



Tricks and Twists of the Lariat.



HARRY MURPHY
1900

HERE was a book in our school library in the days of my youth that for tragic romance and thrilling adventure has seldom been equaled. It was somewhere between the covers of this remarkable work—"The White Chief"—that I discovered the hitherto unsuspected, but none the less poetic, possibilities of the lariat. That long-familiar rope of braided rawhide, commonly spoken of on the ranch as a "lasso," had never particularly appealed to me before, but a breathless perusal of the pages of the "White Chief" invested it at once with a weird and compelling interest. It was, over after a sort of "open sesame," its coils framing for me a vista of the wild, free life of the plains, billowy seas of grass, bright with the blossoms of Spring; limitless sun-scorched levels, where the mirage tempted the weary traveler farther and yet farther from his course; galloping steeds and jingle of spurs, vast herds of cattle, and gleaming horns tossing in the quivering heat. A brave life, gloriously envied, it seemed to me then, and the charm of it has not departed with the gathering years.

Of Spanish Origin.

The riata, or lariat, the rope used on the range in the handling of horses and cattle, is of Spanish origin. Cortez is credited with having introduced it on the continent of North America. Since the followers of that merciless invader roped

of an inch thick. Six of these strands are then braided together around a seventh, the inside strand, and the rope when finished, is perfectly smooth and far less likely to kink, or knot, or twist, than one of hemp. This latter greatly commends it to the consideration of the cowboy. Any delay at a critical moment, when, for example, a quick recovery and throw must be made, may cost him his safety, or even his life. To soften a new hemp rope and render it serviceable, the cowboy ties one end to his saddle-horn and allows the rest to drag on the ground, as he rides about his work. In the course of a few hours he reverses the ends, and thereby the stiff, unmanageable cordage is transformed, in a brief half day, into a pliable lariat.

"The length of a rope," said Frank Chamberlin, the noted lasso and rifle expert, now in Portland, who kindly consented to pose for the pictures which illustrate this article, "varies with individual taste and judgment. Personally, I consider 40 feet the most practical length, although my one-time employer, 'Buck Taylor' knows the world over as the 'King of the Cowboys,' could, with ease and deadly accuracy, handle any amount of one-half inch rope, up to 50 feet. But his height and weight—six feet six inches and 200 pounds, respectively—coupled with almost superhuman strength, were fully proportionate to his idea of the proper length of a saddle rope."

Labor on the almost limitless cattle



SPINNING 100 FEET OF ONE-INCH HEMP ROPE AROUND THE BODY, IN A GRADUALLY INCREASING CIRCLE, THE ENTIRE LENGTH BEING FINALLY EXHAUSTED.

their horned cattle and their Andalusian ponies on the Mexican plateau, its utility has been recognized throughout the Western world, from the shores of the Southern Gulf to the lower limit of those lands that sweep away in unbroken levels toward the Arctic circle. Indeed, it is an indispensable factor in the handling of livestock on the range, and the picturesque cowboy, that centaur of the plains, without it, would be as helpless as a soldier unarmed.

The words, "lariat" and "lasso," are suggestive of coils of braided rawhide, but the article itself is oftener than not of hemp or hair. And the cattle ranchman of North America has long since discarded both terms, in favor of the simpler one of "rope," which he uses not only as a noun, but as a verb as well. He also inclines to the hempen cord for ordinary service, although the Mexican still clings to his braided hide. The latter is preferable for use in rainy weather, the natural oil which it retains preventing the hardening and stiffening to which hemp is liable under certain conditions.

How Made.

The usual size of a lasso is 3/4 or 1/2 inch in diameter. To make one of rawhide the material is cut into strands one-eighth

ranges of the West is never ending. From early dawn to star-set dusk, from dusk to dawn again; in the blossoming beauty of Spring, under the fierce rays of a pitiless sun, or facing the icy breath of Winter storms, the cowboy's work goes on unceasingly. He all but lives in the saddle, and wherever he rides, whether night or day, beneath the Summer stars, or braving the snows of Winter, he carries with him, coiled at his saddle bow, or swung upon his left arm, ready for instant action, his lariat. For there are few tasks that fall to his share that do not involve the use of the rope, and a good "roper" indispensable as he is to every cattle outfit, although he commands fair wages, certainly earns every cent that he receives.

He is, of necessity, a man in the fullest sense of the term—clear-headed, with nerves and muscles of steel; able to think and act with lightning rapidity, of sound judgment, and, above all, a stranger to fear. His work is constantly performed in the midst of danger. A rope may break under heavy strain; a blow from the recoil would be as fatal as a pistol shot. Any inattention or blunder may mean death in some dreadful form. The cowboy may have his faults, but cow-

ardice and stupidity are not among them. For the matter of that, few men are cowards or fools who live close to Nature. It was Walt Whitman who said: Now I know the secret of the making of the best of people. It is to eat and sleep with the earth.

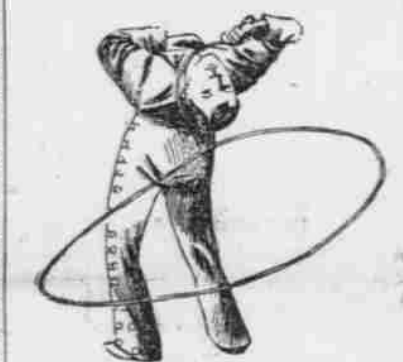
On the Range.

But the nomad of the Western plains is passing. With the advent of the barbed-wire fence, his vocation vanishes. The "daring, dashing cowboy" of earlier days will soon be found only in the Wild West shows and other similar aggregations. Indeed, even now he is banished to those isolated districts where up-to-date methods have not yet been adopted by the progressive rancher. The cattle business may have gained as to profit in this transition from the unrestricted freedom of vast ranges to "farming on horseback," but it has altogether lost its romance.

In the new order of things, on the fenced range, there is no longer need for the services of the expert "roper," once the pride and boast of every outfit. Cattle are, where improved methods prevail, driven into corrals and chutes and branded in the tamest fashion, without even so much as a suggestion of the risk and excitement that characterized the "round-up" of former years, when the cowboy, after a forenoon of arduous preparation, put in the rest of the day roping calves and dragging them up to the fire to be branded. Aside from the work, which was hard and continuous and required skill of no ordinary degree, resulting often in blistered palms and fingers burned to the bone by constant friction of the rope, there was always present an element of danger. Charging steers and enraged bovine mothers, resenting the indignity put upon their young, were not slow to seek revenge. A vengeful steer is no mean antagonist, and a maddened cow is an enemy not to be despised by either horse or rider.

Modern Innovations.

Branding on the unfenced range is a task that never ends. There are con-



Spinning a circle 7 feet in diameter behind his back, at the same time bending body backward. Very difficult of performance.

stantly being discovered animals that have been missed at the regular round-up, and these, wherever found are immediately roped, thrown and "burned." At every turn, and in every phase of his work, the cowboy has need of his rope. It is brought into play in catching fence mounts for the men, for no horse is kept under saddle more than a few hours at a time. If, as not infrequently happens, a steer strays into a quicksand, or miles in a bog, the lasso is thrown about his horns and he is speedily extricated. When the mess wagon needs a lift up a hill, or assistance in crossing miry bottom land, the man with the rope is at hand to render aid.

Wood must be brought for the camp fire. The cowboy attaches one end of his lariat to the log of his desire, securing it by any number of "throws" or "hitches," takes a snub on his saddle-horn, and the well-trained, willing pony does the rest.

A mistaken impression prevails in the mind of the public in regard to the manner in which a lasso is handled. The idea that the loop is always swung around the head before making a cast, especially when the roper is on foot, is erroneous. No man of experience ever makes a cast in this fashion from the ground, in practical work. There are several good and sufficient reasons why he does not. One of them is that the movement is likely to frighten the stock, especially horses; another that he may have to wait some minutes before a favorable opportunity occurs for making a cast. He knows that better results are obtained by holding the rope as unobtrusively as possible, even keeping it concealed from the object of capture if the animal is timid or nervous.

Different When Mounted.

On the contrary, however, when mounted and in pursuit, it is absolutely necessary to swing the loop over and around



PLACING HALF HITCHES, ALTERNATELY, ON FEET AND HANDS, TYING ALL TOGETHER.

the head, for the cast must be made with the greatest possible force, in order to overcome, not only the forward movement of the pursued, but also the action of the wind, should that chance be against you.

As to the manner of casting, some "roper" cast with a quick, jerky movement of the hand, seeming to use the arm very little and the body not at all. Others employ body, arm and hand. Both methods are effective, when perfected by practice. "As for myself," said Expert Chamberlin, in an interval of rest, between the "throws" he was making for the benefit of The Oregonian's artist, "I prefer speed, with very little lost motion. The fewer movements the better, especially in a bunch of excited or irritable cattle."

But not to the man belongs all the credit of marvelous skill in the manipulation of the lasso. He has an able and, indeed, indispensable conductor in his horse. One of the first lessons a young Western equine learns, and one which, once mastered, he never forgets, is not to "run on a rope." After this, he is said to be "rope-broke," or to have "rope

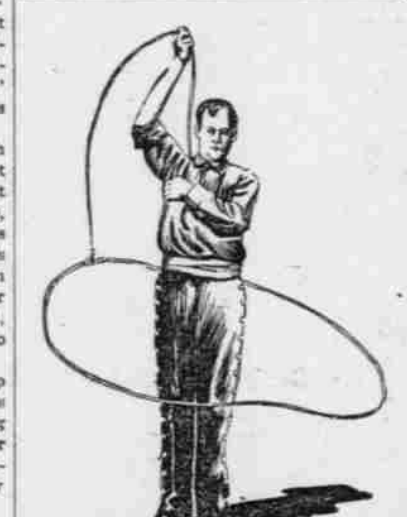


Circleing rope, first in right hand, then upon the wrist and forearm, and then changing to left hand, wrist and arm.

sense." In catching a horse with a lariat, he is invariably secured by the neck. Cattle, on the other hand, are seldom caught by the horns or head, unless it is necessary to lead or throw them.

"Heeling" Throws.

In case a "roper," either on foot or on horseback (he is nearly always on horseback), wishes to secure a calf or a "maverick," he employs what is known in ranching parlance as a "heeling" throw, the noose being so cast that it catches the animal by the hind foot, or feet, as desired. There are also numerous "fancy foot-throws" known to the practiced roper. Among others is that wherein a vertical circle is described with the lariat the loop revolving forward from the rider, in such fashion as to catch the feet of the galloping animal. The horizontal rotary circle is also used as a basis for a fancy foot throw. This



Performer encircled by spinning loop, and out of which he jumps, preserving circle meanwhile.

circle is rotated around the performer, who, biding his time, casts it forward in the path of the animal of which he is in pursuit, at the exact instant that his practical eye tells him will prove effective.

Speaking of fancy work with the rope, there is an interesting class of men, limited as to numbers, who, having acquired a high degree of skill in handling the lasso upon the cattle ranges of the West, now appear in public exhibitions. Of this class none is better known than Mr. Chamberlin, who holds a gold medal representing the American championship. "Exhibition work," says Mr. Chamberlin, "requires incessant practice. To begin with, a man must have some nat-

ural adaptation for it, and to this must be added a thorough knowledge of the rope in all its practical uses and relations. This knowledge is only to be obtained by years upon the range. Either actually or professionally considered, it is the hardest kind of labor and taxes a man's physical powers to the utmost. As a means of exercise, it compares favorably with any dumb-bell, Indian club or 'Delsarte' drill I have ever witnessed. Every muscle is brought into play. A standing position must be maintained, together with constant movement of the trunk, limbs, head, neck and even the fingers.

"Circle work," or "trick rope juggling," continued the ex-cowboy, "is related to practical roping only insofar as, in both cases, the lasso is the implement used. I consider it juggling to make a rope produce seemingly impossible conditions, without the aid of mechanical contrivances; to cause it to describe parabolas and fantastic curves, and to sway and float and circle in an incomprehensible manner."

Mr. Chamberlin employs a lariat of horsehide, covered with white cotton braid, in his trick juggling. It measures about 26 feet in length and is one-half inch in diameter. The "circle" is formed and maintained by spinning the loop of the lasso at a high rate of speed with the right hand, while the left is employed in keeping the kink and twist out of the rest of the rope. The circle is spun horizontally, vertically and at several different angles, the diameter varying as occasion requires. The accompanying illustrations show some of the more difficult feats performed by Mr. Chamberlin.

In the Northwest.

Few things have had more to do with the development of the industrial wealth of this great Northwest than the lariat. From the reedy marshes of the Klamath to the invisible line that divides Northern Washington from British Columbia, vast flocks and herds have pastured unrestricted by so much as the suggestion of a



A natural position for a practical delivery of loop.

fence. In Eastern Oregon particularly—that fair and fertile plateau, where the grass-grown hills are as the billows of the sea—thousands of cattle and horses have been reared, and tended, and driven to market, yielding their fortunate owners rich returns, in the form of golden grain, and adding immensely to the picturesque features of life in that land of marvelous mysteries. Fierce wars have been waged between the sheepmen and the cattlemen, and the heroes of the lasso have not always been victorious. Tragedies that only need perspective to transform them to glorified romance have been enacted, with the limitless range for a stage and the rolling clouds for shifting scenery.

Ambitious Lads.

There was a time, not so many years gone by, when it was the ambition of many a venturesome-minded farmer lad in the Willamette Valley to cross the mountains and become a cowboy. This imagination was fired by the stories of danger and daring that were told about the glowing fire, on long Winter evenings, by returned or visiting elder brothers, or ranchmen. The lingsling spurs, the gorgeously bedecked saddles, with the ever-present rope coiled at the bow, were objects that filled him with almost idolatrous admiration. There was, all Summer long, a passing to and fro from valley to range and from range to valley, over the various mountain routes, of bravely accoutered cattlemen and cowboys driving their bunchgrass herds to market, and returning with young stock, gathered up on this side of the Cascades, to be pastured for a few years on the other and then brought back again, perhaps, or driven northward to the Dalles or Walla Walla, or, more likely still, eastward across the alkali plains of Idaho and Montana, to the great markets of the world.

But times are changing. The advent

of steam and steel and electricity have compelled new conditions. Modern invention is rapidly helping civilized man to get rid of his romance. But though the day is fast approaching when the cowboy will no longer swing his rope above his sombrero, as he gallops across the bunchgrass plains and over the rolling hills of Eastern Oregon and Washington, the fact that he has lived and fought and flourished there will not be forgotten, and the memory of his wild life and wilder deeds will serve to enrich the pages of romance for the pleasure and profit of generations yet to come. For the record of a fearless man, be he prince or peasant, king or cowboy, holds a healthful interest for the sons of men.

With the bending blue above me,
And the brown beneath my feet,
The mighty winds a-blowing,
The angry birds a-lowing,
And far away to eastward,
Where the sky and prairie meet,
A gleam of red a-showing,
Where the dawn comes fair and fleet—
Oh, that's the life I long for!
Oh, that's the life for me!
There's room to move, to breathe in,
Where the hills are like the sea.
And, oh! the splendid battles,
When the blizzard hosts are out!



Spinning a circle behind the back.

And we face the storm king's legions
And put them all to rout.
And, oh! the tender glory
Of the stars on Summer nights!
There's no lamp that e'er can rival
Those soft, white-shining lights.
Oh, that's the life I long for!
'Tis there alone I'm free!
There's health and strength and courage
Where the hills are like the sea.
For a man is out of prison
And as a man should be,
On the range across the mountains,
Where the hills are like the sea!

Duel With Lassos.

The following story of a rope duel on the range is told by Mr. Chamberlin, who says he was an eye-witness of the occurrence:

"It was on the Moreau River," says the narrator, "about a day's ride from the Dakota-Montana line, and directly south of the Short Pine Hills country. We, about 12 riders in all, had camped at the crossing of the Belle Fourche and Valley Creek stage lines, headed north to the Hash Knife ranch. The 'bunch' was composed of all sorts and conditions of men, including the college graduate, renegade and outlaw. There were nine Americans and three Mexicans, picked up for the most part in the Black Hills towns, two weeks prior, to do some extra 'trail work.'"

side and talked in low tones for a few minutes. Then each man selected and saddled his best mount, got his rope off the horn and laid it stretched out on the ground. Dick's rope was about 45 feet long; Loupe's was nearer 60.

"In an instant the Mexican's knife was out and his rope cut to the exact length of Dick's. Then, coiling their lariats carefully, they led their horses in opposite directions until they were about 100 yards apart, where they mounted, wheeled and rode toward each other. I stood holding my bridle reins and watching every move, and I will never forget the look of hate on that Mexican's face. His lips were parted in a wicked smile that showed the gleam of his white teeth. Dick's jaws were set tight. He looked fierce enough, and determined, but there was also a suggestion of fear.

The Encounter.

"They rode slowly toward each other for about 20 yards; then made a dash, and the ropes shot out like lightning. Both men dodged and escaped. The ropes were recovered, and they began to circle around and around. We could hear the swish of their lariats, as they swung them over their heads, each man trying for some advantage over the other.

"They maneuvered back and forth, and, finally, each made a cast. The Mexican got his rope over Dick's head, but the latter threw it off before the slack could be pulled up. An instant later, though, Loupe had gathered up his rope and caught his enemy by the head and one arm.

"He took a wrap on the horn, and, driving the spurs into his pony, dashed out upon the prairie. Before, however, he could pull his captive from the saddle, a pistol shot rang out, and he fell to the ground, dead. Dick had drawn his gun with his free hand, and, coward that he was, shot his antagonist through the head.

"His triumph, though, was short-lived. The Mexican's runaway pony jerked him from his horse, with terrible force, dragged him some distance and stopped.

"Before we could reach him one of the remaining Mexicans had ridden up and emptied his six-shooter into Dick's body. Of course, we all opened fire on Loupe's partner, Lacio, who was now in full retreat, headed for a wooded bottom land. He reached cover far ahead of us, and escaped.

"We returned to camp and passed a resolution to the effect that the world was well rid of both the duellists, whom we buried at Ostrander's stage station, some three miles from the scene of the fatality. The matter was duly reported to a Deputy Sheriff whom we met next morning. It is needless to say that disputes and arguments were carefully avoided by the members of that outfit for some time to come."

L. M. M.

It Was All Right.

A young man, who looked as if he might be about 25 years old, was sitting in the waiting-room of the depot. On his knee was a 1-year-old baby. Presently the baby began to cry, and the awkwardness and helplessness of the young man were so marked as to attract general attention.

At this point one of the waiting passengers, a fat and amiable-looking man,



SWINGING ROPE AROUND BODY—USED WHEN ON FOOT ONLY, IN HIGH WIND.

Bill La Force, the Hash Knife foreman, was in charge.

"We were at breakfast, discussing cattle, the all-absorbing topic in a cow camp, when Dick Mattox, an all-round bad man, a gambler by profession, when not a cowboy, made some remark about roping a Greaser down in Texas and hauling him around the prairie until he was 'worn out.' One of the Mexicans, Loupe La Grande by name, replied, with a sneer, that the man must have been asleep or dead. 'You couldn't rope a live man and do that,' he added.

Dick Pulls a Gun.

"Dick jumped to his feet and pulled his gun. Loupe did likewise, but La Force ran between them and made them 'recover' arms. The Mexican's eyes glittered like at rattlesnakes, but he put up his gun, as did Dick also. There was a short armistice, but everybody knew there would be trouble, for the two had been wanting a pretext for a quarrel from the start.

"La Force ordered the horse wrangler to bring in the saddle bunch, as he intended moving that morning. While I was saddling up I heard the Mexican address Dick, and they walked off to one

crossed the room and said to the distressed baby-tender:

"A young woman gave you that baby to hold while she went to see about her baggage, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"Well, now, I knew it, as soon as I saw you. You expect her back, I suppose?"

"Of course."

"Ha! Ha! You are looking for her every minute, ain't you?"

"I think she'll come back."

"Ha! Ha! Excuse me, but I can't help laughing. A woman once played the same trick on me. I was in Chicago. You're caught, young man. She took you for a hayseed."

"Oh, she'll come back," answered the young man as he looked anxiously around.

"She will, eh? Ha! Ha! What makes you think so?"

"Why, because she's my wife, and this is our first baby."

"Oh—um—I see!" muttered the fat man, and he was in such haste to get back to the other side of the room that he nearly fell over a passing pug dog.—Buffalo Enquirer.