Maverick

BY JOSEPH N. QUAIL

Goodwin agrees perfectly with my own—that he is as undesirable a piece of bric-a-brac as you could find in a year's travel. He's bad to the core, with a temper that—well, the parson states the case completely in a phrase. He says of him that 'He's hell-born and doing the devil's work.' "

"Give me just a minute, Henderson." The captain tore the covering from his letter. "It is from her," he said, then walked to the doorway, where the light was better, to read it. Henderson fancied that he knew why the captain turned his back upon him.

For many minutes the captain stood there studying the missive and seeking to gain from it some evidence to quiet his suspicions. He read and reread it, but could not find what he sought. Rather was he confronted with ambiguous phrasing which almost might be accepted as a confession of guilt. And through it all there ran an appeal that gripped him hard; an appeal, not for herself, but for the child of whom Henderson had spoken; an appeal that almost was hysterical in its earnestness. He turned to the lieutenant.

"Well?" Henderson said.

"There is no comfort in it," was his response.

"At least you know——"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Only that I shall find this boy and do for him as his mother asks, and as his grandfather, if he were living, would have me do."

"He is with Belcher," Henderson said. "We can get him at any time. But is there nothing else? No hint as to why they have gone, or where they have gone?"

"None."

"I'd like to offer help, but don't know what to suggest. I don't know exactly how the case stands, and I don't want to seem to be prying——" Henderson had said, when the captain interrupted.

"Here," and he handed him the letter. "Share this confidence with me. Tell me what you make of it."

Henderson took the letter and read:

"I have tried to hide my distress from all who know me. Grief and shame have kept me from appealing to those who would have helped me for the sake of lang syne. I did not mean that you should ever know, but since you have seen me I throw myself upon your mercy.

"You once were kind to me for my own sake. Be kind to me now for the sake of another who is very dear to me.

"I am going away. For reasons that I may not explain to you, but which, believe me, are beyond my control, I shall leave my little boy behind. He will be all alone. He has no friend in the world but his mother, and yet his safety and well-being demand that his mother shall desert him. I can tell you no more than this. It is for him that I beseech your friendship. I may not even send him to you for fear of increasing the danger which threatens him, and in which you, too, might be involved. I must even trust that you will look for and find him.

"Oh, you will not fail me, I am sure, the good God would have brought us face to face again at this time for no other reason. I was in the depths of despair when this hope came to me. There is no one else to whom I may trust him. Be good to him, as you hope that God will be good to you.

"Do not seek to know more of me, and do not question him. And if his unhappy mother should never return to claim him, think as kindly as you can of BESS."

Captain Davis had assumed his favorite attitude at the window, with his feet on the sill and staring moodily into the plaza. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

Henderson replied with another question. "What do you make of that threat of danger to the boy?"

"I don't understand it at all. Who would want to injure him?"

"If she is a sensible woman—one not given to imagining things, I mean—if she really feels what she has written here, I can think of danger to the boy from two sources. Two good reasons why she might wish to get far away from him."

"You mean?"

"Goodwin, for one. His reputation would warrant her in attributing any and all sorts of meanness to him."

"And the other?"

"I have been forbidden to mention that," Henderson said.

Both men sat staring across at the barracks, and for a time neither spoke. Then something caught the captain's eye, and he sat bolt upright, pointing at a little cloud of dust that spurted from the center of the square. And on the instant the far-off crack of a rifle came to them.

"What does that mean?" he asked, and even as he spoke another little cloud of dust arose in front of the barracks, and the troopers ran to cover as a second report was carried down the wind.

"That!" cried Henderson, springing up, the fire of battle lighting in his eyes. "That is Mister Horner making good!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIGHTING PARSON AND A BAD MAN.

"Now, then, my maverick, climb up," Brockman called to the boy from the wagon. "Climb up. Ole Bud'll hand up your duds."

The mules had been hitched in, the sacks of cornmeal, cases of cartridges, caddies of tobacco, and some sides of fat bacon loaded on, and he was ready to start. It was late afternoon, but he counted upon making Los Valley ranch by 10 o'clock. With an early start next morning he might be able to reach the outer ranch on the head of the West Fork of the Trinity, in Archer County, by the following midnight—a seventy-mile trip to be done in a little more than twenty-four hours of actual travel.

Mr. Bud Belcher tossed into the wagon a small bundle of clothing tied with a piece of rope. "Tain't a very hefty load," he remarked. "Needn't try to untie them knots, sonny. Just cut 'em. Don't need that rope no more, nohow."

A man with a flushed face, who carried a Sharp's carbine and with one finger through the trigger guard, was twirling it above his head, came whooping along the road at a gallop. He was reeling in the saddle.

"Wow!" he shrieked. "Nigger-nigger-never-die ain't nothin' but a damn big lie! Watch 'em hide out! Wa-ow!"

"That there is Horner," Mr. Bud Belcher said, complacently plucking a fresh straw for his teeth from the back of one of the mules. "He's sure got 'bout as much tarantula juice as he can tote. Going out your way, too. Reckon you'll see the fun. He's due to shoot the post up some."

"Won't he fall off?" the boy asked.

"He sure will," Brockman replied as he shook the lines over the mules and the wagon moved out. "He'll go down sudden like if ever them troopers kick the bobbles off and start after him. Let that chap be a living warning to you, my maverick, and break away from hard drink before the habit gets a tight grip on you." He turned a sober face to the youngster and shook a warning finger at him. "Give up tanglefoot, and keep away from them bars, or you'll be a-bringing of my red hairs in sorrow to the tomb."

"Why, you don't really think that I drink, do you?" the boy asked, astonished.

"I wouldn't undertake to say for certain," was the sorrowful reply. "But I savvy the signs a-plenty, and it sure grieves me a heap to see that your nose shows the color of the stuff."

"Oh, that's just sunburn," the boy said, smiling up at him and rubbing his nose. "I got that standing out in front of the barn, waiting for you to get through loading."

"Honest?" Brockman asked, with mock seriousness. "You ain't a-deceiving of me? Think what a terrible shock it would be for me to come home some day and find you bogged down with red liquor, or a-making love to the cook, or a-threatening to shoot up the ranch. Think how I'd suffer, and me so young and unused to them things. Promise me that you'll keep away from the whisky shops out there on the range, and that you won't shoot my happy home up none whatever."

"Look! He's got down, and he's aiming the gun this way," the boy exclaimed, pointing ahead at Horner and ignoring Brockman's nonsensical talk in his excitement at what was taking place.

"Yes, sir, there he goes, cracking loose all right enough," Brockman said as a puff of smoke arose from the spot where Horner had dismounted on the sidehill overlooking the post. "Sounds like a small cannon, doesn't it? He's a-shooting them long buffalo cartridges, I reckon. There goes number two," as a second report reached them. "Now, if them troopers take to shooting back, we're like to find ourselves in a hot ole pickle."

He leaned out over the side so as to be able to see back into the post. "Blessed if they ain't all running to cover!" he cried in surprise. "No, sir. Not all of them. There's a chap making a break for the picket-line to get his horse. Sho! as another shot came from up the hill. "That fellow's given it up, too. Reckon I was wrong, my maverick. They ain't coming back at him a bit. He's got 'em all housed up."

There was a clatter of hoofs behind them in the roadway, and he turned again; but the wind was toward them and a cloud of dust hid the advancing host, if host it was.

"And wrong once more—whipsawed, so to speak," he said, after a moment. "They're coming all right. Let this be a lesson to you, my maverick. It shows how easy it is to be mistaken. You just says to me, says you, they won't come nohow, and then, here they are. Well, I'll be damned!"

The dust cloud had swirled up to them, and in its wake a single horseman, quirt in hand, was lashing his mount to top speed. Brockman's face was a study for a moment; then he leaned forward and urged the mules into a lope.

"There sure enough will be some fun now," he exclaimed. "That's ole Mister Potter on his trail. If the Fighting Parson doesn't stampede him, and we get there in time, you'll see some of the heftiest religious doings ever handed out in these parts."

Two more shots were fired from the sidehill, and then the fusillade ceased. A great cloud of dust raised by the galloping mules sailed on ahead of them and shut out from view all that was happening in that direction; but looking back Brockman saw that the troopers were saddling and preparing to start in chase of Mr. Horner.

"Reckon the parson has got down to business all right enough," Brockman shouted in the boy's ears. "If ole Horner ain't on the mourners' bench yet, he will be by the time we get there."

A minute later he sent the brakebeam down hard and threw his weight back on the lines. "There they are, over there among them rocks on the right," he said. "And durned if I ain't wrong again. Can't seem to get my bets down right nohow to-day. Ole Mister Potter's on the bench. Hold on to these lines." And he sprang from the wagon.

Belligerent Mr. Horner was lying flat on his back, and kneeling astride of him, one hand firmly gripped on the collar of Horner's shirt and the other brandished before his face, was the fighting parson—a tall, slender, bearded man, dressed as the ordinary rancher would dress, and with absolutely nothing in his appearance or manner to suggest his profession.

A few yards away the parson's horse and Horner's were engaged in the friendly service of nibbling the ticks from each other's necks. Nearby lay Horner's carbine, the barrel broken from the stock, as the parson had thrown it aside after wrenching it from Horner's hands and smiting a boulder with it.

"How many times have I warned you that you were on the road to hell?" the parson was saying as Brockman stepped up to them. "How many times have I told you that strong drink would lead you to the crime of blood-letting? Have you no fear of God's judgment?"

"Shouldn't have made a nigger so damned sassy, then," the drunken desperado muttered, sullenly and blasphemously. "Nigger's to blame. Not me. Preach to the ole nigger, you."

Parson Potter shook him as a terrier would shake a rat, bumping his head against the ground again and again. "Sot that you are!" he cried. "God give me patience with you! Shall I surrender you to the vengeance of the niggers you abuse, or will you promise again to live a life of decency? Speak. Which shall it be?"

"Jus' gi' me the gun, and turn loose your ole niggers!" Horner cried, making a frantic effort to rise.

"Them troopers are a-coming up the hill, parson," Brockman volunteered. "They ain't a-going to waste no time with him when they get here. They'll sure convert him quick."

"Ay," said the parson, rising, "and send him unrepentant into hell! Get up, Horner. Mount your horse and get away while there is time. But remember, I claim you for the better life. I'll save you in spite of yourself. Up with you and go."

He stooped and helped the drunken brute to his feet, while Brockman led the desperado's horse up to him.

"You're a good fellow, all right, parson," Horner muttered as he stared about him. "But," as he saw the broken gun, "you're too damn strong, you are. And—and say, you hurt my feelings a heap, sitting on me like that. 'Deed you did."

"Ay, and I was sorely tempted to hurt your face, Horner," the parson said, regretfully. "God forgive me, but I was sorely tempted to do the Lord's work of chastising you. But go. The troopers will be here in a moment."

"And me with no gun!" Horner said ruefully as he staggered toward his horse. "Me with no gun."

"Go," the parson repeated impatiently. "Since you have parted company with Goodwin and his hellions there is some hope for you. I'll undertake to mollify these soldiers, so that you may return. Only waste no more time. Get away while you can."

Brockman assisted Horner to mount, and started him off on a cow trail through the timber.

"Time put in trying to convert that chap is plumb wasted, I reckon, parson," Brockman said as Horner disappeared. "Ought to have let the troops take him. He's just naturally a mean one—all bad."

"You are wrong, young man," Parson Potter replied, warmly. "You are all wrong. There is good in him, and a great deal of it. It is only the rum in him that is bad. You make the common error of supposing that the bad should be left to themselves, to go to the devil in their own way. The good save themselves without help, but it is we who must reclaim the bad. There are the troops. Go on and leave me to settle this matter with them as I may."

"Now, there's a chap," Brockman said to the boy when they were under way once more, "there's a chap with too much nerve for a parson. He ought to be a ranger—or a Sheriff—that's what, 'stead of rustling around mavericking sinners."

"Has he got a brand, too?" the maverick asked.

Brockman stared at him for a moment; then: "Reckon he has," he said, with a grin. "Reckon he has, all right; but they don't need herding none; so what does he do but go a-rustling on poor old Satan's range. Just puts in all his time stealing cattle from that poor ole horned he-devil what ain't got nothing but a tail to fan hisself with."

A trivial and seemingly unimportant thing sometimes has a powerful influence upon the destinies of men. The drunken bravado of Mr. Horner, from Brockman's point of view, was vastly amusing, but of no vital importance either to the maverick or to himself. Yet, had it not been for the confusion caused by Horner, and the time consumed in hunting for him in the hills west of the town, Captain Davis would have been able to comply, as he was anxious to do, with the request made by the boy's mother and have assumed charge of him. What effect that change would have had on the boy's career and how it might have affected the lives of the boy's mother and Brockman and others it is idle to speculate about. But that it would have been vital no one who follows their history can doubt.

When Captain Davis was free to search for the boy he and Brockman were far away upon their journey to the ranch. And then a runner with definite news about the Kiowas called the captain and his men off in another direction, far to the south, and the situation could not be altered for a time, much as the captain regretted it.

As for Brockman, he proceeded to give the maverick his own version of that encounter, and then forgot all about it.

"We sure missed a heap," he said. "But the sign made it all pretty clear to me. The ole parson he just made a run by Mister Horner and came up behind him. Then he fetched him a hefty cuff with one hand and snatched the gun with the other. He busted the gun on a rock, and then he just sat down on him to think what next. Guess Mister Horner thought the hand o' Providence sure had fallen heavy on him when the parson handed him that one. And I reckon the parson would sure have added him to his herd all right if them troopers hadn't come along just then. Like to bet my boots against a biscuit that he gets him yet. Just think what a Sheriff that chap 'd make—and him a-doing nothing but preach and rassle with sinners! It sure is a shame."

CHAPTER V.

HOW THE HALF-DIAMOND L HUNT WENT TO BROCKMAN'S RELIEF.

The men on the Half-Diamond L ranch used to say that John Dalton could smell an Indian miles and miles away. Dalton was the boss-herder, a thin, wiry, nervous man, with skin the color of a ripe prickly pear and eyes like a hawk's. Napoleon Benois—old Pole, the boys affectionately had dubbed him—said to him once:

"Ye'd a-been an eagle, John, if you just hadn't been born a human."

Dalton's manner of handling his men was much like an old hen's fashion of fussing over a young brood. He would go sleepless to increase their comforts, would rustle up dainties in the game way for them when they were a bit off their feed, would scold them like sin when they went beyond bounds with him, and would go strutting around with fight in his eye if an outsider so much as hinted that his chicks wern't the best ever hatched. The men always were giving him trouble, always nagging, but they all loved him and would have gone almost to any extreme to have proved it had there been occasion.

Just now John's nose was bothering him a great deal. The ranch cattle to the number of some thousands were being "loose-herded"—that is, left to go where they would within certain liberal limits—on the range over toward Union Creek, miles to the west of the ranch. Ordinarily the men divided into two parties and rode around them once a day from opposite directions, heading the outlying cattle back toward a comon center, but to-day, because of John's nose, there had been a change. The men had gone out singly, radiating from the ranch like spokes in a wheel, with instructions to ride ten miles straightaway and return without regard to the cattle, but with their eyes wide open for Indian sign. The men had all returned shortly after noon, and not one had seen anything suspicious.

After their midday meal they had grouped themselves in the shade of the ranch on the east and were talking in desultory fashion of the events of the morning, when Dalton sprang up, ran to his saddle and pulled his range-glasses from a case he carried swung upon the horn.

"What is it this time, John—Indians?" Bud Willett asked as Dalton adjusted the glasses to his eyes.

"No. White man. Riding like blue blazes, too. Horse all covered with suds. There's trouble back of that chap. Reckon I wasn't off the scent much, after all."

"That looks like one of the Milliken outfit," suggested Jack Langford, springing to his feet. "Remember, John? We saw that fellow down in the Valley last round-up."

"Yes. But he ain't on the upper ranch no more," said Frank Ringer. "They ain't nothing but niggers on that upper ranch now. Six of 'em. I was over that way after horses 'bout a month ago."

"Don't make no difference where he's from," Dalton said as the runner galloped up and dismounted. "He's got news, sure." He strode out to meet the newcomer. "How!" he said.

"How!" said the runner, stooping to loosen his girths. "Seen any Indian sign hereaway?"

"No," Dalton said as the others came crowding around. "Have you?"

"Yes. It's thick out our way. They killed all the niggers on the upper ranch, and then went on south a piece. But they'll be striking back to the Nation 'fore long, and ole Milliken he thought they'd be like to come out this a-way. So he sent me to give you word."

"Come in and feed," Dalton said.

When the runner had satisfied his hunger, he gave them what information he had.

"Ole Satanta hisself must be with this bunch," he said. "They sure are wicked. Chopped our men up something terrible. Opened 'em up and emptied the meal sacks into 'em. Niggers made a big fight, too. Cartridge hulls lying around thicker'n heel flies. 'Less they turn back by Los Valley, to raid ole Jim Loving, they just must come out this a-way. Ole Milliken he sent in for the troops, and the rangers are in camp on the Cameron, down there in the valley. So if they turn back to the east of you, they'll catch it good and hot, I'm a-thinking."

"They'll know about the rangers," was Dalton's comment. "They'll not go into the valley this trip. They've sure got this raid all planned out. They started in with Milliken, and they'll be after us next. Then they'll strike for the Herald outfit on Union Creek, and from there they'll go to 'Lish Ikard's on the Big Wichita. They'll clean up any buffalo hunters there may be between there and the Panhandle and get back into the Nation that a-way before the troops from Jacksboro can get near them. We've got time to get the horses in where we can fight for them. Guess they won't try to rush us again in daylight. They got a bellyful of that last time."

"How about getting word to the rangers?" asked the runner.

"Too risky," said Dalton. "The Indians, by your say-so, may be between here and the valley, and I'm not going to ask any of my boys to take the chance of getting through them. But I'll send word to Herald and Ikard, to put them on the lookout."

"There's Brockman. What are we going to do about Ed?" Jack Langford said.

"Great guns, I plumb forgot Ed!" exclaimed Dalton. The boss herder looked worried. "He's coming out alone from Jacksboro with a wagon-load of grub, and he'll just about run into this bunch," he explained to the runner. After a moment's thought he turned to the group of herders. "Boys," said he impressively, "I'm going to let the horses shift for themselves. If the Indians get them—well, they've done as much before with all of us right here on the ranch. One of you get off to Herald's and to Ikard's as quick as you can. The rest of you saddle your best mounts—and get a fresh horse for Milliken's man here. We'll bring Brockman through all right or know the reason why."

There was a dissenting grumble for a moment or two, and then Benois called out:

"Let Milliken's man go on to Herald's, John. Every one in this crowd wants to be with the outfit that's going to bring Ed in."

"All right, boys," said the man from Milliken's; "give me a fresh mount and I'll go on. Hope you'll get him through all right, but," and he ran his eye over the party, "fifty to ten's big odds."

"Get Herald's men to join Ikard's, if you can," Dalton said a few minutes later, when the runner was about to start out. "Tell them to work in between these bucks and the Panhandle, so's to cut them off, and perhaps we'll be able to give them a dose that will keep them from coming in again in a hurry."

The runner nodded, and, clapping spurs to his horse, was off at a gallop. He had not passed beyond the first swell in the prairie to the west before the Half-Diamond L men, with Winchesters across their knees and with Dalton in the lead, were racing away to the eastward. Ten miles from the ranch the trail swung down by the south and through a slough covered with mesquite. At the head of this slough Dalton pulled up and turned in his saddle. Holding his arm outstretched, with the palm of the hand between the lower edge of the sun and the horizon line, he found that three fingers filled the gap.

"We've three hours of daylight left," he said. "If Ed got through all right, we should meet him just this side of Brushy Mountain. That's a long way from here. Come on."

And on they went at a gallop, each man's eyes searching the ground as he rode for sign that would tell whether the Indians had crossed the trail. The sun was a red disk resting on the sky line at their backs when they came in sight of Brushy Mountain.

"There's Ed; he's all right. Whoopee!" shouted Langford, and the cowboys gave an answering yell as the canvas top of the prairie schooner flashed white on the timber line a mile away.

Dalton had pulled up and was looking hard through his field glasses. He saw a thread of smoke drift away from the wagon, and something besides, for he dug the spurs deep into the reeking sides of his flagging horse, and as he sped past the others called out:

"Ride, you devils, ride! There's hell a-popping over there!"

Puffs of smoke broke out all along the timber, and there was an occasional puff from the wagon, which the four mules were yanking along faster than ever it traveled before; it swayed and bumped and tossed and jolted, now and again careenging on the rim of a gully and seeming about to dash itself and its contents to pieces.

Prostrate on the grub in the bed of the wagon lay Brockman, pumping his Winchester viciously every time one of the attacking party came into view. On the seat, lashing the wheelers with the long ends of the lines and cheering them on in a piping voice, was that midget of a boy, his big, staring eyes sparkling with excitement and his hair blown back from a pale, drawn face. Suddenly he caught sight of the band of men galloping madly down upon them from in front. He made a quick turn around his wrists with the lines, surged back upon them until the mules slowed down, when he wrapped them about the brake beam and took Brockman's big six-shooter up in both hands, pointing it toward the newcomers.

"Keep 'em going!" cried Brockman.

"There's some of them right in front," said the little chap, trying hard to draw a bead with the heavy revolver. "Look!"

Brockman pulled aside the canvas cover. One glance was enough. "Hurrah!" he cried. "Now we'll show 'em. That's our outfit. Hear 'em yell! Pump it into 'em, boys!" And he jumped on the seat and swung his hat as the Half-Diamond L crowd circled in between the wagon and the timber. "Follow the trail, my maverick, and keep 'em going," he said, as he jumped out with his gun. "We'll catch up with you; the mules will take you to the ranch if we don't."

With just the suspicion of a quiver on his lips, the little fellow laid down the six-shooter, picked up the lines, clucked to the mules, straightened them out and went on.

CHAPTER VI.

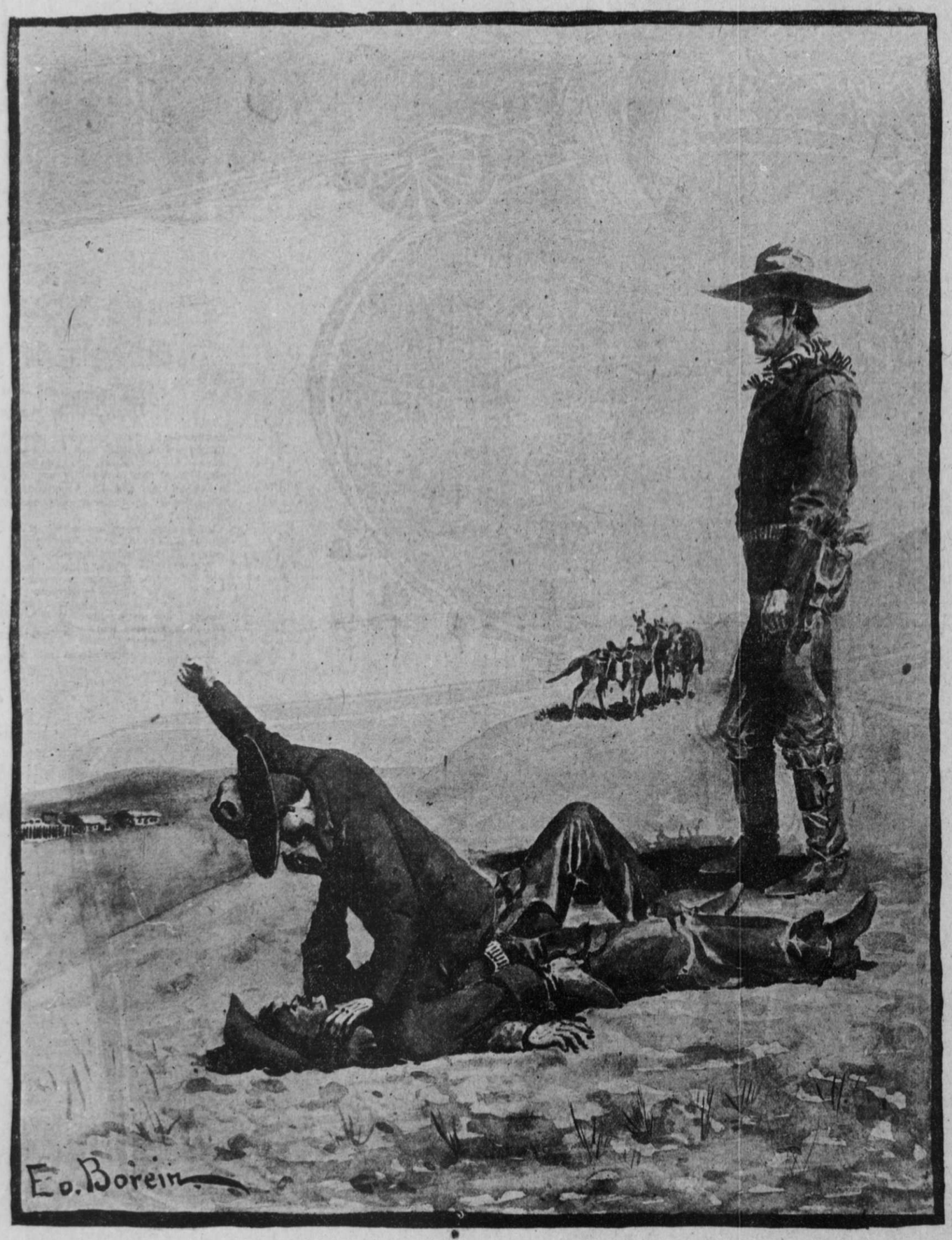
A SKITTISH MULE AND AN INDIAN AMBUSH.

With the rattle of gunfire and the yells of the cowboys and Indians ringing in his ears, the boy lashed the mules into a lope and went speeding into the night as fast as they could pull the creaking wagon. Up to the little swell from which Dalton had discovered the attack, and down the other side of it into the mesquite bottom they clattered until they struck ground so soft that the hoofs of the mules gave out no sound, and the only noise of their passage was the squeaking of the dry hubs on the axles. Now it had fallen dark, and they were out of hearing of the strife behind them. To the west the sky was sullen with heavy clouds; to the east it was streaked with faint lunar rays that as yet fell far short of the meridian. In a little while the moon would be flooding the trail with light.

On and on and on—with now and again a quick glance over his shoulder at the trail, as if in expectation of the coming of the cowboys, and then into the mesquite about him, in apprehension of a concealed enemy—the boy held his way. Down into an arroyo skirted with some tall timber, up again into a grove of scrub oak, and out once more into the mesquite he urged the team.

Then out of the waste behind him came a prolonged moaning cry—"wh-who—who-who-o-ah!" The almost spent mules increased their pace without urging, and with trembling hand the boy felt for the revolver beside him. Again the cry, seemingly more doleful now that he was listening for it—"who—who—who-who-o-o-ah!" Then from all about him the sounds came in irregular chorus. Off in the brush, to the left, some prowling thing slunk away like a shadow of evil, and then once more that drear refrain. The boy felt his blood chill and his tousled hair stiffen as with straining eyes he sought to pierce the gloom. It was like the hooting of owls, he knew that; but Brockman as they came along had told him that Indians often mimicked that cry in their signals. And if these sounds were made by Indians?

(Continued Next Week.)



PARSON POTTER SHOOK HIM AS A TERRIER WOULD SHAKE A RAT.