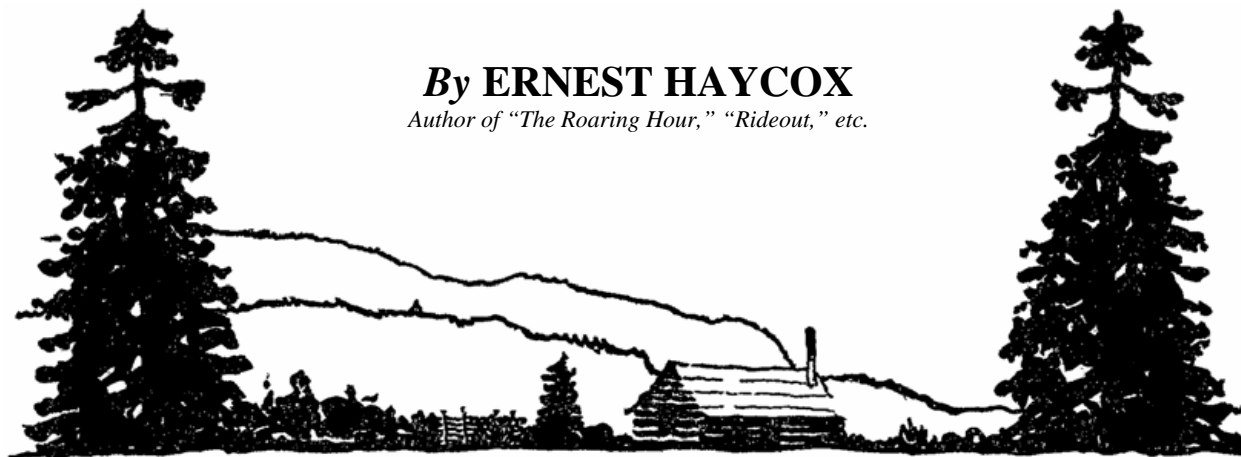


West, August 17, 1932

BREED OF THE FRONTIER

By **ERNEST HAYCOX**

Author of "The Roaring Hour," "Rideout," etc.



In those days people earned their property rights!

TOM CRUZE was in the cabin-clearing chopping out fence rails when the warning reached him through the drizzling November rain. He dropped the bitt of his ax upon the cedar log and stared around the stump-littered field; there was nothing to be seen or heard that justified the vague, indefinite suspense in him. Yet in response to it—for he never disobeyed these instinctive danger signals—he swept the tangle of underbrush that choked the tree trunks of the encircling forest with a half-narrowed eye. Still there was nothing.

The northeast wind fell into the open space and slatted through the fir boughs, picked up earth mold and flung it against the rough cabin walls, twisted the chimney smoke into a crazy spiral; not far away in the trees a swollen creek slithered and dashed between its rocky banks. A dead tree fell afar, rumbling. Signs and portents of the hard Oregon winter to come; but of other dangers no definite witness until Cruze saw his buckskin pony under the barn lean-to jerk suddenly against the rawhide tether. At that the pioneer wasted no movements. He dropped the ax and in a single scooping gesture seized his rifle sheltered beneath a cedar shake; keeping his eyes upon that forest rim he began a slow retreat toward the cabin.

The pony trumpeted and worried at the tether. Out of the brush popped an Indian buck, closely followed by a file of six, keeping a quick pace, heads bowed and bodies swaying with a cradle-like rhythm as they advanced. Seven of them Tom

Cruze counted; he halted his retreat and brought up the muzzle of the rifle. The file swayed toward him; the black, plaited polls of hair glistened with the rain. Then of a sudden the file leader stopped at a distance of ten yards and raised a hand, palm outward. For the first time his head came up and he stared squarely at the white man's face.

"Peace," he said in the clicking, guttural Chinook jargon.

Cruze returned the impassive stare. Like all settlers in the Oregon country, he understood the jargon; it was the universal tongue between white and red man west of the Cascades and north of the Rogue Nation, each tribe flavoring the language with its own idiom. In the present instance the Indians were of the Molalla tribe, possessors of the foothills and mountain fastnesses of the Cascade Range. Unlike the valley and river tribes, they were farther from the influence of white missionary and trader and hence kept their original character more nearly intact. The missionary Indian shrunk and died; the Molallas were plump, belligerent with all the old tribal fire.

"It is time to speak plain words," said the spokesman after a long deliberate pause. "We have watched the white man come into the valley below us. The tribes there starve and die. The game goes away, and comes no more. The white man's sharp stick turns over the ground and makes bad things. The Indian is sick with many white sicknesses. They were not here before the white man came. All these things we have heard. This is our land. The

sun and stars have looked down on Molalla people for many moons. My father was happy here and his father before him. If the white man comes the Indian will starve and die of white sicknesses. Molallas will not be like Calapooiahs and Multnomahs who now are falling like autumn leaves. White man, you must go. Go back to the valley where other white men are. Leave the forest and hills to the Molalla."

A silence fell over the group. Cruze gripped his rifle and stared at the solemn group. Leave all this labor behind and retreat? It was not in his blood to do that. True enough, there was land in the valley below him. The fertile Wallamet soil would grow double the crop that this fern-ridden bench land might produce. But the incoming settlers were taking the best of the valley claims and prices were beyond the reach of a poor man. Besides—and all the sacrifice and toil of one breed of pioneer might be summed up in this reason—he was a forest man.

Others might love the open prairies and seek the river bottom; Cruze had the vision of the cathedral firs forever before him, and the sound of the creeks dashing downhill, and the cold air sliding down from the snow-capped peaks beyond. In the wilderness was game to sustain him, solitude and elbow room to content him. He was master of his domain. Like others he had traveled two thousand miles to find his heart's desire, one of a vast human stream bent on finding the rainbow's end. He had found it. Now must he leave?

THE rain whipped around the group, but they might have been statues for all the visible movement. Indian etiquette, this, which commanded silence for mature thought. Cruze heard the cabin door opened and turned. On the threshold stood his wife, tall and young, stamped with the same restless, invincible Western breeding. A cameo-clear face surmounted by heavy golden hair, set with sober eyes.

"Tom, you be careful! If there's trouble I'll use this pistol."

He broke the silence with a soft, velvet voice.

"You shet the door, Amy, or you'll fotch a cold," he called to her. "That'll be no trouble."

Then, when she had disappeared, he turned toward his grave audience and dropped into the barbaric jargon. "It is bad medicine for the white man to run. I came in peace. I spoke always to my friend, the Molalla, with a single tongue. My heart

is good. Why should I go?"

The leader's heavy face was illumined with an unexpected show of feeling. "It is the white man's way. One comes with a sharp stick to stir the ground. Then two come. Then ten come and the red man must go. The Molalla is no fool. It will be the same with him unless he stop the stream when it is young."

"I speak with a single tongue," reiterated Cruze, the line of his long chin growing sharper. "My heart is here. The big father at Washington says this land is for all. I stay."

"The big father's eyes are too weak to see the Molalla. Have care, white man, of the Indian's patience. I watched you come here with two horses, a white-faced squaw and a dog. See what you have done with the forest! You cut trees with your ax and stir the ground. Bad medicine! The Molalla is no fool. Take your squaw, your dog and your horse and leave."

"I reckon I'll have to stay," repeated Cruze.

The spokesman of the Molallas drew himself up, and anger sparkled in his dark clouded eyes.

"You are a fool, white man!" he warned. "Take your things and go! The Molalla speaks no more until the sun is gone. Then he speaks with the arrow."

Cruze shook his head slowly.

"I come with peace in my hand. I kill no game for sport. It is not bad medicine to stir the ground."

"I have spoken!" The leader raised his hand to the sky. "When Molalla comes again it will be with arrows."

They turned silently in the file and trudged away, heads bowed as before, while the jet hair glistened with rain. There was a sibilant rustle of the leaves at the clearing's edge; then they were gone and nothing marked their passage save the horse's uneasy watchfulness. Cruze sighed, his eyes clinging to the bushes, and his calloused hand slid up and down the stock of the gun. "Thar's trouble afoot," he murmured. "Trouble aplenty fer those who ain't lookin' fer it."

"Tom, come in the house!"

He came at his wife's beckoning and barred the door against the storm. From without, this cabin looked like any other, rough-surfaced and chinked with mud; within, Amy Cruze had worked a transformation on the rough appearances. A white spread was smoothly drawn over the rustic bed; above the wide-mouthed fireplace hung pots and

pans in a neat, shining row; the improvised chairs were backed with tanned deer-hide to ease the rough frames. Such softening as could be done to the rawboned atmosphere of the cabin had been done; the puncheoned floor had a rag carpet; the hewn table was covered over with a cloth of scarlet interwoven with white patterns; the tallow candles beamed from the center. It was only mid-afternoon, yet the day was dark and the oilskin windows were inadequate things at best.

"Tom, what is it?" she asked. "Indians don't come out of sociableness."

He set to work wiping the gun. "Why now, ain't nothin' to worry about much," he declared, looking down at his weapon. "They're a little upset about white folks comin' in."

"And they told you to leave?" She was not to be put off. "I knew it would fall! Remember what Dan Mumpower said last month when he came through? Said there'd be trouble soon enough."

"It ain't him." Cruze smacked the table with his fist. "It's Cockstock's doin's. Cockstock allus was a renegade. Even little Chief John ain't powerful struck with him." He stared at the blazing fire. A wrinkle of doubt crept along his cheek. "But he's an eloquent varmint, sartain. He'll turn the Injuns crazy with talk—and then we suffer."

"What did you tell him?"

"Well, why now, what could I tell? Think I'll give up arter all we've done? I said I'd stay."

They were not demonstrative folk; the deeds they did stood sponsor for their emotions. The metal from which they were made was hard and durable; capable of tremendous strength; hard to heat, but glowing hot when once fanned and slow to cool. Perhaps in younger days they had made more display of love and affection; since then the seasons had tempered them until they were fit protagonists of the frontier. Tempered so that Tom Cruze might say, "Sartain, I'll stay. They'll not skeer me off." And so that his wife might quietly move to the simmering pot on the crane and nod.

"If it's to be a fight, Tom, you'd better lock the horses in and bring up water and wood," she advised.

"'Twon't be fer long. 'Tain't Injun nature to conduct a siege. It's the sudden, stealthy way a man's got to watch." Nevertheless he rose at her bidding and went to fill the empty pails at the creek. At the door he had another idea. "Sartain, ef it's to be war, then Mumpower an' Oldring an'

Conyers'll all be primed. A few dead Injuns'll put sense in Cockstock."

THESE were the other settlers whose cabins stood like outposts along the heavy green forest rim. The nearest was Mumpower, eight miles beyond Rocking River. Cruze totaled up the possible manpower of these four families in case of trouble, as he trudged toward the creek. Considering himself, there would be four men and ten boys. Enough to withstand nearly any kind of attack, if combined; but combination was next to impossible. In these dark woods and this somber ground the battle was both lonely and solitary. He filled the buckets at the brawling stream and went back to the house, whose dim glow of light and chimney sparks seemed the only cheerful sight in all the dismal, twilight day. He lifted the latch, stepped in, and dropped both buckets with a precipitate oath.

"Amy!"

She had gone to the bed and was staring at him with wide, unfrightened eyes. The message of urgency was in them when she raised a hand. "Run and get Mrs. Mumpower, Tom," she commanded. "And hurry. There—there ain't much time."

HE DROPPED down awkwardly and ran a clumsy hand across her hair.

"Why—Amy, I didn't reckon—why, cuss me, I'd told the bucks I'd go ef I'd known this was to happen so soon." It left him in a sudden suspense of fear; he fingered the bright yellow hair while the beads of sweat sprang to his rough skin. "Sartain, we'll ketch up and leave right off. We'll make the settlement by ten o'clock."

"No." The slow unhurried drawl of that word seemed to quiet his panic. "I can't travel, Tom. You run away now and get Mrs. Mumpower to come. Hurry. I—"

He was up on his feet, staring from corner to corner.

"Amy, gal, I can't pull out with you hyar alone," he protested. "Thar's apt to be trouble."

"Never mind. You can't stay now. Run along, Tom. Bring me that pistol and heap up the fire. I'll get up after a bit and bar the door right well."

He gripped his rifle, and at sight of his wife lying so helpless, so unable to use his strength or his willingness, his panic revived. It was two hours to Mumpower's and two hours back. The Molallas

had given him until sundown, and beyond this drizzle and murk of rain the sun was approaching the western line. When darkness fell they would come again. Perhaps he might reach the Molalla village and appeal to Little John. Cruze dismissed the idea at once. There would be only squaws at the village; the fighting men were out in the dark woods, waiting for the hour to strike. Certain peril to leave his yellow-haired wife so helpless in that bed; certain peril to remain. The time had come when she could use only the ministrations of her own kind or of a doctor.

"Tom, you look to have seen Old Nick. It isn't so bad—if you'll hurry. They'll not get in, right off. If they come I'll shoot through that window and they'll be mighty slow to rush in. 'Tain't dry enough to set the house on fire. Don't you grieve, Tom. Run now!"

"Amy, ain't thar anything I can do?"

"No—no! Go 'way! Hurry for Mrs. Mumpower!"

He stared at her with his jaw muscles bulging outward and his hazel gray eyes half hidden beneath the shady brows; some urgent impulse bent him over. He impressed a fleeting, shamefaced kiss on the woman's forehead and, without looking back, rushed for the door.

"I'll bustle right along," he reassured her and opened the door.

Next moment he had slammed it behind him and was out in the storm.

The door faced upon the dim trail to the settlement; on the opposite side of the clearing the upland trail entered. So, in a way, Cruze was sheltered from savage eyes if they were lurking about; the day was momentarily growing grimmer and the storm clouds blacker, more ragged in design as they scudded eastward to the hills. The creek rattled under the sudden bursts of rain and the trees whined in stress. Cruze stared about him and of a sudden dropped to all fours and crawled quickly to the nearest clump of bushes. If he could avoid being seen leaving the cabin it would for a little time deter the savages from making an outright attack upon the place; the knowledge that but a lone woman was within would surely hasten their aggression.

He gained the shelter of the brush and was inundated with a cascade of water; plunging down a graveled slope he breasted the turbulent creek and waded across. On the far side a thin trace led

through the wilderness of fir and hemlock. He set out upon it at a dog trot, the gun balanced in his right hand.

In the clearing there had been a kind of twilight; here a dismal dusk settled. High up the treetops caught the storm and sent the report down as a distant roar. All the sport and gusty vehemence of the elements filtered through the heavy boughs and became a persistent dripping rain, marked now and then by a shower of small limbs. And, like the signal of distant artillery, the infrequent detonation of a falling tree arrived in successive whorls of vibration.

He broke through the breast-high thicket, keeping his moccasined feet on the sinuous trace. By courtesy only could it be called a path. It was less than that. Indians used it in paralleling the foot of the Cascades; it was the frayed string that linked the widely separated outposts—Cruze, Mumpower, Conyers, Oldring. And beyond them others unknown. It wound in and out of draws, skirted and crossed rivers, entered meadows, taking always the line of least resistance until it finally crossed the range and, several hundred miles south, arrived at a tall butte called Yainax, where each fall the tribes from all the Northwest and California met for trade. And it marked the highest surge of a white tide that had washed Cruze and his remote neighbors toward the mountain fastness.

NEVER did Cruze break his step until he arrived at the Rocking River. The rifle swung back and forth, his breathing became more and more labored, he ran with a divided mind, half dwelling at the little cabin behind him and half warning his eyes to be on the alert for wilderness prowlers. He had always been on more or less friendly terms with the Molallas; yet, like all pioneers, he had that kind of trust in savage nature which was bolstered by sharp observation. There was a great fear upon him, a fear that speeded his legs and put added vigor in the whipcord body; not of Indians, but for his wife.

So he ran until he broke through the saplings and brush to face the turbid, yellow Rocking River hissing along the top of its banks and carrying the sediment and drift of a summer's collecting. It was not so very wide; ten yards measured it at this particular point, which at normal times was a ford. Now no man could venture over on foot. Cruze remembered a deadfall that spanned the stream a

little above, and once more set out at a trot along the turbulent waters; when he had gone two or three hundred yards he saw the middle of the deadfall sagging perilously into the water. It would do him no good to try that route unless he had some kind of purchase to the farther shore. Looking around and above him, he shook his head in a kind of desperate disappointment and, turning, ran back to the ford.

There had been growing on him that vague, uneasy feeling of danger again. No particular sound in the maelstrom of booming river and groaning trees arrived to warn him; it was, as before, the indefinite call to his instinct of self-preservation. He slipped noiselessly back into the fringe of grape and salal bushes, crouched on his knees and stared across at the gloomy thicket. Nothing out of ordinary that he could determine; the wind whipped the leaves and boughs; the rain pattered down. Still he rested, his body taut as an Indian bow, the rifle gripped across his thigh.

"God A'mighty!" he growled, and shifted uneasily. "No time to fool around with every little thing I hear."

He had the stalker's patience. At any other time he would have rested there, immobile, voiceless, until the impalpable warning had dissolved, or the quarry came into view. But fear was on his shoulders and urged him to hasten; he gave another long scrutiny to the far bank, strained his ears for the minor notes in the storm's cannonading, and then rose out of the covert. Below the ford a dozen yards stood an alder whose trunk, undermined by the freshet, canted toward the other shore. The treetop extended three-quarters across the water, and on the far side was met by the outreaching boughs of a hemlock. Cruze passed another swift glance through the darkening haze and leaped for the tree. He crawled up through the branches to the very top and looked down at the livid current. There was a hiatus of four or five feet across to where the fir boughs stretched their shelter, perhaps ten feet below his present perch. He swung the treetop back and forth, clung to his rifle with a death's grip, leaned far out on the return swing of the alder, shouted "So-ho now!" and leaped through the air.

HE MADE an arc through the dismal sky, cleared the open water gap and fell a-sprawl in the fir boughs. They momentarily broke his fall;

then they gave way and he started a crazy, head foremost descent to the ground. The fir needles scratched his face; he sought to check the fall with the free arm and was conscious of a hot slashing pain from shoulder to forearm. The rigidly-held gun caught crosswise between two limbs, snapped his body around like a top, turned him end for end, spun him, and catapulted him through the last ring of boughs to the ground in a dizzy heap.

It knocked the breath from him. That tenacious fire of self-protection, however, set him to movement almost automatically. He pulled one foot from the river's edge and weakly crawled toward deeper shelter, dragging the gun along. There he fell against a bush and for a moment relaxed. It was only for a moment. He seemed to hear a high, thin, newborn cry thread its way among all the varying noises of the storm, and he sprang up, terrified, running at full strength toward the trace.

A shadow rose up full against him, shutting off the small light of day; for a third time that ill-starred afternoon the surge of warning spread through the nerves of his body; this time the proximity made the shock and reaction more intense. He jumped aside and brought up his rifle, pulling the trigger as he advanced. The savage shouted, "Hey!" and swung a war-club. The rifle's hammer ticked forlornly against metal, and the wet powder refused to ignite.

"You damned varmint!" yelled Cruze. "Git outen my path!"

The war-club banged against the gun's stock and knocked it aside; the savage spread out an encircling arm. Cruze drew off and pulled his hunting knife. His arm flashed up.

"Hey!" shouted the buck, and fell with a weird cry.

Cruze leaped over the body and fled down the trace. Mumpower's was ahead.

Time, after that encounter, was for Tom Cruze a great leaden weight that dragged at his feet and pressed against his chest. Overhead the storm beat with an increased fury against the treetops and the cannonading of distant windfalls increased. He ran on, undeterred by the turnings and dipping of the trail, plunging over logs, brought up by vines. Endlessly he ran, with the great fear freezing his heart until, through a long dark vista, he saw a solitary gleam of light and presently heard the baying of dogs, full-throated, menacing.

“Hyeeeee! Dan! Hyeeeee!” he shouted at the top of his voice, scrambling over a rail fence.

The comforting spark of warmth dipped and died, leaving the cabin utterly dark. The dogs closed in.

“Who’s that? Sing agin!” an answering yell came across the clearing.

“Hyeee, Dan. It’s Tom Cruze! Call off them thar dogs an’ let me in!”

“Down, down, you curs!” a powerful voice sent out warning. “Git down! Belle come back hyar afore I bust a rib!”

Cruze ran up.

“It’s my wife, Dan!” he blurted. “I reckon I’ll have to ask yore wife to come right over. And them cursed Molallys give me warning just afore I pulled out.”

MUMPOWER stood in the doorway. He was a short man with a barrel chest and an iron-rust beard that masked his face, but a blaze of anger sparkled in his eyes and he turned a club-like arm into the cabin.

“Hyar, you boys, git up the guns. Maw, it’s Miz Cruze needs yore help. Ed, saddle a hoss fer maw. The rest of us’ll use shank’s mare. Tom, yo’re shakin’ like a pizen pup. Maw, whar’s the coffee pot? Injuns out, eh? Wal, by hell! We’ll blast ‘em!”

Cruze gulped down the coffee.

“They give me to sundown,” he informed between swallows. “‘Twasn’t but a half-hour later that the missis went to bed. Dan, what time is it now?”

Mumpower pulled out a big silver timepiece and squinted. “It’s five-thirty. Sundown wouldn’t rightly come ontill about six, ef thar war a sun.”

The sweat rolled down Cruze’s face.

“Ain’t no time to lose,” he muttered. “The missis—”

A clap of thunder overbore his last words. Mumpower’s five sons tramped in the door, armed and ready. Mrs. Mumpower, silver-haired and plump, was swathed in a blanket. “Laws, Mumpower, git yore hat an’ come. We ain’t no Methodist party. That poor little girl all alone!”

“Maw, you’d best put suthin’ more on. Hit’s goin’ to be tarnal wet.”

“Hush up, Paw Mumpower, and don’t stand thar like a bump on a log. Don’t you see how Tom Cruze is fumin’!” The good lady went out and got to the saddle. “Wet! Now you’d think I was Queen

o’ Sheby. Ain’t I been wet afore? Shet that door tight.”

“Hold,” said Mumpower. “I reckon the Rockin’ River’s plumb overflowin’, ain’t it, Tom?”

Cruze thought a moment. “Can’t take that horse across. But if we had a forty-foot stretch of rope—”

One of the boys called out of the blackness ahead.

“I got it,” he called. “Reckoned we’d sort o’ haul maw acrost.”

The dogs bayed and slumped off ahead of the horse. Indian-file, the party returned down the trace. Cruze cut around the other men and took the lead. Mumpower was directly behind, with his sons following, one leading the horse.

“How’s that deadfall across the creek?” asked Mumpower.

“Sunk in the middle.”

The elder pioneer held his tongue for a half-mile before he solved the problem.

“We’ll tie the rope end to Elvy—he swims best—and let him try the log,” he decided. “With the rope across we c’n each tow over an’ pull the hoss through with maw on it.”

That was the end of talk until the river was reached an hour and a half later. It was seven, and a torrent of water splashed between the trees. The stream tugged and groaned at the banks. Some jam of logs not far above created a cataract that resounded above the lesser noises. Cruze burst through the salal and arrived at the deadfall. It was barely distinguishable, a dark strip extending downward to a stretch of creaming water.

“Give me the rope,” said Cruze. “I’ll tie it around my ribs and make the jump.”

Mumpower rubbed a bald, sopping head and calculated the distance. “She’s a good eight or nine feet an’ under water in the middle. Ain’t sech a shucks of a jump, but the powerful part is to land on the other end o’ the log ‘thout boggin’. Elvy’s spryest. Let him go.”

But a fury of haste possessed Cruze. He was fastening the rawhide line around his waist.

“Give me plenty of slack,” he said and walked out upon the log. Mumpower let out the slack and turned the other end around his club-like arm. “Ef you slip I’ll haul back!” he shouted.

All creation seemed to stand at a pause and it appeared as if the roaring river and the pounding storm held their voices in abeyance for one significant moment. Out of the shadowy wilderness

ahead, sounding faint but certain, echoed a sudden burst of shots, perhaps a dozen in unison, followed by a ragged volley. Then a complete silence in which Cruze threw up a shaking arm.

"Hark!" cried Mumpower.

One lone echo swiftly bore down on the wind.

"It's Amy firin' back!" cried Cruze. "By God, if we're too late I'll stalk every Molally in these mountains!"

He drew back up the log a piece, ran ahead and leaped at water's edge.

"Ho!" yelled Mumpower by way of assistance and stood ready to pull the line.

Cruze had fallen flat on the farther incline, grasping the bark surface with both hands. The curling water licked at his moccasined feet and the log teetered perilously. In another instant he was up and on the farther shore, tying the rope to a sapling.

The boys went across, one by one, each with the rope's end around his waist and fighting the current as they whirled down and across the turbulent current. Mumpower stood behind and hitched the rope around the horse's neck.

"Now, Maw, you hang tight in this hyar saddle and the hoss'll do the rest," he directed.

"Don't you get skeered for me, Mumpower," replied the woman. "Oh, that poor lamb! Git along, horse."

The animal approached the water and reared back. Mumpower thwacked him on the rump, and next instant the current took animal and rider; for a time Mumpower raised both arms in suspense. The woman clung to reins and pommel, while the horse's head shot down the creek, bobbing above and below the surface, eyes wide with fright. Cruze and the four young Mumpowers pulled at the line, hauling it shoreward.

Cruze threw the line across for Mumpower and presently the elder was with them. "Waugh, cold water ain't my style nohow!" he roared in distaste.

"A leetle extra washin' ain't goin' to hurt you, Mumpower," retorted his wife. "Oh, that poor lamb in the cabin! Hurry!"

Cruze shouted a tremendous curse and ran into the brush with the others following behind him. Once more a staccato volley of shots resounded in the forest and once more, after a long, hesitant pause, came the single, lonely reply. Cruze was pouring out a steady stream of oaths, fighting aside brush and limbs.

OF A sudden a bright mushroom of light spread through the forest, turned to a yellow blob and leaped pointedly to the sky. Cruze screamed a warwhoop. In return the forest in front of him echoed with Molalla cries. The pioneer stopped in his tracks and threw up an arm, dimly seen, to the rest.

"It ain't the house they fired, it's the old lean-to I used fer a barn," he said. "They did it from cover and I reckon they figger it'll catch the house."

"Hyar's fightin' to do," rumbled Mumpower. "Yore wife's safe fer a little while."

"How do you know?" retorted his wife. "The poor lamb, I ought to be there right this minute."

"Maw, you git off that horse and be quiet a second. Boys, you all spread out and sneak for'd. The Injuns'll all be right on the clearin' edge. Whack 'em from behind. Elvy, you stay with yore mother."

The burning lean-to illumined the whole clearing and set the oiled skin windows to gleaming. The Indians raised a bedlam of noises and the firing became general. Cruze brought up the butt of his rifle and without ceremony dashed forward. Mumpower dropped to the ground. A shot banged out and whistled through the leaves. Cruze's gun descended with a solid thump.

"Thar's one Injun skull caved in," muttered the elder and rose up.

Both pioneers were creeping along the fringe of the trees, watching for the little jets of red that announced gunfire. Dead in front of Mumpower a savage rose and grunted, "Hough!" Before the white man could raise his rifle he was overborne and sent to the earth with the Molalla on top. The little copse seemed to become instantly the focal point of battle. The bushes rattled and a dozen warriors popped into sight; the reflection of the burning building revealed their dripping, half-naked bodies and made them seem like satanic creatures sprung from the earth. Once more the guttural shout of victory.

Cruze whirled about; the rifle crashed down on another skull; Mumpower shoved his knee in his opponent's stomach and lifted him clear.

"Take that, you cuss!" he muttered and, rolling over, sank his hunting knife hilt-deep.

"Comin', Paw, comin'!" Elvy Mumpower's cry rang through the glade.

Three of the boys converged upon the fight. The rifles burst out; the short orange flame thrust weird

fingers into the semi-lit place. A great, prolonged cry of death shuddered from one Molalla throat, wavered and fell away. It seemed to be the turning point of the fight. The rifle shots stopped; the brush rustled under many moving bodies; within the count of ten the place of battle was deserted and silent, leaving only the dead upon the field. Mumpower got to his feet and shook himself like a bedraggled dog.

"Cuss me, I felt my topknot come plumb loose that time." Then he turned upon his youngest son. "Elvy, I told you to stay with yore maw!"

"She's cached in the brush. Told me to come ahead and help out."

"Now, Mumpower, don't you scold him," from the thicket came the woman's reply. "He's got to shoulder a gun sometime or other."

Cruze was running across the clearing. Even before he got to the door it swung open to meet him, and upon the threshold stood the tall, thin, rawboned figure of a man dressed in preacher's black. It was Joab Porter, itinerant preacher and doctor, who made it his duty to visit all the solitary and outlying places in the hills and valley.

"Amy?" Cruze cried out his question.

"Doin' tolerable well," was the slow rejoinder. "Yo're the paw of two more Oregon citizens now, both male, fat and healthy."

Cruze wiped his forehead.

"How'd you come to be hyar?" he asked.

"Was heading thisaway when I heard talk o' trouble back at the settlement. Thought if I pushed on in a hurry I might help. I got hyar plumb in time, it appears."

From within came a steady wailing cry. Cruze felt suddenly weak and humble, and Porter must have read his feeling for he clapped a hand on the pioneer's shoulder.

"God's will," the steady, kind voice boomed comfort. "Down on yore knees."

And there in the flickering light of the fireplace, with the wind whipping through the open door and the rain beating relentlessly down upon the roof, the two men knelt silently while the newborn cried. The burning lean-to fell apart with a hissing sound, and in the remote distance a gun banged a departing challenge.