

El Caballero

Northwest Mounted Police, Moose Pound:
Arrest Low-Lived Joe and Alabama Kid with bunch of stolen bar
circle horses reported noon at Lane's; also look out for a deserter.
L. W. HERCHMER.

At Moose Pound station the telegraph operator received the message just before dawn, then, taking his lantern and the slip of paper, strolled out across the moonlit road to a log house opposite. When he had banged the door sufficiently a sleepy voice growled from the darkness within, and a youth in gray underclothes came out to see what was the matter.

"A wire for you, corporal," said the operator and held up his lantern, while Corporal Irvine tried to read the message, blinked, rubbed his eyes and grumbled over it.

"At Lane's, eh?" he yawned at last. "Forty-five confounded, jumped up mile to the southward. Tell Larry Herchmer he can go to blazes. I mean—that is, wire:

"The Commissioner, N. W. M. P., Regina: Instructions received. IRVINE."

"That's all right. Say, corporal"—the operator looked up at the table of the house, whence a constable's resounding snores awakened echoes—"how do you rouse Mr. La Mancha without getting murdered?"

"A whisper does it." Corporal Dandy Irvine stretched himself and laughed. "Just mention a pretty girl in the Blackguard's ear. Good night."

"So long, corporal."

II.

Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name
In earth and sky and sea!

The trooper had reined his horse to a walk as he hurried the great, ringing triumph song to heaven, and Corporal Dandy Irvine came abreast, leaning over in the saddle to pluck a spray of the roses.

"I never thought, Blackguard," he said, "that you could sing like that. But that hymn was English, and you're a Spaniard."

"On my father's side Espanol, but my mother was English. So I'm a mongrel and a Tommy. See?"

He swung around, laying his hand upon the scarlet serge with a certain grave smile. "A Tommy, yes?"

"Woof!" said Dandy at the very idea of dignity as applied to his joyous young ruffian.

"You grin at me?" The Blackguard faced him wrathfully. "I tell you I'm nice inside—me!" He tossed over a cigarette. "Compose your face with this!"

Then he lifted his horse to a lope and rolled on across the Rose plains, singing for joy of life.

Last December Corporal Irvine had been out on patrol, and with him the Blackguard, the Blackguard's young brother, the Pup, and certain others. Poor Pup! Nobody thought of warning the little recruit to have his moccasins ready in case the weather changed. When a sopping thaw gave place to a sudden blizzard, when wet boots hardened into ice hard as steel, the Pup made no complaint, but rode on dead to the knees. The Blackguard, numb and half delirious, left his brother to die in the drifts where he fell, but Dandy saved the lad.

Noon passed and the hot sun waned upon their journey while still the limitless plains reached away to the south unbroken, but toward evening a ridge of hills lifted above the horizon.

"Say, Blackguard"—the corporal shaded his eyes with one hand, staring intently at the hills—"when you and the Pup were yonder at Lane's last summer wasn't there some talk about the boy getting snarled up with Lane's girl?"

"Chris Lane nearly got the Pup, and she sure loves him."

"You choked him off?"

"With a rope—yes."

"Lane knew?"

"Yes; he threatened the Pup with an action for breach of promise. I was impulsive too."

"So that's why Lane went to the hospital."

La Mancha blushed. "Lane does not like me now."

"He lodged no complaints, though?"

"He was ailing, you see. And if he howled it might have attracted attention to his manners and customs, such as bigamy and stealing little horses and shooting entire strangers to get their money."

"We have no proof of that."

"No. And the brute tries to get our fellows into trouble."

"Look!" The corporal pointed at a dot below the hills.

On that the Blackguard reined, shading his eyes with one hand. "Woman!" he said.

"Lane's daughter, I guess?"

"Yes; Chris riding straddle on that roan plug of hers."

"Why, what can she want?"

"Cause poor Chris is in with the robbers, gets presents from them. I think she'll try to head us off or keep us back while Joe and the Alabama Kid get away with the bar circle horses. Such is woman," he sighed, "and so we'd better roll our tails!"

III.

Miss Chris Lane came tearing onward, riding a straddle bareback, her sunbonnet blown off, black hair and cotton frock a-stream on the wind, while bold eyes flashed from the tawny pallor of her half Indian face.

"All, soldiers!" she cried in the Cree language.

"Adios, señorita!" answered the Blackguard as he and Dandy flashed on, one either side. At that the lady swore in colloquial English, wheeling to give chase.

"You want them horse thieves!" she yelled. "They're not at the ranch. I'll show you where they're cached."

"For shame, Chris," the Blackguard chuckled, letting her draw abreast. "Stand by your tribe. Don't give it away!"

"Kill 'em!" she gasped. "Shoot both of 'em! I hates 'em!"

"They're acting ugly. Only let me show you. Come to the left."

The horses were thundering down a slope which led to a muddy flat whitened with alkali against the foot of the hills.

"You, Mr. Blackguard," sobbed the girl, "you'll wish for the rest of your life you'd come with me. Don't go to the ranch! There'll be murder. Papa says he'll do for you."

The Blackguard took not the slightest notice, but as the horses broke gait in the heavy mud both he and Dandy lay over in their saddles to scar the trail.

"For your brother's sake—for the Pup's sake—listen!" the girl wailed, crying.

Dandy pulled up his horse and dismounted. "Here," he cried, "Blackguard, what d'ye make of this?"

The corporals were kneeling beside a man's track when La Mancha joined him, and the girl wheeled round to watch while they read the signs. "Since the last dew," the corporal muttered, "don't you see? Wore long boots—police boots—bearing heavy on the right from bundle on left shoulder, dog tired, and here—he roped on to the next track—right foot and with the toes gone—by frostbite." He looked up at La Mancha's face. "You understand?" he said.

"That confounded Pup!" said the Blackguard wrathfully. "From Regina," he went on; "two long days' march with that open wound on his foot—heading for Lane's. Bah! The girl's not worth it!"

"Blackguard, we're within a mile of the United States boundary. The Pup has deserted. Remember the commissioner's telegram."

"Not my brother"—the Blackguard's eyes flashed—"not a La Mancha. No! You lie!"

"Thanks; don't mention it," Dandy laughed. "But you know—he turned grave again—if the lad's at Lane's ranch I've got to arrest him for desertion."

"Yes, worse luck, or Shifty Lane reports you for neglect of duty."

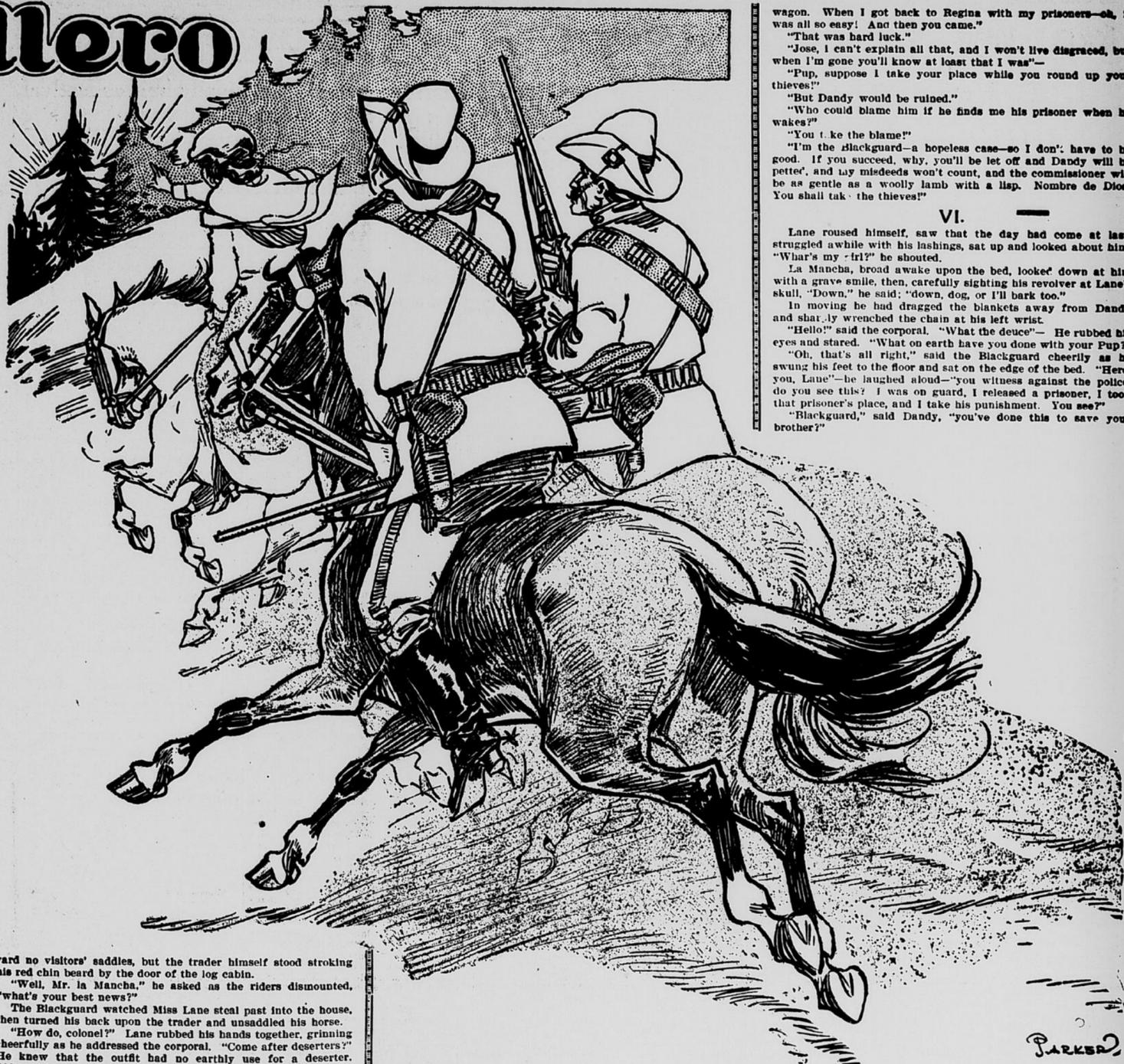
"And you know what it means?"

"Nine months' imprisonment. I'd rather see Pup dead!"

"Didn't I tell you?" the girl was wailing to them. "Didn't I tell you? You'll have to arrest your brother!"

IV.

In Lane's corrals and pasture there were no horses, in his



yard no visitors' saddles, but the trader himself stood stroking his red chin beard by the door of the log cabin.

"Well, Mr. La Mancha," he asked as the riders dismounted, "what's your best news?"

The Blackguard watched Miss Lane steal past into the house, then turned his back upon the trader and unsaddled his horse.

"How do, colonel?" Lane rubbed his hands together, grinning cheerfully as he addressed the corporal. "Come after deserters?"

He knew that the outfit had no earthly use for a deserter.

"Cause I got one for you," he added. "Came in yesterday."

"You're a special constable?" asked Dandy sarcastically.

"Oh, that's all right, general; always glad to oblige the police. I kept him locked up until I saw you come along. It's kinder handy for Mr. La Mancha here, prisoner being his brother."

The Blackguard swung around and spat on the trader's dog.

The trader cursed volubly, but the Blackguard took no note of him whatever. "Senior, I beg your pardon." Taking off his sombrero, he made a sweeping salute to the dog. "I mistook you for Shifty Lane and owe you a thousand apologies."

Lane shook with rage, turning malignant eyes upon La Mancha's brother, who had come to the doorway.

"Hello, you, Pup," said the Blackguard.

"What are you doing here?" asked the corporal. "Come, lad, your pass?"

"I have no pass." He was looking the corporal frankly in the eyes, a wan smile twisting his lips.

"You young fool, explain!"

"A La Mancha," said the Blackguard haughtily, "does not explain."

And the corporal sighed. "All right. You are a prisoner."

The Pup winced, bowed slightly, then turned away because there were tears in his eyes.

"Come, Blackguard"—the corporal walked off. "We'll see to the horses. Go and lie down, Pup," he added; "rest your foot while you can."

"Here, you!"—the trader broke forward, grabbing the Blackguard's arm—"you're going to wipe my dog!"

"Eh?" The back of La Mancha's hand sent Lane reeling against the house. "Who barked?"

"I, and I can bite, too!" yelled the trader. Dandy leaped at him only just in time, sent a revolver flying above the roof, then drew off, gasping for breath, his hand to his hip as he waited.

Lane nursed his bruised wrist, whistling a shrill call to the hills. "Yes, whistle," said Dandy, presenting his own revolver at the man's lips. "Whistle! Call your friends! I want them."

"La Mancha," said the corporal, "handcuffs, quick!"

The Blackguard locked the irons on Lane's wrists.

"Take the prisoner to the cellar," said Dandy, chucking, "then search the house for arms and contraband. I'll see to the horses."

The Blackguard whispered a suggestion, but Dandy shook his head. "No," he answered, "Lane's partners are warned. They're laying for us, I guess, and we'd have no chance in the dark. Watch that girl, though."

V.

The moonlight below the window spread like a pool of silver at La Mancha's feet, then crept along the steel of the carbine which lay upon his knees. He watched the crumbling embers in the hearth until the ruby glow turned gray and the log walls were lost in fathomless depths of night. Somewhere in the darkness lay the trader, bound hand and foot, muttering uneasy dream talk. The half breed girl crouched yonder by the hearth, with a corner of her blanket lifted while she stared—he could feel her eyes—waiting until he slept that she might release her father.

Behind on the bed lay Corporal Irvine and the Pup, shackled wrist to wrist, because the youngster had refused his parole.

The moonlight stole along the carbine, silencing the foresight, the bands, the backsight, until La Mancha's hand shone like white marble where it gripped the breech. His head drooped.

The girl was creeping to her father's side when out of the breathless shadows the Pup stirred with a sudden jangling of the chain which bound him.

"Jose," he called; "Jose!" With his free hand he reached out, grasping his brother's arm. "Jose!"

"Eh? What's up—all ri?"

"Jose!"

"Hello, Pup. Can't you sleep?"

The girl crept back to her corner.

The girl led by a winding trail.

"My foot is hurting," said the lad in Spanish, "a little, and I want to speak about those horse thieves."

"Joe and the Alabama Kid? Go on, Pup."

"Alabama had been here for weeks making love to Chris, and she is terrified. She wrote to me."

"And why to you?"

"She is my wife."

"Humph!"

"Lane doesn't know. He's forcing Chris to marry Alabama, and her letter was so pitiful! I came."

"Tramped with an open wound on your foot. It serves you right."

"I have not complained, but"—the Pup's small hand had grasped the Blackguard's fist. "They think I've deserted, and I'd rather be dead than put to shame like that."

"You little o—!; you did desert."

"I only meant—Jose, I can't bear the shame, the trial, the imprisonment—what have I done with my honor? Think of my mother and father looking down on us now!"

"They're with the saints, much too busy to worry about a Pup."

"Jose, lead me to your gun."

"To blow your silly head off? No, I won't."

"Let me escape—to die in the open under the holy sky, as our fathers did."

"You sentimental ass! Fine high down honor to run away and leave the blame to Dandy!"

"I never thought of that."

"You never thought of Corporal Irvine tried on the oath of two civilian witnesses for letting a prisoner run! He'd get reduced to the ranks and a year's hard labor."

"Oh, help me somehow. I can't bear it, Jose."

"Help you to kill yourself? A live Pup's better than a dead fool any day."

"Help me to get back my honor."

"You see, Pup"—the Blackguard threw his arm about the lad—"it's so awkward about this Lane beast. Dandy and I stung him until he fought us, then trussed him like a hen there on the floor. We've searched the man, his shirt and his socks, his house and his barn, teeth and trousers pockets, but the trouble is there's not a shred of evidence."

"But I s—w him try to shoot you?"

"And his lawyer would prove you didn't see any such thing. No; he hates police as a squirrel hates a gun. He's got a fearful damaging case against the outfit, and when we get back to headquarters the officer commanding won't be at all pleased. He'll behave like a bear in a fit."

"But why don't you arrest the horse thieves?"

"Cause we don't know where they are."

"But Chris will guide you."

"Into traps. She's not pleased with us, Pup."

"And we can't hunt the thieves 'cause we're all cluttered up with prisoners. Don't you see?"

"Couldn't I guard Lane?"

"You've taught Dandy to trust you—in irons!"

"Is there no way, Jose?"

The moon had set and in the utter darkness there stirred no sound until Dandy, rolling over in his sleep, wrenched at the shackles. The lad lay back, broken with long hours of sleepless pain. "Jose," he whispered, "you'll laugh at me, but I must tell everything now. I came to save my wife by arresting these horse thieves myself. Chris and I planned everything. Lane was to be called away by a neighbor and at dawn this morning my wife was to lead me to the place where the robbers are camped—a mile from here—to creep into their camp, to disarm them while they slept, to wake them up and herd them to Lane's

wagon. When I got back to Regina with my prisoners—oh, it was all so easy! And then you came."

"That was hard luck."

"Jose, I can't explain all that, and I won't live disgraced, but when I'm gone you'll know at least that I was—"

"Pup, suppose I take your place while you round up your thieves!"

"But Dandy would be ruined."

"Who could blame him if he finds me his prisoner when he wakes?"

"You take the blame!"

"I'm the Blackguard—a hopeless case—so I don't have to be good. If you succeed, why, you'll be let off and Dandy will be petted, and my misdeeds won't count, and the commissioner will be as gentle as a woolly lamb with a lip. Nombre de Dios! You shall take the thieves!"

VI.

Lane roused himself, saw that the day had come at last, struggled awhile with his lashings, sat up and looked about him.

"What's my fri?" he shouted.

La Mancha, broad awake upon the bed, looked down at him with a grave smile, then, carefully sighting his revolver at Lane's skull, "Down," he said; "down, dog, or I'll bark too."

In moving he had dragged the blankets away from Dandy and sharply wrenched the chain at his left wrist.

"Hello!" said the corporal. "What the deuce?—He rubbed his eyes and stared. 'What on earth have you done with your Pup?'"

"Oh, that's all right," said the Blackguard cheerily as he swung his feet to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. "Here, you, Lane"—he laughed aloud—"you witness against the police, do you see this? I was on guard, I released a prisoner, I took that prisoner's place, and I take his punishment. You see?"

"Blackguard," said Dandy, "you've done this to save your brother?"

"No—no save you!"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a pup's job!" Lane shouted. "I'll—"

"Shut your mouth!" said the corporal. Then, taking down his waistcoat from a peg, he found the key of the handcuffs and unlocked them. "Where is the Pup?" he asked angrily.

"I've sent him, Dandy, to prove that he is not a deserter—to prove that he's trying in his puppy way to do his duty by arresting Lane's confederates. In another ten minutes he'll be back with his prisoners, and I take the blame!"

The Blackguard was dragging on his boots. The corporal was dressing hurriedly.

"Why didn't you tell me, La Mancha?"

"Because you'd have stopped the Pup."

"Or gone with him!"

"Trusted him, Dandy?"

"No."

"It was the only way, and I take the blame. Hello!"

There came a sound of scurrying feet in the yard and the door burst open. There the girl stood against a blaze of sunlight staring into the gloom, her hands lifted to heaven. "Dead!" she screamed. "Dead!"

"Who's dead?" asked the corporal gravely.

"My husband! Dead! Dead! Murdered! Help! He's dead!"

Dandy and La Mancha grabbed their arms, booted to the stables, led out three horses, mounted the girl first, sprang to their own seats and, all riding bareback, they galloped toward the sun. The girl led by a winding trail through bushes over a spur of the hills, then at the opening of a glade fell back, veiling her face with her ink, streaming hair, thrusting out her hands against the horror yonder which she dared not see.

Corporal Irvine came first into the glade, saw the corral full of stolen horses, the outlaw camp at its gate, the robber Alabama Kid, who was saddled to escape.

"Throw up your hands!" he yelled.

The cowboy jammed a bride into his pony's mouth, swung to the saddle and for an instant stared at the thundering horses, the soldiers and Dandy's leveled revolver. He could not escape, he dared not be captured, but swift as lightning whipped out his own revolver. Dandy had fired first, with steadier aim, and the horse thief rolled over on to the pony's neck, then softly to the turf mortally wounded.

La Mancha swept down into the camp where lay the other outlaw, Low Lived Joe, his shoulders against the posts of the corral, a scarlet blanket thrown across his legs, his dull eyes turned toward the place where Alabama Kid, his partner, lay dying.

"You are hurt?" asked the Blackguard.

The cowboy nodded.

"Who shot you?"

The cowboy turned his dead white face to the trooper. "Who shot me?" he repeated vaguely. "Oh, yes, yes; you mean who done for me? There!" His hand had been clutched to his breast, but now he stretched it out, all red with blood, pointing. "That was a good boy," he said, "with heaps of sand—a-trying to—but Alabama killed him."

The Blackguard walked slowly to where a gray blanket lay spread upon the body of a man. He took off his hat, knelt down and lifted the covering away from his brother's face. With shaking fingers he touched the ivory forehead, the closed eyelids where pale blue shadows lay, the lips which were no longer drawn with pain. He crossed himself. He rose very slowly to his feet, looking upward into the glory of the sun; gray, calling aloud to the spirit of his brother beyond the abyss of death.

"Caballero," he cried in his majestic Spanish—"Caballero de la Mancha, this I have done, and for this I take the blame! In that white glory of the illustrious dead pray for the last of the La Manchans, for I am so lonely—so very lonely—and jealous of their honor, Caballero!"

PARKER