

TIM BENDER, A YOUNG HERO

JAMES M. FELLOW

Tim Bender left the house and took the trail to town. It was afternoon and the weekly stage had just arrived. Although not expecting any mail, save from a distant relative who wrote once in a long while, it was his habit, as it was with all the ranchers and their families, to gather outside the little wooden building and exchange news.

Snow had been falling for the last two weeks, and even though there was promise of clear weather for the valley, the high mountains on the east and west were still being swept by the storm. Altogether it was a disagreeable day.

When Tim reached the office the usual large crowd was on hand awaiting the distribution of the mail.

"Hear the latest?" shouted Bill Glenn, who with some others was seated on a bench before the hardware store. Tim approached the group.

"They say that the Thompson outfit is snowbound in Marble canyon and hasn't turned a wheel in six days," ventured the barber's son.

"Who says so?"

"Fatty Jack, the Injin. He just come in from Joshua flat. He says he could see the outfit from Windy summit, but that he couldn't get down to it on account of the storm. Then he fired off his gun, but nobody answered. Fatty says that all the mules are down or have got away. Here comes Fowler and Rossi. They're trying to get up a relief expedition, but nobody wants to go. It's dangerous the way it's storming up there and no one cares to take chances. You know what happened to the last relief two years ago."

Now, Thompson, the freighter, under contract with the Big Nugget mining company, operating in the Ubeheba mountains, 80 miles east, had started from Little Pine 10 days before with a 12 animal and a 16 animal team. He was loaded with lumber and mining machinery. Being two days late and knowing that even now work had been suspended at the mine for want of material, he started in the storm, hoping to be over the summit before the snow became too deep. According to Fatty Jack's account he had succeeded, only to be stalled in Marble canyon on the other side of the range.

The constable and the Indian joined the crowd in front of the postoffice and looked over the silent, sober faces.

"Men," began Fowler, "the Thompson outfit is hard pressed in Marble canyon. You all know the long line skimmers and their swamper. They're all good fellows and now they need help. Who'll volunteer, men? Who'll volunteer to make up a strong party to go out and get them?"

A dead silence followed his words.

"Come now," he urged, "we'd do the same for you—any of you. We'll leave in an hour's time and travel all night. It's only 80 miles and we'll not strike heavy going for 10. Who'll come?"

It was then that Tim Bender left his seat and took his place by Fowler's side. The constable looked around.

"You, Tim?" he said in surprise. "I don't know—your mother, Tim—"

"I volunteer, Mr. Fowler," broke in the boy decisively, and the man, pressing Tim's hand, smiled his admiration.

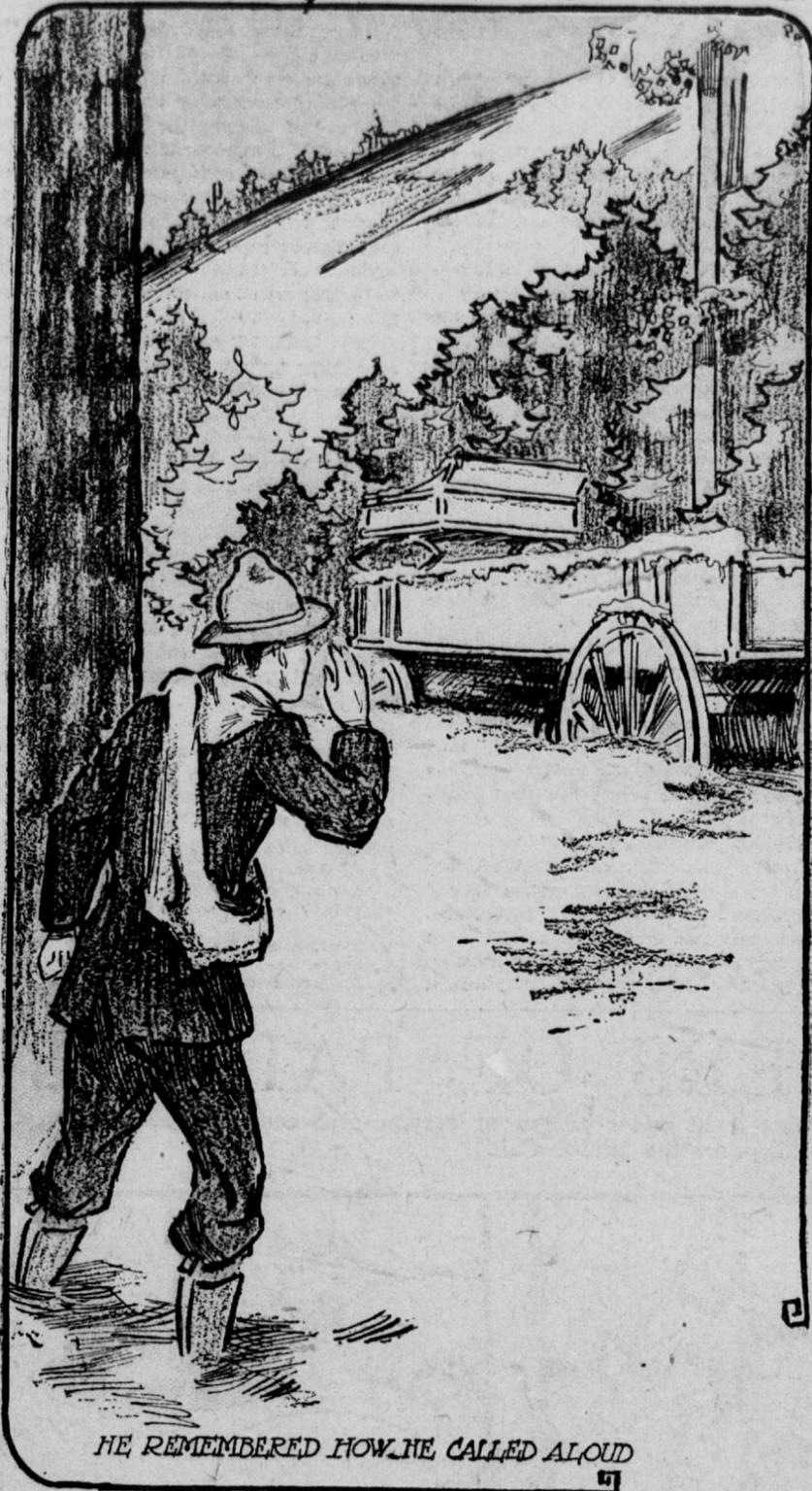
But Tim was only 16 years old. What could he hope to do to make himself useful under these circumstances? The expedition needed men—stalwart men; men able to face and endure hardships of a most trying nature. This boy would be in the way. Many in the crowd shook their heads doubtfully. Besides, Tim's mother was a widow and he was her only child.

The women present were indignant that he should be allowed to take part in a venture involving so much danger. So, when Tim reached home it was to find the small sitting room crowded with ranchers' wives and daughters, each and all protesting against the boy's rash act and endeavoring to gain Mrs. Bender's support of their arguments. But, as Tim paused in the kitchen to listen, he heard his mother say:

"I think my boy has done the only right thing and I am proud to know that he is so manly—so considerate of the welfare of others. It is the way I always want him to be, and I wouldn't think of turning him from the path of duty."

So, an hour later, the relief party left town and tore out across the valley toward the eastern mountains, and the large crowd that had gathered waited and watched until the wagon and its occupants disappeared into the deep canyon through which the road led.

It was night when Tim and his three companions—Fowler, Rossi and the In-



HE REMEMBERED HOW HE CALLED ALOUD

dian, Fatty Jack—piled from their seats and pulled the harness from the six horses. They had come no farther than 10 miles, but already snow was nearly axle deep and the animals were tired by the heavy uphill drag. A hearty meal was cooked, the teams fed and the men, taking only such supplies as might be of immediate use, started to leave.

"You take care of camp, Tim," said Fowler, when the boy made as if to follow. "I'd rather you'd not take any chances on this trip. And say, Tim," as young Bender turned away, "if you don't hear from us by noon day after tomorrow harness up and drive back to town. We'll leave it all to you."

With that they were gone, and Tim, alone and disappointed, proceeded to make down his bed for the night. But he could not sleep. He felt that he had not been treated right; that the constable had underestimated him; that he was not being allowed to help; and because he was confident of himself he felt the rebuff more keenly.

He was still engaged with his thoughts when the wind died and the snow began to fall. A look into the sky told him that the storm clouds above were receiving reinforcements from the Sierra side of the valley.

When morning finally dawned he scrambled out of bed. It still snowed heavily, and Tim decided that two feet had fallen during the night. He wondered uneasily if his friends had made the summit, six miles away, and how far they had journeyed, or if they had lost their way. After a while he began to worry. The more he thought of his inactivity the more restless he became. Toward noon, as the storm showed no signs of abating, he could bear the suspense no longer. Binding his feet with gunny sacks to keep out the cold, he broke a bale of hay to tide the animals over until his return and, equipped with provisions, struck out over the snow.

But he did not keep up canyon as his friends had done. There was a shorter route into Marble canyon,

known to but few, which his father had shown him. So he turned into a small gulch that ran south almost at right angles with the main ravine, followed it about a mile, and, climbing a ridge, continued up its white backbone until he gained the pine clad summit.

How he walked! The sweat was pouring from him when he began his descent of the east side of the range, and he felt the effects of the heavy climb. Once he stopped and endeavored to gain a view of the far off desert hills, miles below, but the snow still fell, enveloping the surrounding country like a thick veil that the eye could not penetrate.

The whole afternoon Tim struggled on, sliding and slipping down a steep embankment, sprawling up the side of a slope, or digging himself out of a drift that had appeared to be anything but solid snow. Tired but happy, he at last found himself in the rocky depths of Marble canyon. He could almost tell the number of steps now to the point where the Saline valley road dropped from the Big Cowhorn meadow into the rocky bottom of the canyon.

Bravely he trudged on trying to keep up a steady pace, but admitting to himself that his greatest efforts were feeble ones. Further, and what gave him more concern, was the fact that he fell into the habit of resting. He found he was not able to walk a hundred yards without pausing and he feared that these delays, short as they were, meant more to his friends than they did to him. And every time he thought of this the more alarmed he grew and the harder he fought against the weakness. But without success. Even the blinding snow, that had at first seemed as nothing to the vigor of his youth, was lending its aid against him. Again and again as he stumbled on it buffeted and beat him, and each and every falling flake was turned into a spiteful, little light that pricked his eyes until they felt sore and swollen. Then after a long, long time night came.

When and how he reached the half buried freight wagons, Tim never could distinctly recall. His first impression was that they were before him. He remembered how he called aloud, or had tried to call aloud, but having received no answer had begun his search. Thompson and his men he found in their beds beneath the wagons. They were weak almost unto death. For on finding that they could not hope to travel while the storm kept up they had camped here waiting until it passed over. But it continued and, their provisions giving out, the freighters turned the mules loose to shift for themselves, and attempted to walk back into the valley. But they wandered from their course, and after two days' and nights' exposure to the elements again reached their outfits—weak from the want of food and exhausted by their efforts.

Forgetting his own pains and fatigue, Tim worked and worked over the four half conscious men and it was well on toward noon of the next day when he at last rested. He knew the men were out of danger, but he realized that he must have help. Fowler, Rossi and Fatty Jack had not arrived. Where were they? The storm had all but passed, here and there the blue sky showing through the breaking clouds. Was it possible that the constable's party had fallen by the way or had wandered off and were lost, or, again, finding the storm too severe had abandoned the expedition and returned to town?

But Tim was a prospector's son and like a prospector knew how to get the most good out of the smallest trifle. Also he could shape that trifle to fit his purpose. Besides being a good prospector, he always made it his business to find out in what section of the country the hunters of mineral were spending their time. So he readily conceived a plan.

Leaving behind what provisions he had brought he was soon mushing along over the snow. This, however, soon disappeared, for his way lay along the lower ridges on the desert side of the range where the snow could not live. Although stiff and sore of limb and exhausted in mind and body, he reached Wacobi spring, 12 miles away, in good time.

Here, as he had anticipated, were camped three prospectors. In a few words he told his story and asked their assistance. The men were deeply impressed and eager to help, and loading their burros with a goodly stock of grub and bedding, urged Tim to ride one of the little animals.

The huge camp fire of the Thompson party had not burned itself out when the sturdy rescuers, led by young Bender, arrived. The four freighters were profuse in their thanks to Tim for saving their lives and appreciating the ordeal through which he had passed they insisted that he should remain in camp and take the rest of which he was so much in need. To this the prospectors also agreed, saying that they would institute the search for Fowler and his men. Tim, however, would not listen to them.

But while supper was being prepared the boy's worn out body and mind conquered his spirit, for as he lay resting upon a horse blanket before the fire he fell asleep.

When he awoke a whole day had passed and the sun was just setting. Rising painfully to his feet he looked around. A short distance away a large crowd of men was gathered and among them he saw the constable, Rossi, Fatty Jack and many of his town friends.

"Three cheers for Tim Bender!" cried some one, and the canyon rang again and again. From all directions men rushed up and struggled to grasp his hand. Fatty Jack lifted him, blushing and embarrassed, upon his shoulder and held him there while Fowler told the story of the rescue party. How he had been afraid for Tim to accompany the expedition and how they themselves had become lost in the first night's storm, finally finding their way back to camp. Then, as Tim did not return, and fearing for his safety, they had hurried back to town to get men to scour the mountains for him. After this he narrated our hero's adventures, going over the story which we know, and ended by praising the unselfish spirit of the boy who would undertake so much for another at the peril of his life.

That evening a messenger arrived in town. He rode straight to the little cottage on the outskirts. There a large crowd of sympathetic friends were assembled, come to comfort Mrs. Bender, whose son they had given up for dead. The rider was Fowler.

Leaping from his horse the constable walked into the house.

"Mrs. Bender," he said, and his eyes shone as he spoke. "Tim is the hero of Inyo county!"

For a moment she stared, wide eyed and pale. Then as he smiled, she buried her face on Mrs. Fowler's shoulder and wept for joy.