

HANDS UP!

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Hands up! by Frederick Niven

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FREDERICK NIVEN

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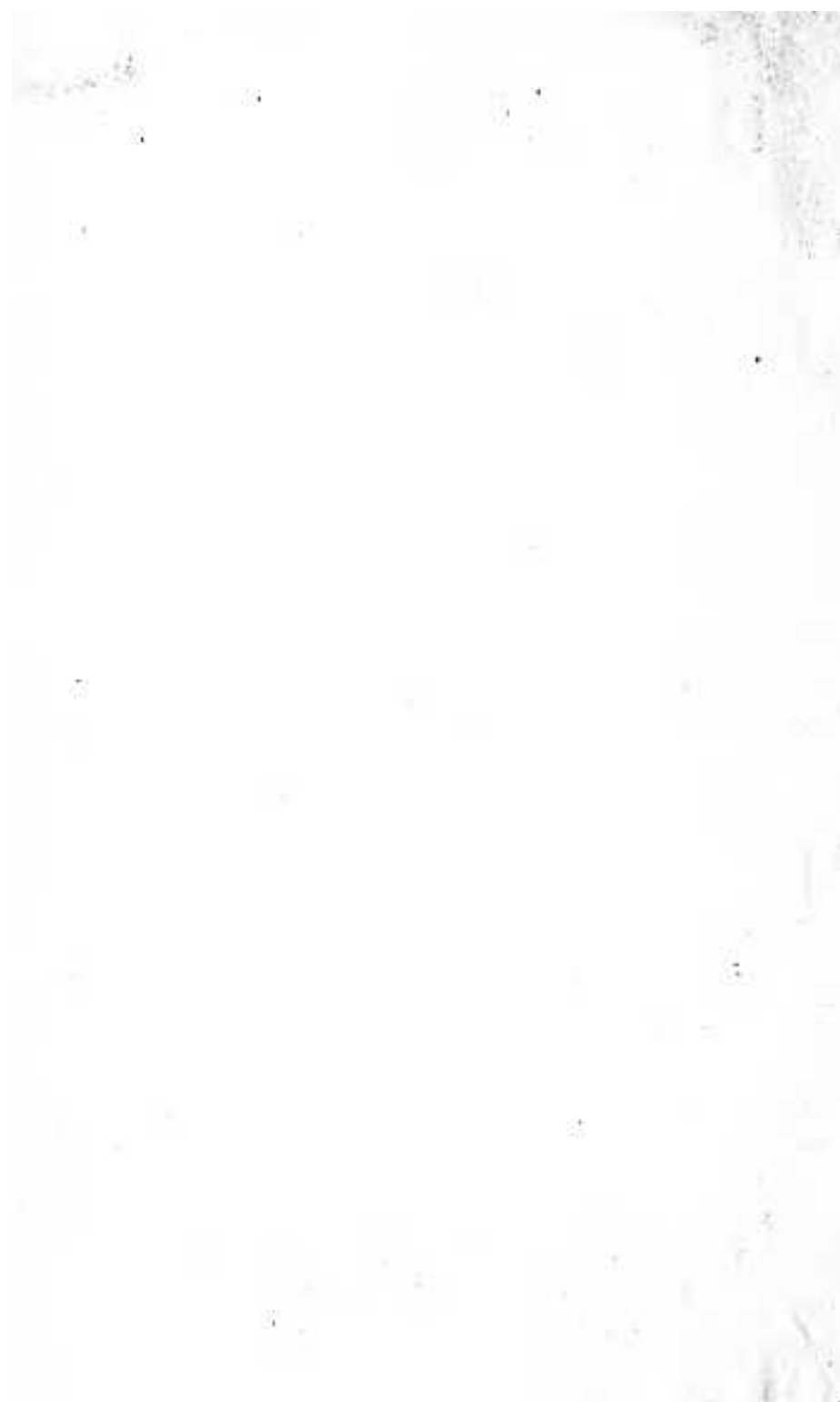
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BY

FREDERICK NIVEN



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over his misguided, or rudderless life, and his wild end, than with the "jolly good riddance" air that might be expected. There was reason for it.

I had better, to begin with, explain how I came to the sage-brush country of the Apache Kid, because, in a new country, the men one meets there have had some concussion (good or bad) in their lives to boost them so far. And the reason for their being in the new country is a kind of striking of the pitch-fork to get their key.

That beginning of things I must tell quite frankly, bolstering myself up to the explanation by the thought that most young men—boys, let me say—for I was but a boy (and though I say "most young men" I am talking of myself!) have a kind of what the Scots call "daftness" in them, and are generally exceedingly sorry for themselves, magnificent in their woes and grandiloquent in their hopes.

I had wanted, in the old country, to be a sheep-farmer. My mother had, however, coaxed me to go in for a scholarship at my school. We spent our summer holidays, I remember, that year, after I had sat for the examination, in the Isle of Arran, in the Firth of Clyde, an island that appeals to the youngster because of its moors, its cliffs and corries, its high rocks and adders in the heather.

All through that vacation I was out and about on the hills with the shepherd and working in the dips. My father would come and watch me clutch adroitly a sheep by the horns, swing my leg over it and straddle it to the tank, plunge it in, walk alongside, yank it up at the end, and send it down to the pen among the other baptised ones. I say this not sacrilegiously now, but recalling an unfortunate expression used at the time.

My mother (bless her) was of the old school, and had had hopes that I might become a minister of the gospel, which several boyish escapades had dashed. My father and she had little in common; and one day, as he watched us working in the dips, my mother came along, under her sunshade, from the farm and stood looking on, half-sad, half-proud. My father was wholly proud of me at the moment, because I had pinioned a particular recalcitrant ram between my knees, and, wriggle his head as he would, I was his master. The farm-boys stopped to laugh and egg me on—just as I have seen, since then, cowboys roar with laughter when some branded two-year-old (who slipped through unbranded at one-year) has arisen and made a disturbance in a corral.

My father turned about, and, seeing my mother, gave his sniff that prefaced a jocular remark and said he:

“I think you’d better be glad that the boy can baptise sheep instead of mortals.”

My mother stiffened under the sunshade, held it up rigidly over her head instead of letting it make a pretty circle behind her head and shoulders. She walked sadly back to the farm and wrote a letter straightway to her minister, asking him his views on sheep-farming for a young man. The parson wrote back that sheep-farming was a lazy life.

My father was a queer old fellow. He was a determined enough man, but very “jack easy” as the word is. He would dismiss things with a “Pshaw—don’t worry me,” just when the looker-on expected him to fight to the end for his own view, would give his shoulders a dismissing shrug and retire to the library to read his “Don Quixote” in Spanish, with his feet on the mantelpiece.

When this letter arrived my mother handed it to him and he read it with eyes widening and widening, held it in a trembling hand and bellowed out :

"What has he got to do with it? Perfect nonsense! What a woman! What a woman! He's a shepherd of souls that—that—that—*parson!* What does he know about mutton?"

And then my dad seemed to listen to the echo of his voice and, alas, saw the humour of his remark. He sat back and laughed at himself, then got up, flicked the letter, said: "Far better give the boy a chance. I wish my father had let me follow my instincts—" and retired to smoke many cigars and read "Don Quixote" in the Spanish.

But evidently he could not settle. I think, looking back on him, that he tried too much to dismiss things instead of to mend them. He had, nevertheless, quite an ordeal of it dismissing that letter. It came on a Friday and all Saturday he was glum and on Sunday so glum that he spent the forenoon yarning with the stable-boy and the ploughman. To my great delight, from where I sat (glum as he, before the farmhouse) I saw him dancing and snapping his fingers, explaining some Spanish dance to the farm hands. They looked upon this townsman, spending his summer vacation with them, as a "great card." He had spent his younger days partly in Chili, in the nitrate business, partly in the Argentine, and lived a deal in the past. He was now giving them an exhibition of some Spanish dance; and presently he began to sing, in response to some request from the stable-boy, a Spanish song.

My mother came out and looked at him sadly. I was old enough to see both sides—to see that, in one way, my dad was making a motley of himself for