

His Real World

By NEWTON A. FUESSLE

WHEN Crumpton swung into the saddle and urged his sorrel cow-pony into the winding trail that meandered across fifty miles of sun-baked alkali desert to Queens, every cow-puncher on Clay Butte ranch knew that something far off somewhere in God's country had happened. They knew from the way he used his rattlesnake quirt, from the way he dug his spurs into the flanks of his mount, from the way the boss swore at the Chinaman who was washing dishes in the mess shanty.

The best cow-puncher in all the foot-hill country was going away, perhaps never to return—that was certain. He gave them a "So long, fellows!" after he had gripped the hand of the boss. Crumpton was a man of few words. These meant a great deal.

The rider, swinging easily with the stride of the pony, seemed at home, with the leather fringe of his Mexican trousers, the sombrero trimmed with green, the red of a knotted handkerchief fringing the brown of his neck. He was spare and sinewy, hard as a nail, wild of heart; drinking and gambling just as he rode—long and hard. His eye was afire with the look of the wilderness, and in it no fear of anything that lived. In the far foot-hills they called him handsome.

As he rode, the horseman watched the dance of the sun devils that hemmed him in, jiggling their tantalizing circles around the loping horse, and full of savage menace. The rays of the sun stung horse and rider like dirks; and occasionally he would bare his head to them. And then a great joy would flood his heart, a joy mingling with pain, for he was going away from the foot-hills, away from the pony that had been his companion for years (on the plains the best friends are not necessarily human), away from the wild and free and lonely existence at Clay Butte ranch.

"You, Salem," he said, talking to the animal "I reckon this'll be our last ride together—for a spell," he added a little wistfully. "It don't seem right square for me to pike out o' here. Kind of low down, I reckon, for me to duck and leave you here."

The pony whinnied, and the rider, bending forward, put his hand on the hot neck, and patted the animal affectionately. Often Crumpton would take a sheet of yellow paper from the pocket of his shirt. Then he would unfold it and laboriously read the scrawl of Jamie Webb at Queens.

"Say, bronc'," he commented, gazing reflectively over the ears of the pony and out upon the dusty trail that meandered away to civilization and to the country called "God's" by the cow-punchers—"bronc', you old cayuse buster, I got a letter day before yesterday. What do you think o' that, Salem?—me, Charlie Crumpton, got a letter! That's why we're hikin' for Queens," he continued, drawing out a lazy oath. "Yep, we got to make Queens tonight; so you better step lively. Jamie's got a job for me, Salem. Wants me to help him make things interestin' for the Guffey City stage-coach line. They carry too much dough, them tenderfeet do. It's goin' to be our duty to see to it that they loosen up a little. And then when the jig is up, it's us to Canady, an' then to Alaska. That's a long ways off, Alaska is. Was gettin' kind of tired of it up there to the ranch. What I need is something excitin'—the whizz of lead," he concluded with a laugh.

The pony tossed its head and whinnied in reply. A hundred yards to the right the lean form of a coyote loped up from a little valley, and the rider, watching its wolf-like swing, drew a revolver from its holster. A brown lid closed slowly over the gray of an eye. There was the glint of the sun on the polished barrel, and a sharp report. Immediately, the greyhound form wrenched itself from the ground, and then fell limp and dead. The cow-boy gave a whoop, loud and unearthly in its intonation, and the buzzard wheeled in its flight to listen, while sinister echoes skirted the hills. The pony understood and whinnied.

"Fixed him, didn't I, Salem?" commented the rider. Then he broke into the rollicking measure of a drinking song. Presently he fell into reflection again, and the pony settled once more into its patient stride, tossing its head now and again at the continued silence of the master.

The thoughts of the horseman sped ahead, past the deserted shacks where four school-teachers from Illinois had lived eight months before they could prove up and secure the titles to their claims, past the little gully beside whose sparkling stream, cold with mountain freshness, roving parties of Indians chose to pitch camp, past the shanty where a crazy settler lived on canned tomatoes and hardtack, and then to Queens and the Transit House, where a week of unbroken ease awaited him, with black cigars and faultless rye and delightful indolence.

And now his fancy, spanning the lapse of years, carried him back. He saw himself a young fellow, fleeing the justice that hounded behind, fleeing remorse, dominated with a frenzy to get away—



"Hello! Ain't You Lost Your Bearings?"

away from home, from civilization, from the world, from his crime. He had found Queens, and stumbled upon Clay Butte ranch. He had put off all that belonged to him, even his name, and become one of the daring, drunken, reckless riders who cared little who he was or whence he came. There he had spent ten years, with the blue of the heavens above, with the scorching sands of the foot-hills beneath, talking to his pony for company for weeks and weeks, following the monstrous herds with eagerness. Of late a restlessness had come over him, a desire to get back to the world, to the men of his kind, to the combat of the strong. It was the blood of the restless that leaped in Crumpton's veins, and the thought that he was here, far away from the great world, with his alien heart fitting ill into the mosaic of the cow-puncher community, was almost more than he could bear. And here was Jamie's note, suggestive of wild adventure and promising the danger that he craved.

Presently the driver gave a short whistle, interrupting himself in his reflections; his lips shaped themselves for an oath. He was crossing the ridge of a long hill, and far below, where the trail curved past the little stream, stood an odd figure, in strange contrast with the unbroken dullness of the foot-hills. It was the figure of a little girl in a figured suit, wearing a diminutive leghorn hat. Crumpton saw from afar that the eyes which were fastened upon him were full of wonder.

"Come here, you Salem! Don't make a fool o' yourself!" said the rider, for the pony shied as they approached.

The child raised a pair of half-frightened, wondering eyes, as the cow-boy, drawing rein, gazed down with droll and puzzled look.

"Hello!" he said in a tone of half humor, mingled with a bashful tenderness that sounded strange to him and the pony. "Ain't you lost your bearings a trifle? Shut up there, bronc', and stand still! You'll get your drink in a minute." Then he went on reflectively, "I reckon the kid's lost." Then, "Where was you goin'?"

"I want Elsie," the child returned in small and tearful voice. And then, either at the sound of her own voice or of the name, her eyes blurred, and two big tears rolled down, tracing streaks in the lines of dirt on her face.

"There now," Crumpton went on awkwardly, "never you mind, youngster. I reckon Elsie's up to Queens, an' that's exactly the place we're hittin' for. Don't cry, midget."

Crumpton, dismounting and taking the child's hand, led the pony to the water, muttering to himself: "It's them dirty Indians from the Rosebud. They'd steal anything. Never heard of 'em stealin' a kid, though. Get a move on there, Salem! We got to mosey out o' this before they get wise."

The cow-boy mounted his pony, clumsily clutching the child to him. "Don't be scared, midget," he said softly, and the big blue eyes stared in wonder. "I hain't much of a hand at this kind of busi-

ness, but we'll get to Queens somehow."

The rider, with his strange burden, sat clumsily in his saddle, nor did he urge the pony much. The pace, in consequence, was slow, and by noon less than half the distance had been covered. At midday, without stirring from the saddle, he ate the food he had brought in his pocket, and drank the luke-warm spring water he carried with him, awkwardly feeding the child and letting her drink from the flask. Mile after mile the child kept her big blue eyes fastened in searching inquiry on the brown face of the rider. Sometimes Crumpton ventured a question, and then he would relapse into silence. To his repeated inquiries the child answered nothing save, "I want Elsie."

An hour passed—two, three. The child was growing heavy. A feeling of numbness gripped the right arm and right side of the rider. At length he shifted the burden to the left. His cow-boy senses felt a strange thrill as he held the child. It was all new to him—the delicate texture of the dress, the yielding softness of the body, the wistfulness of the mouth, the fearless look of trust in the large blue eyes which never left his face. Sometimes the cow-pony would neigh in jealous protest, for it detected something strange in its master's tone.

"We'll be there pretty soon now, midget," ventured the horseman now and again. "I guess Elsie'll be waitin' kird of anxious for you, eh?"

The child's eyes brightened at the mention of the name, and a little smile stole to the corners of her mouth.

By this time the sun was low in the west. Out of the distance came sinister shadows, bringing coolness into the sweltering hollows and dominating the valleys that separated.

"It's gettin' late," muttered the cow-boy reflectively. "Can you speed 'er up a little, Salem? Queens is a good seven miles off yet, an' we got to hurry."

They were crossing the depression of a little valley. Looking up, Crumpton's gaze met a second figure, also strange, standing in the trail on the top of the hill. Surprise brought an oath to his lips, but he cut it short, for the blue eyes were looking him through.

"Maybe that's Elsie," he observed meditatively, as he regarded the figure. The child, starting at the name, looked up, and immediately the figure at the top of the hill, now less than a stone's throw away, started forward. The girl wore a gray riding skirt and a red cap, and as the child threw herself with a cry into her arms, the cow-boy, feigning unconcern, looked away, bewildered and frightened.

"Where did you find her?" the girl demanded. "How good of you to bring her along! Really, I don't know what I could have done all alone. Elaine, that's my pony, ran away this noon when I was watering her at the creek, and I had to start back. I've walked all the afternoon. Father was away, and, besides, I knew I could get her back. It must have been the old Indian woman who was at Queens the other day; she seemed to take a fancy to Suey—that's what we call her for short—Susan's her real name. My, how I'm rattling on!—and without a knock-down—that's what they call it out here," she added in apology with a laugh. It was a merry, girlish, tinkling laugh, such as horse and rider seldom heard in the foot-hill country. "My name is Graves," she concluded, raising a pair of dark eyes to his.

He looked into them for a moment, and then shifted uneasily in his saddle, his eye following a buzzard. "Elsie Graves, ain't it?" he commented gravely.

The girl looked up surprised. "Oh, of course, Suey told you, didn't she? What's yours?"

"Crumpton—Charlie Crumpton."

"Oh," the girl returned. She had half expected him to say "The Virginian," so she told herself afterward.

"An' you hoofed from the creek?" the cow-boy asked after a pause. He was as shy as a captured coyote in the strange presence of the girl.

"Yes," she laughed, "I 'hoofed' it." The laugh heightened the cow-boy's uneasiness. "Back there a way," she continued, "I turned my ankle. It's getting worse. I was terribly provoked with Elaine for running away. I knew I'd have to walk back. But I felt sure that I could get to Queens for I have always walked a good deal. But it frightened me when I turned my ankle. I'm glad you came," she said frankly.

"Maybe we'd better be startin'," said Crumpton uneasily. "Whoa, boy!" he said, swinging to the ground. "You two can ride, an' I'll set the pace." He helped the girl into the saddle, and then handed up the child. "There," he said, "I guess you won't have any trouble ridin' Salem. You be good now, bronc!" he said to the pony.

"I'm very sorry," said the girl, "to put you to all