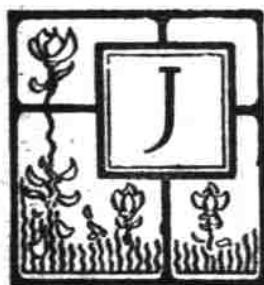


THE METTLE OF A MAN

By Harry Irving Greene

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Illustrated by R. Tandler



JOSE mumbled a prayer as he slowly sheathed and unsheathed his knife as you have seen a cat flex its claws. A dozen times during the night he had been about to leap, yet each time Magool had sensed his purpose, and the big black muzzle had awed him for another hour.

"But now he would wait no longer, and with a prayer to his patron saint he tightened himself like a coiled spring. And Magool, noting it, felt first the cold sweat come pouring over him and then an apelike rage that feared nothing mortal.

"He leaped to his feet as the Mexican arose, and with the heavy revolver held by the barrel hurled it with all his force at the head of the other just as he started his rush. But Jose caught it on his forearm and knocked it aside, and the next instant Magool felt the burn of the knife as though a hot iron had pierced him. But he was as strong as a gorilla, and burying his fingers in the other's body he heaved him into midair, and the next instant lurched forward giddily.

"From below he heard the thunder of the down-crashing shale, then found himself hanging over the side of the trail with one hand gripping the edge and one spur jammed into a crevice of the rock.

"Far below, Jose, in the midst of his avalanche, was just plunging into the foam, his broad sombrero borne up by the canyon wind soaring like a hawk in midair and not yet halfway down. Then his fingers weakened and slipped and something up above gave way. I guess that is about all."

They sat in silence for a long minute, the man gazing into the distance with eyebrows contracted and the girl watching him closely, giving him mental credit for a force and a power of imagination that she had never accorded him before. Beyond even self-denial he had arisen in her estimation and respect.

"And you know so much about what no living eye saw or tongue ever told by reason of what?" she asked at length.

"Because I was in the camp into which Jaques Menzes dragged himself with the story of his brother's murder, and later on I heard the story of Magool's hold-up and flight. Also I was with the posse that arrived at the spot almost before the thunder of the avalanche had died away. We found Jose's lost gun; we found the hobbled mules with their treasure, which we restored; we knew how long it had been since the men had committed their respective crimes and fled, and therefore we knew how long they had faced each other.

"Also we found Magool's spur in the crevice, we found his empty guns, we found his body with the knife wound, and we found Jose's hat—but we never found Jose."

"And the rest was pure deduction?" His head nodded.

"It was. Still, it could not have been very different. I told you this principally as a warning that you might never be led upon that way by its seductive beginning."

She arose with a slight shudder, involuntarily shrinking away from the place of horror and moving toward her horse.

He followed her.

"Jaques, the remaining brother, died soon afterward from his wound without revealing the secret of their fabulous find. Some day I am going to have a look

SYNOPSIS.

DOROTHY RAYMOND, pampered daughter of wealth, tired of the social round, wants to rough it. Invited by her uncle in Montana to visit his ranch, she accepts. Part of the journey is made by stage coach, which in a spirit of fun is held up by three cowboys, Cheyenne Red, Alfalfa and Puck. A cloudburst causes a flood to sweep down the mountain, and the stage driver leaves Dorothy behind. The cowboys' horses also disappear, and the three men and Dorothy find a haven on a large boulder. They rig up a shelter for Dorothy, build fires to dry their clothing and spend the night on the rock. Morning found the flood abated, and Puck located the horses. They started for Chloride, the nearest town. Before arriving there they left Dorothy, and she assured them she would not tell who they were. Dorothy finished the journey by stage, and at the ranch was met by Mrs. Andrews, the housekeeper. At supper she was surprised to find Puck, Alfalfa and Red, who worked for her uncle. She is introduced to Mr. Kirkland, a prospector, who has a cabin near the ranchhouse, and who often is a visitor there. He teaches her how to ride. Later Puck and Alfalfa are sent away and Dorothy and Red go part way with them. On the way back Red gives Dorothy his version of his meeting with his two companions. Several days later Kirkland took Dorothy out for a shooting lesson and at its conclusion told her the story of "Death Trail," and warned her against ever crossing it.

for that lost pocket mine," he announced as they rode homeward in the gathering dusk. "By the way, you have not told me how you enjoyed your shooting lesson."

She flicked her horse lightly.

"I liked the shooting part well enough."

He turned upon her quickly, for the first time openly showing his displeasure.

"Miss Raymond, I think you do me scant honor. When you go to a dancing master to be taught, you not only permit him to take hold of you—but would think it strange if he did not. Should you take a lesson in music, your instructor would guide you as he thought necessary. When you go to a theater your escort assists you, often unnecessarily. But when a man in a flannel shirt and high boots attempts to instruct you in shoot-

reasons for your treatment of me. Shall I put up your horse for you?"

Realizing that he had spoken the truth, half incensed at him for having spoken it and half angry at herself because she was compelled to admit it as the truth, she merely announced that she would take care of the horse herself, making no reply to his other announcement.

He doffed his hat.

"Then I will bid you good night," he said, and wheeling his horse galloped away, leaving her to dismount as she chose.

She unsaddled Smoke and turned him loose in the corral, meeting her uncle at the door of the house as she was about to enter. He gazed at her with mild curiosity.

"I have been taking a shooting lesson

To save her life she could not have told whether she liked or disliked him, and she dismissed the matter by telling herself that it really did not make any difference. Then she had supper, after which she wrote a long letter to Denton in response to his imploring ones, the burden of which was the value of patience. After this she went to bed.

But in the middle of the night she sat upright with a low cry of terror. She had dreamed that she had wandered in the darkness along that awful pass. Above her towered ink-black mountains to almost the height of the moon; below her was a vast void of blackness, from the bottom of which came the hungry roar of waters.

Her foot had slipped and she had stumbled forward as Magool had done, had uttered a despairing cry and felt herself clutched by a strong arm and drawn back to safety by one whose features she could not distinguish in the darkness, but whom she instinctively knew to be the man who so causelessly seemed to antagonize her.

She was trembling and perspiring from her evil dream. Composing herself she again laid her head upon the pillow, shuddering at the thought that she should ever set foot upon that trail even in her dreams. But had Dorothy been able to look into the inscrutable future she would have slept no more that night.

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CHAPTER X.

Wherein Dorothy Comes to Grief.

IT HAPPENED about a month after Dorothy's arrival at the ranch. She had formed the habit of fishing for trout at the pool two or three mornings a week, and soon had become fairly adept in the graceful art of whipping an artificial fly or dropping a real locust lightly upon the surface, and success had generally rewarded her.

The pool lay not more than fifteen minutes' brisk walk from the house, and lately she had been accustomed to make the trip on foot, scattering the wandering bands of cattle she chanced across and laughing to see them flee, her rod over her shoulder and her lips puckered into a shrill falsetto whistle which delighted her mightily. She had not forgotten Kirkland's warning never to go among them on foot, but had experimented out of curiosity, had found them nearly as timid as deer and took secret satisfaction in nonchalantly ignoring the command.

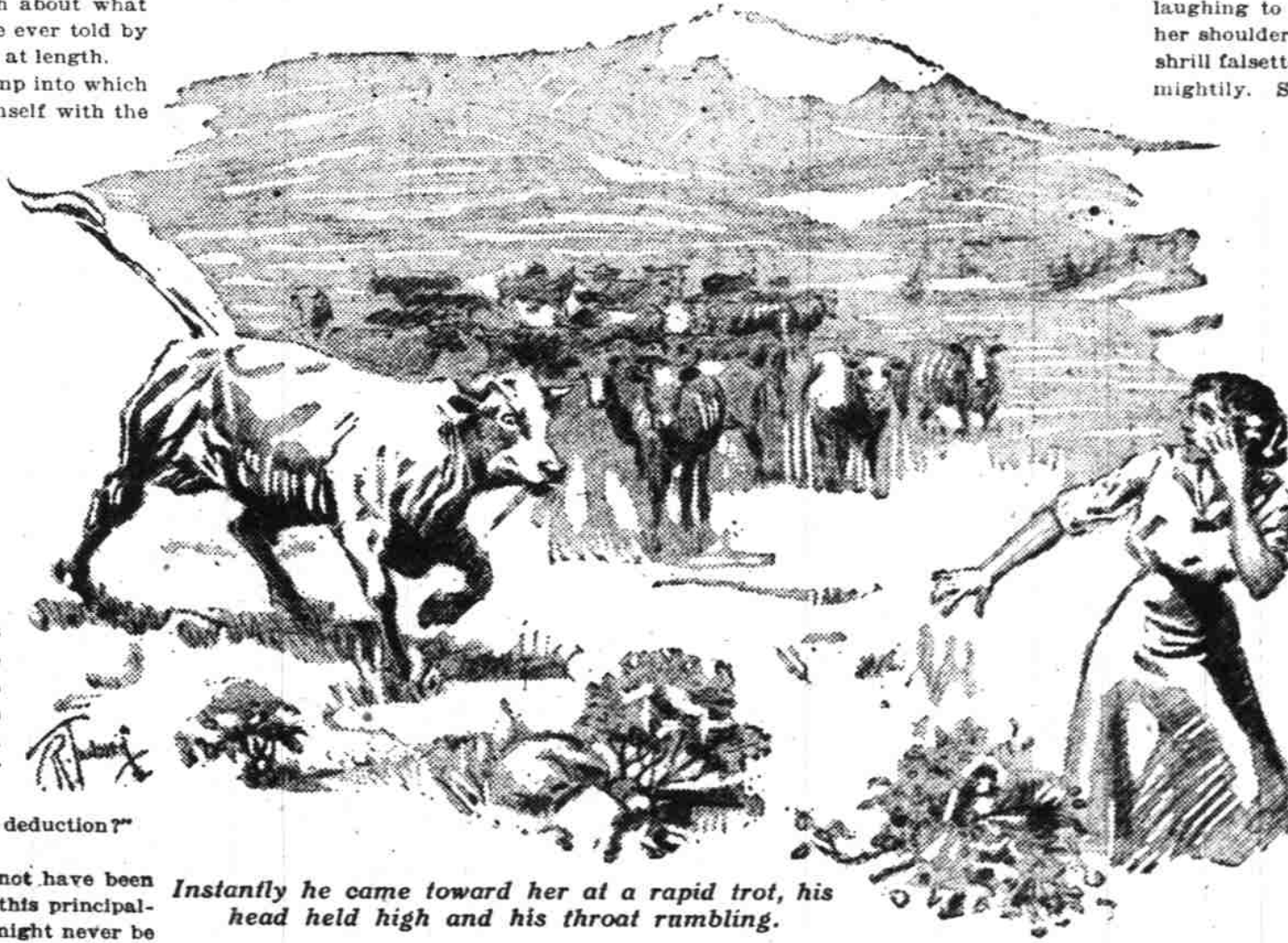
In the first place she believed that he was in the habit of telling her boggy tales to frighten her, as he might have done to an inexperienced child, and in the second Dorothy had a vein of stubbornness in her makeup and a self-confidence that sometimes prompted her to do unwise things merely for the sake of asserting herself.

The morning was clear, the air exquisite, and she walked with the springy step of a young wild creature as she passed through the gate and out upon the valley that lay at the base of the foothills. Sage brush was thickly scattered about her, many of the clumps

rising to the height of a man's head when he was seated on a horse, and of sufficient sturdiness to turn aside whatever creature might pass among them.

Half a mile ahead a bunch of range cattle had wandered down into the valley and were feeding in her path, but she surveyed them complacently as timid, half wild creatures who would flee upon her approach.

True to their usual custom, they lift-



Instantly he came toward her at a rapid trot, his head held high and his throat rumbling.

ing you recoil from him as something disagreeable or dangerous.

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YOU have grown to regard a dress suit as a protection to you and as an excuse for familiarities which you would not tolerate from a man dressed as I am, no matter who he might be. Because of the clothes you are unjust to the man within them, and therefore inconsistent with yourself. I can ascribe no other

from Mr. Kirkland," she said in explanation as she paused.

Uncle Dud had not spoken to her for two days; now his voice came back to him.

"So! Well, Kirk's all right—only of course you must remember that he is very peculiar," he sighed. He turned away abruptly, and the girl, with a last glance at the retreating horseman, now but a faint blotch in the growing darkness, entered the house.