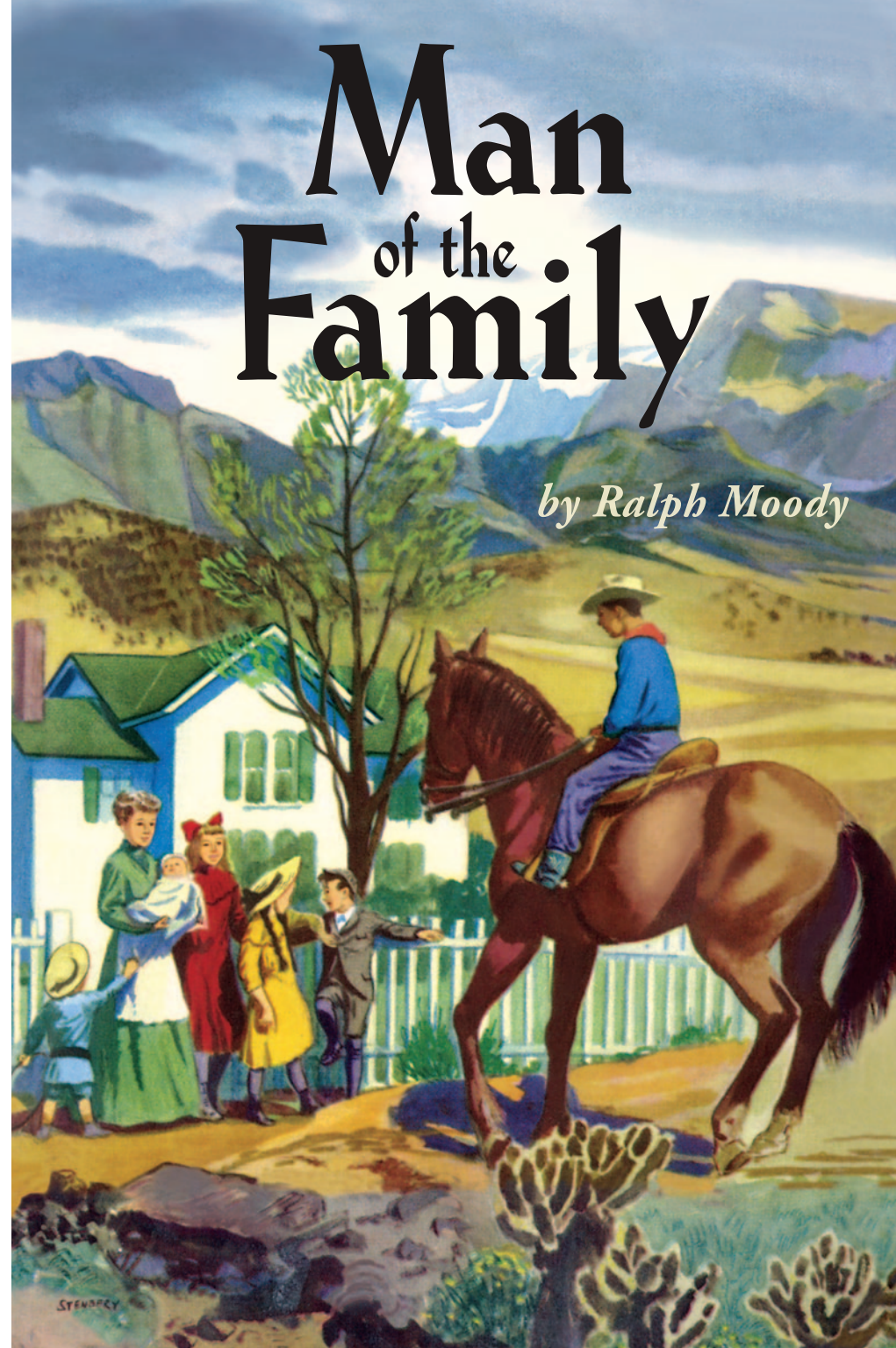


Man of the Family

by Ralph Moody





Man
of the
Family

Books by Ralph Moody

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Come on Seabiscuit!

The Dry Divide

The Fields of Home

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Horse of a Different Color

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Man of the Family

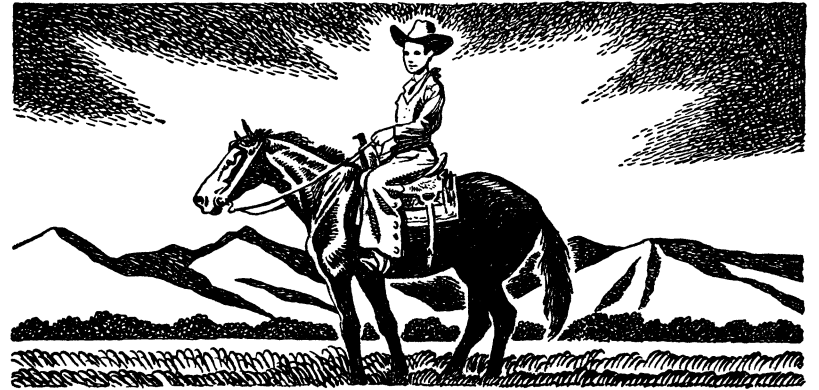
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Riders of the Pony Express

Shaking the Nickel Bush

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Wells Fargo



Man of the Family

By RALPH MOODY

Illustrated by Edward Shenton

Purple House Press • Kentucky

TO
MY MOTHER

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First Edition

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Man
of the
Family

CHAPTER 1

MR. NUTTING GIVES ME SOME ADVICE

FATHER died when I was eleven. That was in the early spring of 1910, and our relatives back in New England wanted Mother to parcel us out among them. When the doctor found that Mother had got blood-poisoning in her hand from nursing Father and would have to go away for a month, Cousin Phil wanted her to send us east right then, but Mother said, "No, Phil. I am sure Charlie would want us all to be together."

Grace was nearly two years older than I, and we were standing with the younger children when Mother spoke. We didn't look at each other, but Grace's hand found mine and squeezed it. Then Mother turned to me and said, "Ralph, you are my man now; I shall depend on you."

It didn't seem to me that the man of a family should go to school. I wanted to work, as Father had, and make a living for the family. My brother Philip was eight, and Hal was five, so they were too young to get jobs. Muriel was between Philip and me, but she was a girl.

We had brought our horse, Lady, and the spring wagon with us when we moved to Littleton from the ranch. With them, I was sure I could find plenty of ways to make us a living.

While I was getting dressed the morning after Mother came home, I planned that I'd go up to see Mr. Cooper right after breakfast. He had a big cattle and alfalfa ranch up near the mountains west of Littleton. I had worked for him the whole summer before. He had paid me twenty dollars a month, and had told me he'd give me work whenever Father didn't need me at home.

Mother was lying on the horsehair couch in the parlor when I came downstairs. She called me in and, before I had a chance to tell her what I'd been planning, she said, "Gracie will have to stay home with me for a few days. After you bring the milk from Lenheart's, I would like you to dress her one of the fattest hens. You'll have to hurry right along or you'll be late for school."

I wanted to tell Mother right then about not being able to go to school any more, but she called to Grace and started telling her what blouse Philip should wear and which hair ribbon to put on Muriel. It seemed as though it would be better to talk to her when there wasn't quite so much of a hurry.

While we were eating breakfast I got an idea for stalling off going to school. Philip always liked to feed the hens. And twice, before Father died, he had left the chicken house door open and let some of the hens out. I thought he might do it again, so I asked him to feed them while I was gone for the milk. It worked all right. When I came riding Lady back down the lane from the highroad, I could see half a dozen of our hens out in the side yard. Philip and Muriel were chasing them around with sticks, and King had Benjamin, Mother's big Buff Orpington rooster, treed on top of the privy. It was after half past eight before I got them all back into the henyard. Then I grabbed the first one I could get my hands on, and chopped her head off before Mother could send word for me to let it go till after school.

I picked every last, single pinfeather, and it took until nearly quarter of ten, but I don't think I fooled Mother very much. When I took the hen in, she called me and said, "Here's a late excuse to give your teacher. Hereafter you must feed the hens yourself. We can't let anything interfere with your schooling."

All the time I had been picking the hen, I had been making up arguments. Not that any of us could argue with Mother: we couldn't. Father never had either. What he always did was to talk about something else till Mother changed her own mind. I thought I might be able to do the same thing on the school business, so when she gave me the note, I said, "Do you remember how many hens we had when we moved down here from the ranch? It seems to me there aren't very many left. I counted them just now, and there are only thirty-seven and the rooster."

Mother pinched her upper lip two or three times with her thumb and finger. "Now...let...me...see," she said. "We ate two or three during the early spring, and I used some for broth when Father was sick.... Thirty-seven sounds about right, I think."

Of course, I knew thirty-seven was right. I just wanted Mother to think about it. Then I said, "Well, if we keep on just eating hens they won't last us till school vacation. I thought maybe I ought to go up and see Mr. Cooper this morning about getting my job back, then we'd have a payday by the time the hens were all eaten up."

Mother didn't say anything for a minute. She just reached out and took hold of my hand. While her fingers were rubbing up and down on the back of it, she said, "I know. I know. We musn't keep on eating them or we won't have any eggs. That makes me think.... Were there any broody hens that wanted to set? We must plan to hatch some chicks and then get a garden started right away."

I could see that Mother was going to talk clear around me if I didn't look out, so I said, "Grace could take care of the setting hens just as well as I could, and I'll hurry and get the garden planted before I start working for Mr. Cooper."

Mother kept on rubbing my hand, and said, “Father worked himself to death taking care of us, just because he never had proper schooling. I don’t want you to do it.” Then she swallowed and tried to smile. “It must be twelve or fifteen miles up to Cooper’s mountain ranch. You’d never be able to go back and forth every day, and I must have a man at home nights; Philip isn’t old enough yet. Now you take your note to the principal and tell him you won’t have to be late any more.”

I hadn’t thought about Mother needing me at home nights, and it really was too far to ride up to the mountain ranch and back every day, so I took the note and went to school.

That was my first day of school since the middle of March. While Mother had been away, we children had stayed with neighbors. Just taking care of Lady and the hens hadn’t been enough to keep me busy, so, in April, I’d found myself a few jobs on market gardens. The farmers were setting out cabbage plants and they paid boys five cents an hour to help them. I knew I could never make a living for the family at five cents an hour and go to school at the same time. All through classes I tried to think of ways I could find a better job, and as soon as school let out, I went down to see Harry Nutting.

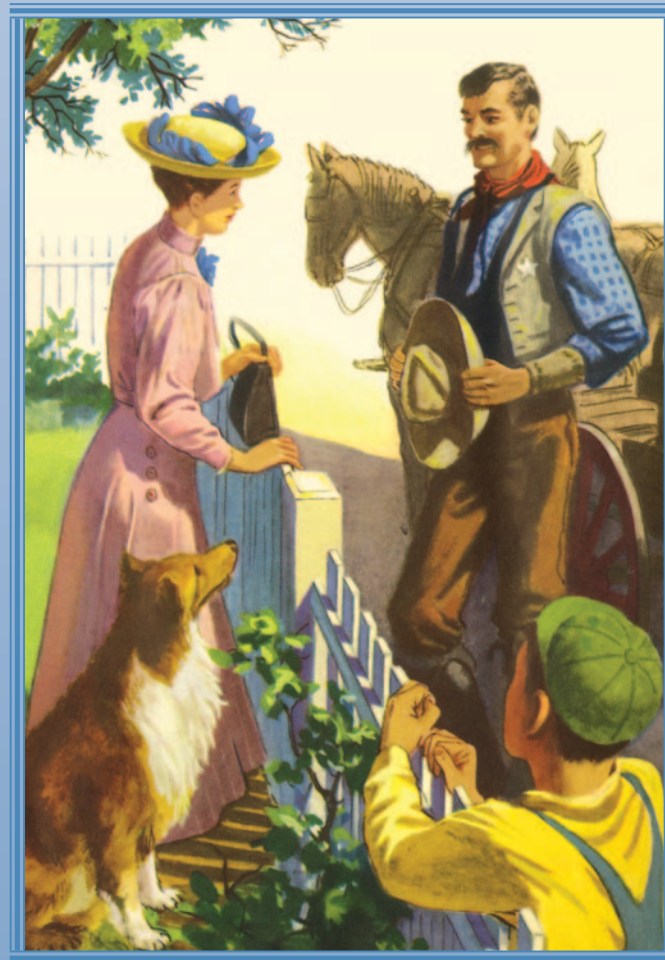
Mr. Nutting wasn’t any older than Father would have been, but he owned the Littleton Lumber and Fuel Company and just about the nicest pair of driving horses I’d ever seen. He didn’t load any lumber himself, or shovel any coal, and he wore good clothes all the time. And though he was always working, it was with his head instead of his hands.

When I went into his office that afternoon, Mr. Nutting came over to the counter, and said, “Hello, Little Britches, what you doing these days to make a dollar?”

“There isn’t much now except planting cabbages,” I told him.

“Good job,” he said; “used to do a lot of it when I was your age. What they paying you?”

“Five cents an hour,” I said. “I can get in about three hours after school.”



“Ralph Moody has the rare ability to blend understatement and deep emotion....*Man of the Family* is a powerful and beautiful little book.”

—Sterling North

“*Man of the Family* is everything *Little Britches* was—a heartwarming, frank, completely delightful narrative.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“...a deeply honest bit of Americana. *Man of the Family* is a book for everybody in the family.”

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