wings onto 'em. I've been kind of worried about that. I don't much believe Uncle Peter is going to enjoy that trip and be sure does get irritable by spells. I've got a notion to ride for some other outfit, this summer."

"Was that the reason you threw your horse down and got hurt?" asked Pink, and Andy grinned again by way of reply. "They'll be gone a week, best they can do," he estimated aloud. "We ought to be able to make our getaway by then, easy."

Pink assured him that a week would see them beaded for the Flying U.

It was the evening of the sixth day, and the two were packed and ready to leave in the morning, when Andy broke off humming and gave a snort of dismay.

"By gracious, there they come. My mother lives in Buffalo, Pink, in a little drab house with white trimmings. Write and tell her how her son Oh, beloved! But they're hitting her up lively. If they made the whole trip in that there frame uh mind, they could uh gone clean to Miles City and back. How pretty the birds sing! Pink, you'll hear words, directly."

Directly Pink did.

"You're the biggest liar on earth," Sherwood Branciforte contributed to the recriminating wave that near engulfed Andy Green. "You sent us down there on a wild-goose chase, you fool."

"I never sent nobody," Andy defended. "You was all crazy to go."

"And nothing but an old stone hut some trapper had built!" came an indignant, female tone. "There never was any castle, nor "

"A man's home is his castle," argued Andy, standing unabashed before them. "Putting it that way, it was a castle, all right."

There was babel, out of which

"And the skeleton! Oh, you it was a dead cow!" This from the young-old lady, who was looking very dragged and not at all young.

"I don't call to mind ever saying it was human," put in Andy, looking at her with surprised, gray eyes.

"And the battlements!" groaned the-girl-who-does-things.

"You wanted battlements," Andy flung mildly into the uproar. "I always aim to please." With that he edged away from them and made his escape to where the cook was profanely mixing biscuits for supper. All-day moves had put an edge to his temper. The cook growled an epithet, and Andy passed on. Down near the stable he met one of the chosen half, and the fellow greeted him with a grin. Andy stopped abruptly.

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"Say, they don't seem none too agreeable," he said, jerking his thumb toward the buzzing group. "How about it, Sandy? Was they that petulant all the way?"

Sandy, the mapbearer, chuckled. "It's lucky you got hurt at the last minute! And yet it was worth the trip. Uh course we got stalled with the wagons the second day out, but them women was sure ambitious and made us go on with a packadero layout. I will say that, going down, they stood the hardships remarkable. It was coming back that frazzled the party.

"And when we found the place say, but it was lucky you wasn't along! They sure went hogwild when they seen the ruins. The old party who acts young displayed temper and shed tears uh rage. When she looked into the cabin and seen the remains uh that cowcritter, there was language it wasn't polite to overhear. She said a lot uh things about you, Andy. One thing they couldn't seem to get over, and that was the smallness uh the blamed shack. Them fourteen or fifteen rooms laid heavy on their minds."

"I didn't say there was fourteen or fifteen rooms. I said I didn't count the rooms; I didn't either. I never heard of anybody counting one room. Did you, Pink?"

"No," Pink agreed, "I never did!"

Sandy became suddenly convulsed. "Oh, but the funniest thing was the ancient pottery," he gasped, the tears standing in his eyes. "That old dutch oven was bad enough; but when one uh the girls that one who collects old dishes happened across an old mackerel can and picked it up and saw the fish on the label, she was the maddest female person I ever saw in my life, bar none. If you'd been in reach about that time, she'd just about clawed your eyes out, Andy Green. Oh me, oh my!" Sandy slapped his thigh and had another spasm.

Sounds indicated that the wave of recrimination was rolling nearer. Andy turned to find himself within arm's length of Uncle Peter.

"Maybe this is your idea of a practical joke, Green," he said to Andy. "But anyway, it will cost you your job. I ought to charge you up with the time my outfit has spent gallivanting around the country on the strength of your wild yarn. The quicker you hit the trail, the better it will suit me. By the way, what's your first name?" he asked, pulling out a checkbook.

"Andy," answered the unrepentant one.

"Andy." Uncle Peter paused with a fountain pen between his fingers. He looked Andy up and down, and the frown left his face. He proceeded to write out the check, and when it was done he handed it over with a pleased smile. "What did you do it for, Green?" he asked in a friendlier tone.

"Self-defense," Andy told him laconically, and turned away.

Half an hour later, Andy and Pink trailed out of the coulee that sheltered the Rocking R. When they were out and away from the fence, and Pink's horses, knowing instinctively that they were homeward bound, were jogging straight west without need of guidance. Andy felt in his pocket for cigarette material. His fingers came in contact with the check Uncle Peter had given him, and he drew it forth and looked it over again.

"Well, by gracious!" he said. "Uncle Peter thinks we're even, I guess."

He handed the check to Pink, and rolled his cigarette; and Pink after one comprehending look at the slip of paper, doubled up over his saddlehorse and shouted with glee for the check was written: "Pay to the order of Ananias Green."

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"And I've got to sign myself a liar, or I don't collect no money," sighed Andy. "That's what I call tough luck, by gracious!"