

Henry H. Nelson, Danish-born Montana sheepman, horseman, conservationist and irrigation pioneer, has been the subject of two articles published on these pages and written by his daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Greenfield of Helena. In this warmly humorous vignette, the focus is on Mrs. Nelson, a descendant of the distinguished Israel Putnam family of Massachusetts, who married Nelson in 1892 in Boston, where the rising young Montana sheep grower had just sold his spring wool clip. Anna Nelson was famous for entertaining in the grand manner at the family's Riverdale Ranch on the Missouri River near Great Falls. Seventy years ago on May 15, 1902, with Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as the theme and with Charles M. Russell's art in the background to record the rain-soaked climax, the festivities far outdistanced all other Nelson parties in imaginative planning and unforgettable results.—The Editor.

## Shakespearean "Culture"



FOR THE HENRY H. NELSON FAMILY, 1902 was a big party year. Charlie Russell was identified with both of Mother's biggest parties seventy years ago, and her most unique one. In October she gave a New England Harvest Home party on Nelson Island about a mile from the home ranch on the Missouri River. Of it, she wrote in her diary: "Three hundred guests came from Helena and Great Falls. Charlie Russell was there several days beforehand making the decorations."

This was probably the most successfully executed and certainly the largest party she ever gave. The Great Falls *Tribune* of October 2 recorded: "It is impossible to do Mr. and Mrs. H. H. Nelson justice in a short article . . ." and then ran for several columns with colorful details.

But the meeting on May 15 of the same year, of the Great Falls Shakespeare Club—to which Mother enthusiastically belonged—eclipsed all parties, not only in hilarious, dramatic antics, but because it gave our family a long-treasured water color by Charlie. In it he illustrated, with his own impish brand of humor, the last act of Mother's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

## *in Montana, 1902* by ELIZABETH GREENFIELD

CHARLIE RUSSELL WASN'T AT THIS spring cultural frolic in person, for the Shakespeare Club was strictly for ladies, an exclusive group whose members were carefully voted in. But Nancy Russell was a member and told Charlie all about how Shakespeare's sprites, jesters and fairy queens were about to move their gambolings from Fifteenth Century England to Montana of the early 1900's. Very likely, Charlie greatly enjoyed lampooning, in his kindly way, the whole preposterous party.

The Shakespeare Club was founded when Great Falls was less than two decades old. Its members yearned for eastern culture, either because they missed what they had known or wanted to acquire what they had never known. Mother was voted in because she could contribute "Boston culture." Mrs. Theodore Gibson was asked because her father-in-law, Paris Gibson, was the famed founder of Great Falls. Mrs. John Morony, besides being a tall, statuesque blond beauty, was married to the president of the First National Bank. I didn't know Mary Morony very well until after the party. But Mrs. F. J. Adams was one of my favorite people. Her husband was our family doctor, and she was the jolliest person I knew. Thus she was a natural for the character of Puck, the mischief-loving sprite also known in English mythology as "the mad and merry Robin Goodfellow."

There were other members, but I mention those I remember as being on the planning committee which journeyed up to Riverdale well in advance of the big day. Two other members I knew well. One was Mrs. Nancy Russell or "Mamie" who naturally gravitated where she could absorb social know-how. I don't seem to remember her on the planning committee. But Mrs. Charles Heisey was. She didn't have the leisure of the others, for she was a busy housewife, a fact which never slowed her pursuit of "culture."

THIS, THEN, WAS THE PLANNING committee that sat down around our dining room table to think up refreshments and cast the play. Mother studied over a little red leather copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a pencil and sheet of paper before her.

Up spoke Mrs. Heisey. She had already cast herself as Hermia and had her lines all learned. She just *had* to have that part, she said. Didn't Hermia have two lovers? How exciting for an over-worked housewife! She just couldn't wait to demonstrate that she knew her part, learned as she scrubbed her kitchen floor. Long before, she had written her lines on large sheets of paper for memorizing. These she pinned to her sleeves after tucking up her long skirts.





**MRS. H. H. NELSON**



**MRS. JOHN MORONY**

As the committee looked on, the budding *Hermia* got down on her knees and went at it, scrub brush keeping pace with her voice as it arose quoting Shakespeare: "Never so weary, never so in woe. Bedabbled with dew and torn by briars, I can no further crawl, no further go. My legs can keep no pace with my desires."

The committee applauded Mrs. Heisey as she got to her feet.

I know it was only her delightful demonstration and mother's frequent re-telling that has kept this memory alive for me. There are many gaps in my recollections and of course I just didn't understand Shakespeare at all except that he seemed sort of fey, like Hans Christian Andersen. A recent re-reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* clarified who said what, and why the lines I remembered fitted in so delightfully with those long-ago burlesque happenings.

I remember well hanging over the back of Mother's chair as she busily planned. "Now, Beth," she remonstrated, "you just run along. We are busy."

I didn't. I crept under the table. There, among the long ruffled skirts, I listened as animation mounted. After the play was cast, Mama started hunting for refreshment ideas. She insisted they must have some connection with the play.

"Now here is one fairy named Peaseblossom and another one Mustardseed. How about split pea soup and sandwiches of meat and mustard?"

Nuts and honey, too, because someone pointed out that Mary Morony as *Titania*, Queen of the Fairies, says to her lover, Bottom the Ass: "I would be loathe to leave you overblown with a honey bag, Signior. Say Sweet Love, what thou desirest to eat. I have a venturesome fairy who will fetch thee sweet new nuts."

But Mary Morony was confused and quite serious: "Now this Bottom that I make love to hasn't yet been cast. Who is going to be Bottom?"

Mrs. Adams, the tease, murmured, "Well, look here, Mary, Bottom says of himself, 'I must to the barbers go for methinks I am marvelous hairy about the face and I am such a tender Ass if my hair do tickle me I must scratch!'"

But Mary was getting stubborn. "I want to know who is going to be Bottom. Answer me."

Silence.

"Does anyone have the faintest idea who will be Bottom?" she persisted.

Nobody had a suggestion, so I popped out from under the table.

"Sam is," I cried.

Mama looked startled, but almost at once she comprehended.

"Why, of course. How perfect. I was wondering how we'd ever get up an Ass and here is old Sam, a ready-made Bottom."

Even when it was explained to Mary, however, that Sam was Papa's breeding jack who indeed had a hairy face and a loud bray, it took a lot of talking to get her to agree to make love to him. Only "Art for Art's Sake" turned the trick. I heard that old saying a lot in those days. Peace was restored when Mrs. Adams quoted her lines as Puck: "For she his hairy temples then had rounded with coronet of fresh and fragrant flowers."

"You see, Mary," Mrs. Adams consoled, "all you have to do is put a wreath around Sam's neck."

I volunteered to make the wreath and Mother gaily reminded everyone, "It is the merry month of May, girls, and there will be lots of flowers. We'll decorate a hay wagon with them and meet you all at the train on the 15th."

Kleinschmidt Bend, a luxuriant green hay meadow near our ranch, was selected for the scene. It was decided that everyone would wear their laciest muslins because it would be hard to costume such a play.

Mama took Mary out to the barn to look at Sam and assured her he was not only quite a pet, but a fine registered jack that Papa had bought in Kansas City to breed mules from his Percheron mares.

"Henry says George Washington was the first to import registered jacks to America," Mother volunteered.

That did it and the ladies had to hurry to catch the afternoon local—the Stub—back to Great Falls.

FROM THEN ON I DREAMED ABOUT that party. How in the world was Mama going to put over such a crazy one? Catherine, our family cook, was glad to concoct the refreshments, even to adding many tidbits after glancing through the pages of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Look here, Mrs. Nelson," she said, "it says 'two lovely berries molded on one stem.' How about all those jars of maraschino cherries you

ordered? Let's put a couple on each of the tooth-picks."

In spite of all this enthusiasm, however, Mama had trouble almost immediately with Fred Nickolsen, our ranch foreman, about the hay wagon. He said everything that had wheels was in use hauling things to the lambing pens. Furthermore, who would drive the team? It was just that time of year when a sheep ranch was shorthanded.

"If H. H. were just here!" Fred's blue Danish eyes were bright with disgust. But he couldn't talk back to the boss' wife.

On and on she went: "We will need the wagon up by the house the day before for decorating. And, Fred, perhaps a man to help us pick up clematis and wild roses for decorations."

"No, Mrs. Nelson, NO. No men can I spare."

Fred walked away mumbling in his beard about "Boston rubbish."

"Ya, Merry Month of May, she says, with us getting the biggest lamb drop ever, May ain't merry for me. And Kleinschmidt Bend? Now why that low place with the river flooding back up in every slough?"

But early on Wednesday, the 14th, Fred had a big hay wagon in front of the house. There were no men, however, so Mama used Catherine and me. We two "stout yeomen," as she called us, dove into the brush along the river. There was a lot there besides the long flowering ropes of clematis we dragged out to the wagon. I remember the warm fragrances of the Spring day. The roses were as sweet as their thorns were sharp and the mint we trampled in river mud gave up its fresh wet smell until the skunk came by.

"No matter, hurry, hurry," chided Mama, busily festooning the panels on the wagon sides. In a pause she looked at her scratched and breathless helpers. This gave her another idea.

"The Shakespeare Club can't climb aboard this thing in their long skirts. Catherine, you go now and get a ladder. Also, you must talk to Fred. He never hears me, but *he*, not you, must drive this wagon tomorrow."

Catherine was glad to go out to the barn. We never knew how she did it, but she said later she just put it on the line to Fred: "Do you want the wives of Great Falls' leading citizens to drown fording those sloughs for want of a good driver?"



ON THE GREAT DAY, WHEN THE STUB let loose its shrill whistle at the Riverdale siding, all was in readiness. Interested spectators hung out of the car windows to watch the Great Falls "swells" climb down the steep car steps to the cindered right-of-way and then collect themselves for that other climb up the ladder. Much applause broke forth when the transfer was safely completed and the flowery chariot lurched off.

But at once trouble became evident. Sam didn't want to go. He resented being tied to the back of the wagon and said so, with braced forefeet and a loud bray. Since I was riding my pony, Grover, I came up behind and let Sam have my quirt on his rear. Fred whipped up his team and finally we got Sam moving.

It was rough going over the prairie in the dead axel wagon. But finally Fred got his load of ladies down to the hay meadow where a band of ewes was lambing. Mrs. Adams decided things were under control enough to start the show. She got to her feet and started to recite: "How *now*, Spirit? Whither wander thou? Over hill over dale, through bush through briar, over park over dale, through flood through fire, I do wander everywhere. Our Queen and all her elves come here tonight. Take heed the Queen come not within the King's sight. For she perforce holds that loved boy. Crowns him with flowers and makes him all her joy."

Mary Morony rose to the occasion, but before she spoke her lines, a lurch sent her sprawling. The wagon had come to an abrupt stop at the edge of the slough, bankful of flood water. Now it was Fred's turn.

He stared at Mama, but spoke sternly to the giggly ladies: "You actresses get ready now to put on a swimming show, because I don't know how deep this slough is. Got over this morning, but the river is rising fast. You asked for it. Remember that."

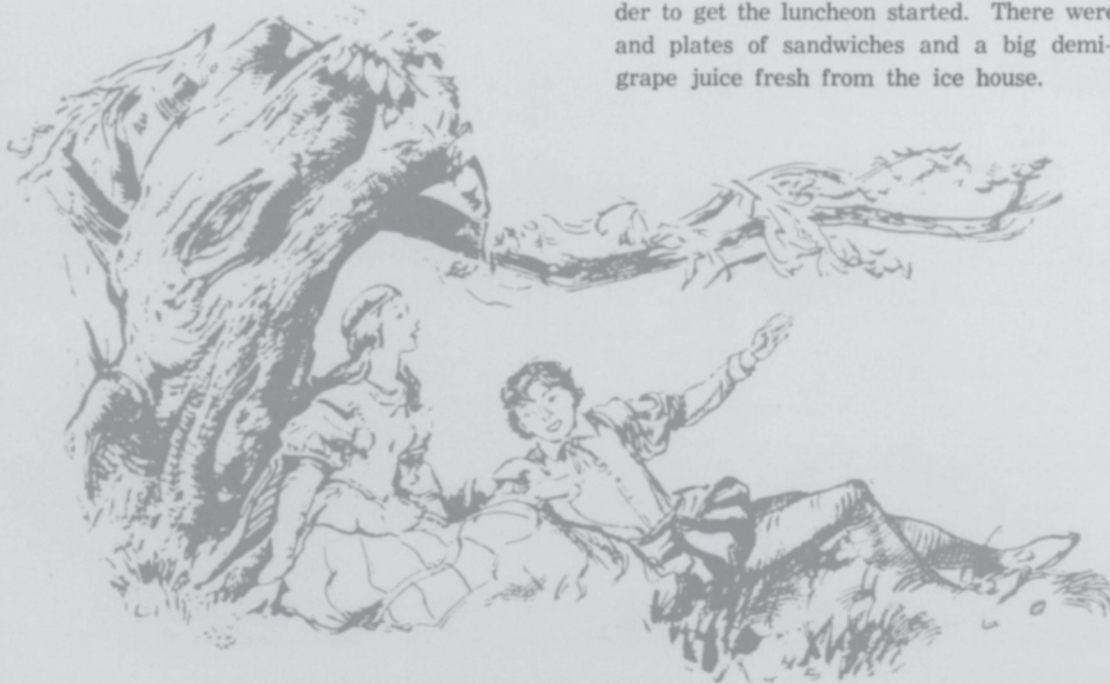
He yelled and applied the whip. The team gave a jump and a splash, but they kept their feet and pulled hard against the pull of the water. The chariot took on water and lost flowers, but made the other bank. Everybody was subdued — even Sam, who only groaned and sneezed as water washed over his head.

Was it the wind that had come up, or the wetting? Everybody was cold. Fred hastened across the meadow where the ewes, after one look at our chariot, took off wildly with their lambs to the nearest brush. Even their herders were so spell-bound they forgot to send the dogs after the fleeing sheep.

On a higher spot was the little tent that Catherine had persuaded Fred to set up as a "pavilion, where the ladies can eat their refreshments."

What a welcome sight!

"See, under the greenwood tree just as it should be," cried Mama as she scrambled down the ladder to get the luncheon started. There were plates and plates of sandwiches and a big demi-john of grape juice fresh from the ice house.



Mama bustled busily about giving orders. "You girls who are 'audience' can help me. The Merry Masquers will be busy about the stage." Nancy Russell, the only audience so far, now got busy. As for Fred, after putting nosebags on the team, he went away to smoke a peaceful pipe.

A loud bray announced that everyone had forgotten Sam. Mary grabbed up the flower wreath and went looking for him, but Sam was heading for the same spot as Grover and I. Probably it had been the home of an optimistic homesteader long ago, a little log cabin under the big cottonwood. But I knew this hideaway place well. It was just my size, for one thing. Its low sod roof was half gone and the door flapped at a crazy angle. Mushrooms grew in its dark corners and weeds flowered

on its roof. I believe Sam knew it was going to rain and was heading for shelter. Mary was trailing after with the wreath.

"Beth," she called, "help me catch him."

Back at the tent, Mrs. Adams, having eaten, cried, "On with the show!"

Waving her arms at the hay field, she took up Shakespeare's lines and announced, "Here's a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal."

The cast took up their places and Mrs. Adams, assuming the role of Puck, went on: "This green plot shall be our stage. This hawthorn brake our tiring house and we will now do it in action. What sayest thou, bully Bottom?"

She peered around for Bottom, but only for a moment. That was the moment when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* became *Tempest*.

# **GREAT FALLS DAILY TRIBUNE**

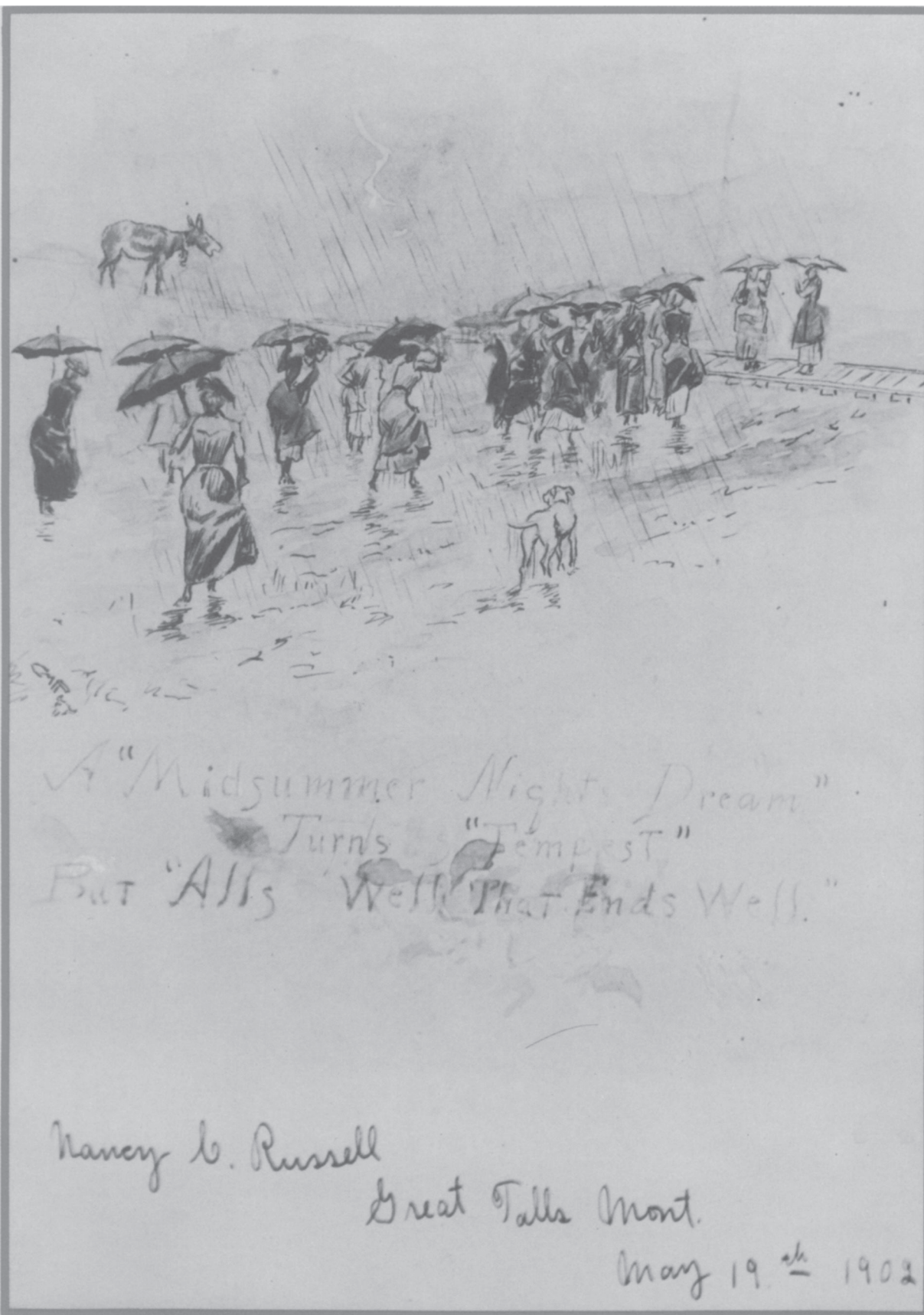
May 18, 1902

Those who went up from Great Falls to attend the "Midsummer Night's Dream" festival, given at Riverdale Thursday by Mrs. H. H. Nelson, were Mrs. F. J. Adams, Mrs. W. D. Dickinson, Mrs. Theo. Gibson, Miss Burns, Mrs. J. T. Morrow, Mrs. Wm. A. Webster, Mrs. Chas. M. Webster, Mrs. E. P. R. Gordon, Mrs. Chas. E. Heisey, Mrs. John G. Morony, Mrs. Gowan Ferguson, Miss Veazey, Mrs. Frank P. Atkinson, Miss Flynn of Helena and Mrs. Chas. M. Russell.

The ladies were met at Riverdale in the morning by Mrs. Nelson and Miss Hood, with a large hayrack, gayly trimmed in wild currant blossoms. This expansive vehicle was mounted by means of a step-ladder, and after settling themselves cosily in the hay, the ladies were driven to a picturesque little wooded nook of the Nelson farm. Here, "under the greenwood tree," the party halted and were treated to a delightful portion of the "Midsummer Night's Dream," read by Mrs. F. J. Adams. Then the drive was resumed to the river's bank, where, among the trees, was pitched a small tent, containing all the preparations for a delicious picnic lunch. Until this time the program had gone smoothly and delightfully, and everyone was enjoying a perfect spring day in the woods, when suddenly the rain began to fall. A heavy tarpaulin was stretched over the wagon and the refreshments were served there, instead of under the trees. The menu was made up of those foods only which are mentioned in the "Midsummer Night's Dream," and consisted of pea soup, cold tongue, nut sandwiches, honey sandwiches, corn mayonnaise, squash pie, punch, grape ice, fairy cake and coffee. Despite the fact that the water sprites quite outdid the woodland fairies in the entertainment of these Shakespeare devotees, the entire day was enjoyed immensely by all and everyone was generous in praises of the hostess who had planned so artistic an affair.







SUCH A CRACK OF THUNDER AS IS SELDOM heard, even in May, split the air. Glaring lightning flashed across the sky. Even before the startled actresses could run for the tent, another blazing bolt scared Shakespeare out of all of them. Then the suddenly black sky let down its rain in a blinding deluge.

All these details were related many times, for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a favorite with the Shakespeare Club. Even as late as May 31, 1925, the Great Falls *Tribune* carried a story including names of charter members then present and says, "Fairy dance from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* done by Betty Willcomb."

But I daresay never again in the Shakespeare Club's 40-year history was there such a rendition of that play as was done in 1902 at Riverdale.

Although Mamie Russell wasn't in the cast, her cue came with the downpour. She and Fred piled the drenched ladies, none too gently, on to the hay wagon and tied the tent, which had blown down, across the top of them, flowers and all. In retrospect, I believe she and Fred must have been of one mind about "Boston rubbish," for everyone agreed their team work was perfect, even when Mary Morony's screams came from the little cabin. Mother said Fred cried, "Hold the herd, Mrs. Russell, while I round up those mavericks."

The Mavericks—Sam, Mary, Grover and I—ducked into the cabin when the downpour came. That cabin had many times been adequate for Grover and me. But Mary and Sam were something else again, especially because the load of water was already causing the thin sod roof to sink further. We might have got by if Mary had only kept her 6 feet of height doubled up as she had when she crept through the door. But no, when she got to the lowest corner she stood up! Looking at her, I saw a headless figure. Her head had gone through the thin soggy sod roof. It was *outside*!

That's when she started screaming. I rushed outside to have a look. What I saw I'll never forget. Never a more tragic masque did Shakespeare create than Mary Morony's terrified face festooned with drooping weeds and dripping black mud. She could hardly see and couldn't even get her arms through the hole to wipe away the mess. But she could scream. She even scared Sam, but he couldn't get out either, because Grover was tied in the doorway.

To the rescue ran good old Foreman Fred. Just how he got us mavericks back to the herd I don't remember. I couldn't take my eyes off Mary, whom I'd always remembered as "that beautiful statuesque blond."

There was no let up in the tempest, but now we were herded by Fred and Mamie. Between them they got us all back to the ranch.

CATHERINE HAD LOTS OF HOT TEA READY, but there was no time to dry out, for the train back to Great Falls was soon due and everybody wanted to get home. So, Mother got out all our umbrellas and Fred drove the ladies to the railroad crossing.

I'm sure Sam didn't go along on this trip, but he appeared anyway, in the water color we received from Charlie Russell a little while later. The water color, in addition to the caption, also carried Nancy's name in big writing and C. M. Russell's buffalo skull done modestly among some May flowers.

The whole story was in the picture. But one thing more came later. To me Charlie gave a little plaster Puck, in Robin Goodfellow dress, perched gaily on a little leaf. This tiny sculptured elf is the essence of that May day. Looking at him now, after so many years, is to be young again.

