

The Red Roan Mare

by John G. Neihardt

IT'S all very well to laugh at what you can't understand, and there's no defense against laughter. I myself used to ridicule such things, for the life of a trooper in the Sioux campaign of the 70's was hardly calculated to make a healthy man believe in any phase of existence that could not be effectually ventilated by the slash of a saber or put out of business with a drop of hot lead.

But that was before Jim Dolan went out; and since then—well, it's just as though a man were walking in a night of drizzle through a strange country, conscious only of the ground under his feet and of the impenetrable darkness, when suddenly a flash of lightning lifts the gloom, revealing his unsuspected relation to a whole landscape. And after that he believes in considerably more than the ground under his feet, for he feels that world all about him silent in the shadow.

Mind yon, I'm not saying that it all really happened. Part of it might be explained by the scalp-wound Jim got in Reno's fight on the Little Big Horn, and part may have been due to my own fatigue and hunger and to the drenching, melancholy weather of those last days. Make what you can of it; I tell it as it seemed to me.

I had known Jim only since early March of that year, 1876, at which time he had been detailed for scout duty to my regiment, the Second Cavalry, then a part of General Gibbon's command stationed at Fort Ellis. Nevertheless we were fast friends.

He was a big, handsome, magnetic fellow, such as women love and men admire; and I never could make out why he should

have taken a liking in me, for I was always a quiet man, morose, as some thought, little given to pleasantries; and what courage I ever displayed was not of the dashing sort—rather a species of fear than genuine courage—the master-fear of being afraid.

But Jim's was the true Celtic temperament. The gloomiest circle of troopers that ever hugged a grudging smudgy bivouac fire of sage-brush grew merry with his presence. He seemed to regard danger as the acme of life, and life as rather a good practical joke, the point of which was all but spoiled by too many serious boneheads—like myself.

Humor and daring in him seemed somehow to be the same thing, and I have often thought that he really deserved little credit for his remarkable courage, which was attributable less to driving will and the sense of doom than to a superabundance of animal spirits. Thus constituted, so fitted to make Hard Luck the bumpkin of farce, he should have gone out like a brilliant light snuffed at full flare. Ah, how differently it happened!

As for William George, I knew him but slightly, and what I saw of him left an unpleasant impression. We of the "Montana Battalion" had marched down the left bank of the Yellowstone from Fort Ellis under orders to join with General Terry's forces pushing west from the Little Missouri, and had been in camp over a week opposite the mouth of the Rosebud, when the steamer *Far West* arrived with Terry and his staff.

About noon of the same day the long line of Custer's cavalry, the unforgettable Seventh, filed down from the table-land across the river and went into camp in the valley.

When the boat was about to cast off, bearing Gibbon and Terry to the last council of war in which Custer would ever participate, Jim suggested that we cross with her.

“For,” he said, “I’ve got a friend in H troop of the Seventh—haven’t seen him since my last trip to Fort Lincoln. Want you to know him.”

So I went along and met William George.

He was grooming a big, red, roan mare when we found him, and it struck me that the manner in which he greeted his genuinely delighted friend was a trifle cold. He seemed less interested in the man than in the mare, of which he was evidently very fond, judging by the gentle care that he lavished upon her from ear-tip to fetlock.

A neat-built, wiry little chap he was, scarcely a full inch to spare above the army height. His restless, black eyes were set a mite too close to a thin, sensitive nose, and his upper lip had a disagreeable habit of curling at the corner. He seemed always on the point of sneering, though when he spoke, which was seldom, he was civil enough in his saturnine way.

I felt sure no length of association could have made us pals, and I expressed something of the kind to Jim afterward. But he insisted that I was mistaken.

“Bill’s a good sort,” he said, “but you’ve got to bore through his shell to know the heart of him. Down at Fort Abe he beat me to the finest girl that ever lived, and so I guess I’m no prejudiced party. He’s too serious; that’s all that ails him. Why, you’d think his life was being held for a ransom of a hundred and seventeen dollars and no cash in sight the way he takes things! You’ve got to have real sand to think that way and still go ahead, and a sandy man is sure to be a good sort when you get past his burs.”

Nevertheless, in spite of Jim’s generous view, my unpleasant impression

persisted.

At the council it was decided that Custer should proceed with the Seventh Cavalry up the Rosebud, following the fresh Sioux trail discovered by Major Reno a few days before. Should the trail be found to turn toward the Little Horn—which proved to be the case—he was to continue southward as far as the headwaters of the Tongue, thence turning toward the Little Horn.

Our column under Gibbon was ordered to proceed up the Yellowstone to the mouth of the Big Horn, there to be ferried over by the Far West, and thence to march to the forks of the Big and Little Horns. Thus, if all worked well, the hostiles were to be enclosed by the two columns on the twenty-sixth of June, and Custer was advised by Terry not to attack before that date.

Among the white scouts transferred for service with the Seventh was Jim Dolan.

Well, our forces arrived in the early morning of the twenty-seventh. On the twenty-fifth Custer, with five troops had attacked a village containing no less than seven thousand Sioux warriors. The whole world knows what we found strewn along the broken rise east of the river. I need not dwell upon that ghastly wreck of valor, for neither Jim nor his friend was found there, and such a tale may be left to the Xenophons of the past, or, better still, let us hope, to some not impossible Homer of the future.

Farther to the south we came upon a very different scene, where, upon a barren hilltop, surrounded by their slain and wounded, barricaded by their dead horses and pack-mules, sun-blistered, thirst-maddened, the remnant of the Seventh under Major Reno had held out for thirty-six hours against the whirlwind assaults of a body of cavalry that had not a superior in the annals of war-craft.

Upon learning of the approach of Terry’s column the Sioux had retreated toward the Big Horn Mountains, Burning the grass

behind them to screen their movements; and, accordingly, the hour yielded us no sterner duty than that of relieving our plucky comrades.

Among the wounded were Jim Dolan and William George. When I came upon Jim he was leaning against the carcass of a pack-mule with a bloody bandage on his head and a pipe in his mouth. His eyes had a dazed look and his face was pinched; but he was making a heroic effort to smoke. A bullet had bitten the scalp evidently early in the engagement, for he remembered little after the retreat to the hilltop, and seemed to be of the impression that it was still the 25th of June.

When I asked him how he was getting on he smiled like a sick child, and remarked that he felt a good deal like the fag-end of a drunk without the memory of the fun; and when he grinned I saw how he had been chewing his pipe-stem.

“Did they get Bill?” he asked anxiously. I had not yet come upon Bill. “I hope he’s all right—it means so much to the poor devil—the girl and all that, you know,” said Jim. “Hunt him up and tell me. Don’t mind me; I’ll be fit as a fiddle in a day or two.”

I found Bill with a hole in his side huddled up behind a clutter of dead horses. He was bled white, and when I first saw him I thought he was dead. But he opened his eyes and the light of recognition came slowly into his vacant stare.

When he spoke, scarcely above a whisper, the sequence of his questions struck me as peculiar. Had I seen his mare—a red roan? And was Jim killed? I had not seen the mare, and Jim had a scalp wound. Would Jim die?

One should say nothing but good of the dead, and I may have been mistaken; but I thought my hopeful answer to that last question sent a fleeting expression of vexation across the white face as he closed his eyes and

groaned. Then, too, he may have been thinking of the mare. Men have strange whimsies when the chill white wind begins, as it had begun for him.

We immediately set about the task of carrying the wounded down to the steamer *Far West*, which with great difficulty had succeeded in reaching the forks of the Big and Little Horns some fifty miles from the Yellowstone. My troop and one other of the second were detailed to carry the litters in relays, and about sundown we set out with our pitiable burdens upon a most melancholy and toilsome journey.

Our progress was painfully slow, for the rough trail was rendered more difficult by the darkness, and for many of the wounded the least jar was torture. At midnight, having covered less than five miles, we decided to wait for the day.

It was during that gruesome night-watch that I caught the first glimmering of the relation between Jim and Bill, though at the time it all seemed to me little more than the whim of a dying man. In my rounds through the camp during the dark hour before daybreak I came upon William George, ghastly white in the blue glare of a smoldering brush-fire. He was evidently delirious, for he was muttering incoherently, and when he opened his eyes he called me Jim.

I thought to humor the poor fellow, and kneeling beside him stroked his head and spoke as I imagined Jim might speak to him in his tenderest mood. He stared long and searchingly upon me, and then he said: “Bring me the mare, Jim. I’ve got to start now—I’ve got to ride fast before it gets me. I must go to her before it gets too cold.”

And I said “Yes; but it’ll be daylight soon, and you’d better not start till then.”

His eyes narrowed with a look that would have been murderous had there been any vitality behind it. “You’re hiding the mare from me, so I can’t go,” he said; “and you’ll

ride there yourself—and it'll get me." He made a pitiful struggle to get up and fell back exhausted. I once killed a wounded coyote with a club and it stared at me as Bill stared then. "But I'll be there too, damn you!" he whispered.

Then he was off to the fight on the barren hilltop, and by his broken muttering I knew that once more he heard the bickering of the carbines, the shrieking of wounded horses, the moaning of tortured comrades and the yells of the charging Sioux. I thought he would die before morning: but he clung to life as a man plunged into an air-hole clings to thin ice.

We did not set out again in the morning, but spent the day making mule-litters, and it was nearly sun-down before we were ready to resume fee march.

Between long saplings, hitched fore and aft to the pack-saddle of a mule, we slung blankets for the accommodation of the wounded. I see it now very vividly—the long train winding down the wild valley of the Little Horn through a flame-painted night—the shadowy bulks of the pack-animals lurching on the rough trail—huge, distorted shadows leaping along the banks like ghostly outriders of a ghostly cavalcade—the white faces lifted momentarily out of the gloom by the capricious flare of the wind-smearred torches. It is the weirdest picture in my memory, save one.

Well on toward morning we sighted the lights of the steamboat glimmering through the murk at the end of a long lane of bonfires that had been kindled by the crew for our guidance.

Early the next morning the Far West, with her cargo of suffering, started on her record-breaking voyage to Fort Lincoln, seven hundred miles away: and that was the last I saw of William George. Or was it? Nearly forty years have passed since then, and perhaps with age one's flesh wears thin and

one sees through to the other side. However that be, the more I ponder the strange happenings of those last days, the more am I prone to believe that I saw him again.

When, in midsummer, offensive operations were resumed, we pushed eastward under General Crook in pursuit of Sitting Bull's band.

The Sioux, apparently content with one successful stroke, had broken up into small bodies, the scattered remnants trickling back to the reservations. It was a wild-goose chase; and when, early in September, we reached the headwaters of the Heart River, we were half whipped, though we had met no enemy.

We had traveled over four hundred miles since leaving our wagon-train, and our jaded animals were dropping out by the score; for the buffalo-grass had been burned before us by a dissolving foe. Ragged, half starved, we had little more than ammunition and nerve, and many of our men began to develop symptoms of scurvy.

One hundred and sixty miles to the east was Fort Lincoln. Two hundred miles to the south, across a desolate region, lay the Black Hills. To strike east for supplies meant a loss of two weeks, during which time the new mining settlements in the hills would be left defenseless. A ten days' march to Deadwood on the two days' rations remaining to us seemed impossible.

Nevertheless, we turned south.

There was no disguising the fact—we who had met no foe were in headlong retreat; and hunger, more terrible than the whole Sioux nation, harried us van and flank and rear, like invisible cavalry. It had come on to rain—a ceaseless leaking of low, gray skies that washed the salt out of our saddle-bags and chilled us to the bone.

Now and then, all day long, the crack of a pistol, dulled by the fog, told us that one more leg-weary horse had fallen and could not

get up.

That evening we bivouacked in a desolate valley. There was no wood, and I, like all the rest of the column, even to Crook himself, was huddled up to a cheerless smudge of sage-brush, watching the stragglers hobble in with the water streaming from their hats, when, out of the twilit rain-blur that blanketed a rise to the east, appeared a horse and rider, bearing down upon us at an easy canter that certainly could not have been managed by any of our animals.

It was not that the sage-brush suddenly burned more brightly, or that the melancholy drench abated in the least; but the bivouac immediately became less cheerless for me: for better is a half-drowned smudge of sagebrush shared with a pal than the glow of oak logs alone.

It was Jim Dolan with despatches from Fort Lincoln.

Superficially he was the same old Jim; but I felt a difference: not in appearance—he looked well, and had evidently fully recovered from his wound; not in his talk—it was still warm-hearted and merry enough, considering the long ride and the diabolical weather. The difference was subtle, and may, in fact, have been in me.

Perhaps you will get my feeling when I say that there seemed to be a thin veil over his personality. I thought at the time that the vague change was fully explained when I asked about his friend, William George, and saw how his eyes took on a far look. Bill had died on the trip down the Yellowstone, and was buried at the mouth of the Powder.

That was all I got out of him then, and I did not push the subject, seeing; the effect it produced. I attributed that effect to the warm Irish heart of him cherishing the memory of a vanished friend; and when next day, riding at his left through the pelting rain, I noted the gauntlet of his bridle-hand marked in ink, "W. G.—H7C," I was deeply moved, for I had

never experienced such devotion of man to man.

We were floundering through the mud at the crossing of the north fork of the Grand when a courier from our advance guard under Mills brought the news of a clash with an Indian village under Chief American Horse at Slim Buttes some seventeen miles to the south.

Reinforcements were immediately ordered forward, including my troop of the Second, and Jim rode with us.

About noon, emerging at the mouth of a ravine, the whole arena of action was spread out before us. To the north, south, and west towered the grotesque, weather-carved heights of the Slim Buttes, swathed in trailing clouds of mist and smoke. It was like a Greek theater on a grander scale, the valley being the orchestra.

The first glance at the welter of men and horses that thronged the scene revealed to us the fact that we had at last met with some of the chief actors in the tragedy of the Little Big Horn; for, scattered about among the bands that still contested the victory with Mills, were tattered guidons and uniforms of Custer's regiment.

A few moments later our troop was charging a small body of Sioux who had taken up an advantageous position at the mouth of a coulee, when that befell which, as I am prone to believe was the first of a series of strange happenings that ended as you shall hear. While we were pursuing the fleeing band at a stiff gallop up the gulch, Jim's horse struck a gopher hole and went down with a broken leg. I drew rein and cantered back. Jim picked himself up, laughing, and, placing a pistol to the horse's head, put the poor beast out of its misery. The thudding reverberations of the shot had scarcely died away in the misty gulch, when a shrill whinny came from behind a clump of brush near by.

"There's luck," said Jim; "no walking

for me to-day.”

I dismounted, and we pushed through the brush, expecting to find the pony of some fallen Sioux. What we found was a big, raw-boned mare, bridled but barebacked. That she was a red roan in no way excited my imagination; for, as you know, I am a matter-of-fact sort of man, and I had seen many red roans in my time—a not uncommon color in a horse.

But what did strike me as odd was the look on Jim’s face. He had been laughing a moment before, but now there came upon his countenance the blank expression of a sleep-walker. He had stopped stock-still, his cheeks were blanched; and he was staring wide-eyed, not at the mare—but across her back! He seemed not to breathe.

What time elapsed I do not know; but when the mare, with ears pricked forward, approached us, nickering, the strange look vanished.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Jim muttered, now advancing with a coaxing hand outheld.

“For what?” said I.

“Oh, nothing!” he replied; “just one of my fool notions. Speed in that nag—eh? And tough as whang-leather!”

Our comrades, returning from their scamper up the gulch, came upon us while Jim was cinching his saddle on the new mount. We rode back through the dripping ooze without a word. In fact, at the time the incident did not assume the importance which I am now persuaded to attach to it, and it passed easily out of my mind; for Crazy Horse had come up with the main body of the Sioux, and during the rest of the day there was little leisure for the entertainment of whimsies.

We were too much occupied with the brutal business of maintaining our strategically weak position in the valley against the hostiles potting at us from the heights. I should probably have forgotten the matter entirely in the hardships of the ensuing

days had it not been forced upon me again by Jim himself.

With the waning of daylight the enemy withdrew. The rain abated to a drizzle, and the night was pitch-black. Jim and I rolled up beside a smoky fire, and I, thoroughly fagged, must have fallen at once into a dead sleep.

I was startled by a hand laid heavily on my shoulder and a voice in my ear. Seizing my carbine, I leaped to my feet, thinking in the first wild moment of waking that a night attack was being made upon us. Then I became aware of the silence of the camp, and knew that it was Jim who had aroused me.

He had stirred the fire to a mockery of cheeriness, and was sitting beside it wrapped in his blanket. “Sorry I had to wake you,” he said; “but I had to do it—had to talk to somebody—can’t sleep.”

I sat down beside him, feeling more than a little bit surly. “What’s wrong?” I asked. He did not answer at once, but stared into the fire, and I was on the point of anger when I noted that he had a frightened expression—like that of a child who has just escaped from something in the dark. Jim of all men!

“Why, Jim,” I said, “are you sick?”

He gave me a searching look with something like an appeal in it, and said: “How can a man get out of six feet of clay?”

A hideous suspicion flashed coldly upon me as I thought of the scalp-wound. I had seen men horribly mutilated, and felt no sensation but that of pity. Such things happened in the business of a professional fighting man. But that one should suddenly discover his friend to be some one else—some strange dweller in a fanciful world—I felt prickly all over.

He must have felt my shudder. “For God’s sake, old pard,” he said, “don’t think I’m crazy! I’m simply puzzled, and I want to thrash the thing out with you. It’s about Bill.”

I nodded and waited.

“Bill and I were pals, as you know,” he went on at length. “We campaigned together with the Seventh in 1873, and there wasn’t ever anything between us until a year ago, though I always felt that I forced the friendship. Bill was peculiar—never seemed to give the whole man. Always I felt that just a shy bit of him stuck to its hole like a badger. It used to hurt me, because I was fond of him and never held anything back. But you can’t have a friend made to order after your own specifications, so I got to taking him just as he was, and it worked better that way.”

Here Jim’s voice trailed away into the silence of a deep study. The fact that what he had said was rational enough somewhat calmed my first fear, and yet was it quite a normal proceeding to wake a man in the dead of night and insist upon his listening to ever so interesting a delineation of character?

“Well?” I urged with some impatience. Whereupon he began again, talking in a monotonous tone, as though he were only half there.

“Then the woman came in—it was at Fort Lincoln—and there was a change. Bill and I had always shared everything, and I did not look upon the acquaintanceship as serious; for marriage had not then occurred to me as a possibility—and it was not necessary to look twice to know that the woman was good. As to her feeling for me, I thought her no more than gracious. I was slow in realizing the fact that it was otherwise with Bill, though. I felt a growing coldness that puzzled me. But one day some long suppressed hell boiled over, and that part of him which he had been withholding from me came out in a flare of rage. It wasn’t good to see.

“The woman had become a matter of life and death to him—and he was jealous. It struck me as ridiculous, and I laughed like a fool. Then I took him by the shoulders and I looked deep into his eyes that had a tangled light in them, and I said: ‘Look here, Bill! I

wouldn’t swap a first-class he-friend for all the females that ever strutted. The nicker of my horse is sweeter to me than her laughter is to you.’

“Soon after that I got myself sent to Fort Ellis with despatches, and that was when I met you. And the more I thought about Bill on my lonesome rides the more tenderness I felt for him and the more I was sorry. As you know, I did not see him again until the Seventh camped at the mouth of the Rosebud last spring. You remarked a coldness in his greeting — and you were right. They were engaged. His term of enlistment expired this fall. It was going to happen then, and they were going back East.”

Jim trailed off again and fussed absent-mindedly with the fire. I had fully awakened by that time, and felt reassured as to his sanity; for, though I was still groping after the point of his narrative, I began to catch at vague meanings, moving like shadows in a fog; and Bill’s raving during that night watch on the Little Big Horn came back to me in a new light.

“It was the night he died,” Jim continued, “a hell of a night. I’ll see it to my last day—the whole after deck of the Far West cluttered with writhing men under the lamps that smoked in the river wind. And the engines pounded and the men groaned and the stern-wheel snored, kicking back the yellow miles, and the exhaust went on forever and ever—*swish, s-w-i-s-h*. My head was near splitting with it. And all at once, above the clatter and the moaning, I heard a wild cry with my name in it. It was Bill calling me from the other side of the boat, and he kept it up till I crawled over to where he was.

“He was right on the edge of things and slipping fast. It nigh tore the heart out of me to see the face of him, and God knows I would gladly have swapped wounds with him then. The old Bill that I knew had already gone, and he eyed me like a snake writhing

under a boot-heel.

“‘You’ll get there, and I won’t,’ he wheezed. Then he flopped around till he got up on one elbow, and he looked like a man who is yelling, though the voice he fetched was only a thin squawk, and he said: ‘Leave her alone, Jim, I tell you; leave her alone!’ Then he fell back all crumbled up and shivering. And I swore I wouldn’t have anything to do with the girl; but he didn’t seem to know me after that. He died that night, and next day we landed at the mouth of the Powder and buried him.”

Once more Jim was silent. Then at length he said in a low voice, as though he were talking to himself: “I’ve broken my promise. I was Bill’s friend, and I was wounded, and she was kind to me. It came on me too strong when I was too weak—and afterward I couldn’t somehow shake it off. And, after all, Bill was dead, and the living have to take happiness where they can. She gave me his spurs and gauntlets that I brought to her and asked me to wear them. God knows I have worn them with a heart full of love for Bill.”

Out of another silence Jim hurled strange words, turning upon me with the manner of a man who gives the lie to an accuser: “Bill was dead, I tell you! I saw him die! I saw him buried! I saw them shovel the clay on him! And yet I saw him—plainer than I see you now—sitting on his own mare this afternoon!”

Again the hideous suspicion, that Jim’s seemingly rational narrative had all but allayed, flashed coldly upon me. This could not be sane, I thought, because it was not then within the limits of my experience. It gave me the feeling of a man trying to scramble up the crumbling walls of a sand-pit. I tried to laugh, feeling that bluff ridicule might shock him back to sanity, but my attempt was a fiasco. The wound had bitten too deep, and Jim was dying at the top.

“Laugh if you like, old pard,” he said; “but I saw what I saw. Come with me.”

He got up and started toward where our animals were tethered out in the dark. I followed, heard the soft nicker of the mare as Jim approached, saw his head and the dim bulk of a horse leap suddenly out of the dark in the sputtering flare of a sulfur match. “Look,” he said as I came up and peered over his shoulder. The mare was branded high up on the rump. U. S.; and lower, near the flank, 7HC.

The match went out, and for a moment I was in the grip of a panic doubt as to all those fundamental preconceptions upon which my tight little world was built. It was like a sprawling tumble down a black hole. But immediately old habits of thought reasserted themselves, and my fear for Jim’s sanity came back redoubled. I assumed the role of the worldly wise cynic, the man who knows all about existence and therefore can’t be buncoed.

“Well, and what of it?” said I as we walked back to the fire. “There were horses in H troop of the Seventh, were there not? I believe, as a general rule, they are to be found in cavalry regiments; and some of Reno’s were captured by the Sioux. You’ve got to take hold of yourself, Jim, and quit brooding about Bill. Where’s your sense of humor? A dead man playing dog in the manger! As for what you saw—simple enough. Head full of Bill—red roan mare—Bill on the mare. Shake it off and let’s get some sleep, for hell will be popping all over the place in the morning.”

He made no reply, rolling up to the fire with his back to me. But he did not sleep. I know—for neither did I. But when the wretched camp became visible in the dirty light of a sodden, sunless dawn, I felt angry with myself for my ineffectual denial of Jim’s vagary during the black hours of wakefulness. What a fool I had been to give even a second thought to the fantastic improbability of

another life amid the brutal and still unmastered verities of this one!

Men were so many bellies. Let the sleek and pampered forget that fact, pule about souls, and all that. As for the girl—that sort of thing was all very well for an idle moment of moonlight amid safety and an unbroken sequence of square meals; but here was a sterner business. I would wipe the affair out of my consciousness and I would make it very plain to Jim what I thought of the matter if he forced it upon me again.

We buried our dead in a deep ravine, and a thousand horses in columns of twos trampled over the new graves, obliterating all traces of the spade, that the last resting-place of our fallen comrades might not be violated by the skulking Sioux. Then, though technically we were victorious, having captured and destroyed a village of the enemy, we resumed our flight—a gaunt, ragged multitude of men and horses fleeing from our own want.

Either piqued at my apparent lack of sympathy or ashamed of his own unmanly whimsy, Jim did not ride with me that day, but chose to accompany Upham's battalion of the Fifth, upon which fell the duty of covering our retreat.

The fog soon engulfed the rear guard: but all morning we could hear the dull popping of the cavalry carbines and the deeper drawling of the Indian rifles. The trail now led steadily upward amid grotesque peaks fringed with jack-pines, looming ghostlike about us.

At dawn the drizzle had again increased to a downpour, and unseen gulches boomed around us. When, for a moment, the capricious wind drew back the curtain of the fog ahead, the detailed picture of our utter wretchedness fetched many a groan—the infantry, a shivering rabble of vagabonds, floundering through the sticky mud; the cavalry, mostly afoot, dragging their exhausted mounts behind them, disheartened,

footsore crow-baits with drooping heads and tucked-in tails streaming with the drench.

And when, toward noon, my troop came upon a bevy of hollow-eyed stragglers who were skinning a horse, the fact of our condition was driven home with a new force. Henceforth we would eat our four-footed comrades. It seemed almost like cannibalism.

It may well be that my breakfast of sage-brush smoke and drizzle after a bad night had left me weak, or that the ultrahuman character of the rain-washed landscape got on my nerves—or both—but in spite of my sane determination of the morning I could not drive Jim's absurd fancy out of my head.

There it stuck despite my efforts to oust it: and, strangely enough, I often caught myself slipping away into a semi-dream state in which the whole absurd business undeniably took on the character of a foursquare actuality; and before I was aware of the change I would be seriously considering what might be the intent and procedure of William George. Then it would come to me that William George was dead, and once more the fear for Jim Dolan's sanity would fasten upon me.

Early that afternoon we went into bivouac along the brushy bank of a creek flowing northward out of towering bluffs that appeared to bar our retreat like a wall. Somehow we succeeded in kindling fires, and the whole camp was soon steaming from the improvised shelters made by flinging sopping blankets over sticks thrust into the mud.

Toward nightfall Upham's battalion joined us, and Jim rode up to where I happened to be sitting alone, huddled under my dripping blanket over a little brush fire that struggled valiantly against the downpour.

The excitement of the rear-guard fight had apparently done him good, for as he flung a leg across the mare and dismounted, he essayed a joke. "Ham and eggs for six, chef!" he commanded with playful brusqueness; "and

be quick about it.”

His tone cheered me. It was the old Jim come back again. No doubt he had merely given way to a passing fancy, and God knows there was in our circumstances sufficient justification for an occasional lapse from the strictly rational.

When we had finished with a chunk of roasted horse-flesh, and Jim had ended his animated narrative of the rear-guard fight, so reassuring had been his manner that I ventured on a sally, intended to be witty, regarding his vagary of the previous day and night; for it seemed to me an opportune moment had arrived for ending the incident with a gust of wholesome laughter.

But no sooner had my ill-conceived joke passed my lips than a sickening sense of its utter failure smote me. Far from laughing, as I had expected, Jim suddenly grew grave, and a troubled look came into his eyes. Night had fallen now, and the rain-smearred splotches of light from the bivouac fires strung along the ravine served to intensify the outlying darkness.

“I hoped you wouldn’t say anything more about it,” said Jim. “It’s getting on my nerves. I’ve fought it all day.” Here he handed me his gauntlets. “Put them on,” he said.

I obeyed, feeling a necessity to humor my poor friend; for I had heard that in certain forms of mania there may be intervals of complete freedom from the characteristic obsession, which the least suggestion may suffice to recall. The horse-flesh, though stringy and tough, had banished the peevishness which accompanies a certain stage of hunger, and now I felt nothing but pity for the man. It was the scalp-wound, after all.

“Do you notice anything queer?” he asked.

“They are well soaked, aren’t they?” I replied casually, feigning not to have noticed the initials on the left one. He eyed me with

the same appealing stare that I had noted the night before, and said: “How could there be four hands in one pair of gauntlets? Tell me that! I’ve felt it all day; and the mare knew it. Often when I felt it strongest she would turn her head back, nicker caressingly, and nip at the toe of my boot.”

Seeing that neither cajolery nor humoring would do any good, and yet feeling the necessity for doing something, I assumed a stern air which I was far from feeling, and expressed myself rather pointedly.

“Now look here, Jim,” I began; “I’m going to be open with you, knowing that I can trust to that solid foundation of horse-sense which I have never found lacking in you.” Then I set forth quite frankly my theory of the scalp-wound, made it plain that I considered him a sick man, ventured the conviction that he was in dire need of a friend to guide him, and offered my services in that capacity. “And if the mare and the gauntlets have that effect upon you,” I ended, “for God’s sake shoot the nag and burn the gauntlets!”

I thought to shake him out of his morbid condition by appealing to the instinct of self-preservation; and you may imagine my despair when, far from appearing alarmed at my prognosis of his alleged ailment, he smiled calmly, a little sadly, and resting a hand on my shoulder, said: “It’s good of you, old pard; but there’s something bigger than you and I in it. I’ll not mention it again. As for the mare and the gauntlets—would I shoot Bill, would I burn him?”

I fell to sleep that night with the melancholy conviction that sooner or later my poor friend would lapse into idiocy, and I got only slight comfort from the determination to speak to the surgeon about his case.

Some time during the night I awoke suddenly, feeling certain that I had heard bugles sounding the charge. I leaped to my feet, only to note how silent the night was, save for the whisper of the rain out in the

darkness. Most of the bivouac fires had succumbed to the drench and the remainder sent up columns of faintly glowing steam and smoke soon swallowed in the murk.

I was preparing to roll up again when I noted that Jim was missing.

At the same time there came from the outer gloom a low whinny—coaxing and caressing as of a much petted horse welcoming its master. The sound explained to me not only the fancied blare of bugles, but the absence of Jim as well. Doubtless he had gone to the mare for some fantastic reason sufficient to his poor, addled mind.

It was plainly my duty to look after him. So, having heaped the charred ends of the brush upon the dying coals, I went to where the mare was staked out; and what I saw by the groping glow of the replenished fire made my heart ache with pity. Jim was grooming the mare.

Approaching, I addressed him as though he were doing something quite usual. "About through with the mare, Jim?" I asked. "Better hurry up and come back to the fire."

He wheeled about and—it wasn't Jim at all!

The face there turned upon me was the one I had seen during the gruesome night-watch on the Little Big Horn. It was the face of a dying man, and before I could catch my breath it had_ shuddered into nothing like a face in a pool struck by a sudden gust of wind, and only the mare remained.

When at length I regained control of my limbs I hastened back to the fire, shivering violently. As I came up, Jim appeared, wrapped closely in his blanket and walking rapidly from the opposite direction. Neither of us spoke as we curled up beside the fire. Was I, too, going off my head?

That question made the long night hideous for me.

We broke camp at the first light and pushed on toward Black Hills. Still the rain

came down; in fact, it did not cease during those terrible eleven days of the retreat from the headwaters of the Heart to the Belle Fourche. Up and up the trail wound amid eery peaks vague in the rain-blur; up and up to some fantastic cloudland, as it seemed, until close on noon we reached a summit where the highlands dropped precipitously to a featureless plain that seemed vaster for the very cloaking of the mist. It was a heart-breaking prospect.

And now began the long, last stage of a march which for severity and hardship, as an authority has remarked, has but few parallels in the history of the army. I need not dwell upon the details. It is enough to say that no wood was to be found, that grass was scarce, and that the soil through which we floundered was gumbo. No fires at night; no coffee in the morning. Only the endless muck and the ceaseless autumn rain, and the weariness and the hunger. And all the while skulking bands of Sioux hung upon our flanks and rear like wolves lusting after the stragglers of a bison herd.

Hour after hour Jim and I trudged along together, leading our leg-weary horses, or rode knee to knee when the going was better; and never a word passed regarding that which neither of us could forget. A strange fear tied my tongue; fear not only for my friend's sanity, but for my own. As for Jim, he had promised silence, and he kept his promise to the end.

The end!

It came suddenly and in a manner far other than any I had groped after in my wildest imaginings. It was the third day of the march across the God-forsaken plain, and my troop had been detailed to guard the rear and to pick up the stragglers; for many of our men were falling exhausted by the way, and the scattered bands of Crazy Horse still harried us. Evening was coming on—a slow, imperceptible deepening of the general

grayness.

Fagged, gaunt, shivering, we rode in silence, save for the low murmur of the rain and the dull, sucking pop of the gumbo clinging to the hoofs of our staggering horses.

A band of Sioux appeared at the mouth of a shallow *arroyo*, some three hundred yards to our left, and opened fire. Mechanically, almost listlessly, we wheeled about and returned the compliment, though the mark was little more than a clutter of dark blotches against a background of muddy gray.

Suddenly amid the snarling of the carbines a wild cry came from Jim on my right—a shuddering cry like that of a man who flees some horror of a nightmare. My first thought was that he had been hit. I turned to him and saw—

Shall I say that I saw it? Or had the strain of those terrible days reduced my vitality to the point where hallucinations was only a matter of suggestion? Explain it as you wish, and be content with your thumb-rule measurement of preconceived cosmos, as you must.

I saw it in that flash of timelessness—the red roan rearing with the sting of plunged-in spurs, Jim staring upon me with a face gone blank with terror, his carbine still slung, his bridle-hand limp. But that is not all I saw.

There were two in that saddle.

One moment so—and with a shriek of pain the mare was off, headed for the mouth of the *arroyo*, her neck stretched out, her ears laid back—a gaunt image of sinewy speed; while Jim rolled loosely in the saddle, and the other—one with Jim from the saddle down and one with him at the hands—crouching low to the tossing mane as one who rides a race.

The firing ceased and the whole troop gazed, thunderstruck.

It was like a dream, brief in the memory, but endless in the passing. The flying mare became a shadow, vague against the deepening gloom. And then out of the mouth of the *arroyo* the yelling Sioux burst forth upon us. We fell back upon the main column, fighting as we went.

And that was the last of Jim Dolan!