IX weddings in San Joaquin Forest in one year!” said
old Ranger Neil to young Ranger Blackstone, as they
met on the trail. “Only eight of you gay young
bachelors left to dance with the girls! Get busy; go
down the line and propose to every pink sunbonnet.
Let the town hats alone—they’s giddy an’ stuck-up.
Out in the aidgeis of the foothills there’s better girls
wearin’ what their mothers wore.”

“Pretty girl is pretty, even in them extinguisher hats,” said Black-
stone. “I won’t deny but what these weddin’s and cellerbrations,
and the wearin’ criticisms on us slow-pokes have had some effect.
And of course I acknowledge further, between ourselves, that them
six rangers have done pretty well. They picked up wives that light
up their cabins whenever they step through the doorway.”

“There you go, Blackstone,” said Neil, in a tone of solemn warn-
ing. “Arkansaw and me are dyed-in-the-wool bachelors. We know
it isn’t easy to get a girl at all—it’s durned hard to get a real sensible
one. I’ve seen even handsomer rangers than you be sail down to the
Valley under full spread of furlough, with a whole month’s salary
ahead—and come back tied and marked with that same old slipper
brand. Yes! I’ve seen them hand out to us in proud satisfaction
just such a lovely social sample of wedded bliss as Jerry Buttons’
girl, and three or four others I have in mind.”

“Well,” said Blackstone, “those are all new stories to me. When
we make camp and Minaret rides in from his range, an’ maybe those
timber-estimating boys, I’ll call on you to sound the warnin’ notes,
an’ brace the bachelors. I heard one of the married men say as how
the last of the bachelors was a goin’ to be put in a cage, an’ be toted
around and banged at with pea-shooters for ten cents a shot.”

That night they camped on the Chiquito, where four trails cross,
and the timber crew came in, so that six rangers were together. Neil
cought trout for supper, Minaret had a square of Inyo County comb-
honey, white and fragrant, and a Round Valley cheese, by way of
“extras.”

After supper one of the young rangers went to his pack, and
brought out a half-dozen good cigars, well wrapped. “Came from
that New York newspaper-fellow that I showed around last summer—
the same that gave the ranger-library one of the books he wrote—
bully good story, too, about how to run foot-races.”

“We live too high out here, we rangers,” said Aroostook, the head
of the timber crew, lighting his cigar and stretching himself out in
perfect bliss.
THE MISTLETOE-WOMAN

“You bachelors are mighty convenient around this forest,” he continued, “You make friends easy; you fit into lots of places. Besides, you are becoming scarce in this country.”

“Ranger Neil advises us to brace up against feminine wiles; he thinks there are two sides to this wedded bliss picture,” remarked young Blackstone.

“And so there is,” said Neil. “When I rides by a camp and sees the kids chase out to tell their father good-bye, or see Macy with Dimples in front of him on the saddle, or hear Mrs. Roy singing as she gets breakfast for a bunch of us old fellers, I wish I had a happy home. But, then, I think of Jerry Buttons, an’ I observe that wedded bliss is of varied sorts.”

“Who was Jerry Buttons?” asked Little Jo.

“He was on a Forest, where I rode range before I was transferred. I ought hurt feelin’s ef I named it. There was a very good ranger up there whose Bible name was Jeremiah Mason. But his favorite cuss-word was ‘O, Buttons!’ so of course that stuck to him. He was the finest man we had on cattle work.

“You timber fellows needn’t laugh, and say ‘old style.’ Reproduction of timber isn’t the only item. I rode once with a way-up boss from Washington, that writes slashin’ good poetry; well, he told our Supervisor that if a ranger knew range an’ live-stock an’ mountain people, he could make good in any position. We used to think that was Jerry Buttons.”

“Cattlemen are peanuts to manage, along side of contractors an’ lumber jacks!” interjected Aroostook.

“One day Jerry goes down to Sacramento and meets a girl there. Then he writes lots of letters,” said Ranger Neil. “Pretty soon he begins to save money hard—for a bachelor. We heard she was a beauty, and real bright,” he continued, “an’ so we thought: ‘Now here’s Jerry, whose weak point is reports, will have a jim-dandy home-clerk to post him on book names of grasses, an’ help him draw grazing-maps, an’ make him study harder than he ever did before.’ You see, Jerry was careless, and he was lazy in streaks, but a tremendous worker in between.”

“That’s me an’ you, all right!” said Minaret. The narrator looked at him reproachfully. They had been cowboys together in Nevada, before the forests were set apart.

“Et tu, Brute?” whispered little Jo of the timber-crew, so softly that no one heard him. What he said aloud was: “Go along, Minaret! You and Neil and all you pioneers simply wear the rest of us to skin and bone. Lazy nothing! Fire ahead, Neil; he’s an old horned toad from the desert.”
“Jerry brought her up here,” said Neil, striking his gait again. “You never saw such a change in any man on earth. He was that subdued, and under the brush-harrow. Everyone saw it, first jump,—except Jerry himself.”

“That wife of mine,” says Jerry to me as we rode together, ‘is a wonderful woman. I can’t understand, as I say to her, how she ever came to marry me. She is so well brung up, an’ she likes things so nice! It’s jes’ like a romance out of a book—and here we are, roughing it in an old barn.’

‘No worse than other young couples,’ I tells him. ‘The Forest has only money to build one or two cabins a year.’ But Jerry went on:

‘She’s so sensitive, an’ delicate. I never seen it before, but you must acknowledge that this is an awful hard life for a real lady. Whenever I can’t manage to make my home camp at night, she jes’ lays there with her eyes wide open, an’ her han’s clenched an’ her ears stopped with cotton. She can’t sleep one wink till I get back.’

‘She’d get over that about the third night,’ I mentioned,—without any sense to brag on. ‘It’s only fifty yards to a neighbor. Leave her a police whistle and give her a chance to realize that nothin’ will hurt her. She’ll soon be spendin’ her time fixin’ up things to surprise you with. She’ll get so that she is proud to see you ridin’ off for a week of specially hard work.’

“Jerry turns in his saddle and looks at me, cold and sudden. We rode on a while, an’ then we took different trails, an’ he says, ‘Good mornin’, Mr. Neil,’ as if I was a stranger. Then I says ‘Get along, old man,’ and it brung the tears to his eyes, but he couldn’t manage to say nothin’!

“Jerry, he buckled in even wuss after that,” added Neil, “no man ever worked harder to play two games at onct.”

“To reconcile the irreconcilable,” thought Little Jo.

“He often rode ten miles after dark,” said Neil, “chasin’ home after a big day’s work; he wore down his horses, and bought two more, on instalments; he washed clothes on Sundays; he sent his wife off on long visits to her friends. He began to wear out; lost his cheerfulness. We did all we could to help him along.”

“This sort of thing ran on for about five years,” the ranger continued. “By then Jerry was washing and starching and ironing clothes for his little girl and a lot for his wife, too. She was livin’ on him jes’ like a mistletoe livin’ on an oak. She always looked as if she had come out of a band-box, and so did the little girl. She got even prettier,—but Jerry had a stoop, and looked gray and wrinkled. Lost his promotion, of course, and Mrs. Jerry, who was smart enough,
THE MISTLETOE-WOMAN

made up a mean but funny little verse about the Supervisor, that
went all over the country."

"Jerry put all of you in a hole," said Minaret.

"He sure did," answered Neil. "He was obeying every order,
and taking every dressin' down like a lamb. But he couldn't see
where the trouble was; he went on worshiping his pretty little mis-
tletoe-woman."

"What do you think the trouble was, Neil?" said Aroostook.

"Well, she had been an only child, among adorin' relatives. She
was selfish clear through. She liked admiration, and she hated plain
livin'. She said onc't that she warn't raised rough like the rest of us."

"Jerry was a fool," said Minaret.

"I can't have told this thing right, if anyone thinks that," said
Neil. "I want you to see how she was that bright and attractive
that no matter how mad we were at her on Jerry's account, she would
meet us at the post-office, or on the road, and in ten minutes get us to
feel friendly again. Jerry kept on sayin', every once in a while, 'I
don't see why she married a common ranger like me.'"

"She was nothing at all but a bad, a dangerous woman," said a
young timber-ranger from Big Creek crossing. "What do you think,
Little Jo?"

"She was Conventionally honest, but shallow and undisciplined.
She was worse than bad—she was hopeless. But how did it end,
Neil?"

"Jerry had to resign. Then he went to Tonopah and made a little
money, so that he could be home—that is, at the hotel—every night.
But the kid died of typhoid, and the woman took up with a mining-
stock operator. I understand Jerry went right down hill after that."

"Pretty tough!" said Ranger Blackstone: "even one case like
that is frightful! But a ranger ought to tell a girl the details of his
work, and make sure that she understands the whole thing—the
roughness—the being alone nights—the small salary. Still, nine-
teen out of every twenty of the ranger women are first-class helpers
of their men folks, so we needn't lose sleep over the misfits."

The young forest men rolled up in their blankets; the camp-fire by
the Chiquito fell to a glowing heart of coals; the moon shone on pine-
clad ridges, and when it sank the constellations gleamed out in dark-
est skies before the dawn, and moved on overhead, as they had for
countless thousands of years. In the hearts of the sleeping rangers,
stronger than contradiction, the calm ideals of home, of fellowship
and of broadening life, remained unshaken, while those who were
happily married saw visions of their distant wives, equally with them-
selves bearers of the burdens, sharers of the happiness of the Forest.