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From a Photograph by Clarence A. Purchase

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The species is, indeed, so different in appearance from any poisonous kind that having once known it any careful person may collect it for the table as freely as he would collect puffballs. There are, however, a few species of small pink-spored mushrooms which are somewhat poisonous. If the gills remain pink in color after the mushrooms are old, or if the mushrooms are small at maturity, they should be discarded.

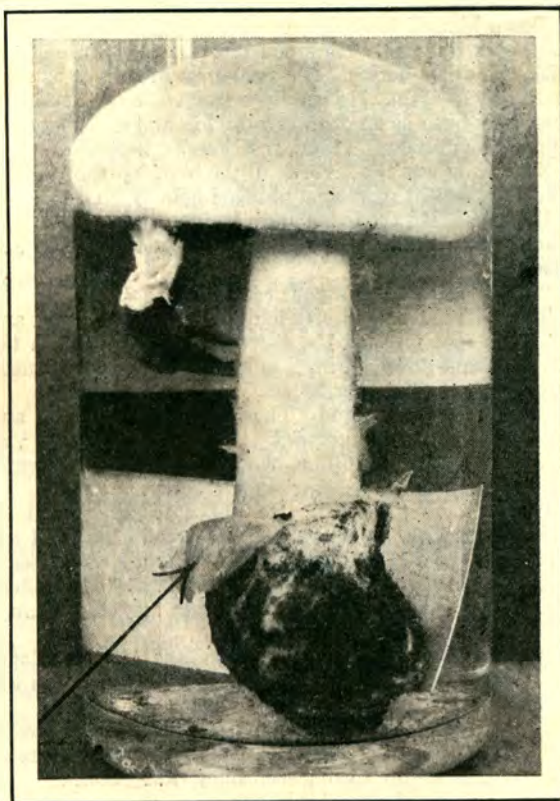
A number of species of mushroom belonging to the genus *Coprinus* make good eating. These occur especially in freshly manured soil, in soil containing decaying wood, and rarely in bare wood itself. They come up in great numbers in small patches during every wet spell, even well into the autumn.

This mushroom is usually smaller than the fall mushroom and the cap is more nearly cylindrical in shape. The spores are black, so that the gills are either black or gray black as soon as the spores begin to mature. When the spores are mature the whole cap melts away into a black watery liquid, thus giving rise to the name "inky cap." These mushrooms may readily be known by this habit, which is characteristic of them only.

When once a patch of inky caps is located it may be visited again and again when the weather is moist, and a fresh crop gathered each time. The inky caps are all edible and some of them are especially fine flavored.

The morels or spring mushrooms, of which there are several species, grow during wet weather in the spring, usually in woodlands or uncultivated orchards. Probably more persons are familiar with these mushrooms than with the fall varieties. In many localities, in fact, they are the only fungi known as mushrooms.

They grow a few inches high and each resembles a sponge fastened to the end of a stick. The stem is hollow and dingy white. The top is darker, also hollow, and the surface is covered with depressions, which give the sponge-like appearance. Both stem and top are more or less jelly-like in consistency and water-soaked in appearance.



"Death-Cup" Mushroom, Poisonous. The Arrow Points to the "Cup," Which in This Case is Somewhat Membranous and is Turned Back. Often the "Cup" is Much Harder to Detect Than in This Specimen. Mushrooms of This Type Caused the Deaths of a Number of Persons Last Season

These morels are all edible and fine flavored, and as there are no noxious species which resemble them in appearance they may be gathered and eaten with impunity.

In conclusion it may be well to say once more that the mushroom collector should know how to avoid the deadly poisonous species and should know the species which he collects.

These four groups do not by any means exhaust the list of excellent edible fungi, but they include the most common and abundant and some of the most delicious ones. He who can collect these with certainty and precision will always be able to eat mushrooms in plenty when the season is right and the weather is wet.

Ten Per Cent for the Bugs

THE South Dakota Agricultural College estimates that insects injure the crops of that state to the extent of ten per cent every year. Probably that figure will stand as a conservative general average. In other words, you work nine days for yourself and one day for the bugs. You spend between thirty-five and forty days a year working for the insects, and the rest of the time for yourself.

If any community would spend half this wasted time studying insects and their control the conservatives would say it had gone crazy, but wouldn't it be worth while? Once mastered, the insects would give less trouble forever. Not all insect pests can be fully controlled, but the remedies for most of their ravages have been worked out pretty well, and time spent in their study will be fruitfully expended in reducing the insect damage year by year. The time to study insects and their control is in youth, though no farmer is too old to take up the thing that takes a ten per cent toll on his life work—or half that. We rightfully object to ten per cent interest on loans. But the insect rate is higher, for it is levied on all our crops. If we only thought so we might very largely avoid this loss.

WILD FIRE

By ZANE GREY

Author of "Riders of the Purple Sage," "The Lone Star Ranger," etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK TENNEY JOHNSON

XVI

BOSTIL went into the village. All day long he was so busy with a thousand and one things referred to him, put on him, undertaken by him, that he had no time to think. Back in his mind, however, there was a burden of which he was vaguely conscious all the time. He worked late into the night and slept late the next morning.

Never in his life had Bostil been gloomy or retrospective on the day of a race. In the press of matters he had only a word for Lucy, but that earned a dauntless, saucy look. He was glad when he was able to join the procession of villagers, visitors and Indians moving out toward the sage.

The race course lay at the foot of the slope, and now the gray and purple sage was dotted with more horses and Indians, more moving things and colors, than Bostil had ever seen there before. It was a scene that stirred him.

Many fires sent up blue columns of smoke from before the hastily built brush huts where the Indians cooked and ate. Blankets shone bright in the sun; burros grazed and brayed; horses whistled piercingly across the slope; Indians lolled before the huts, talked in groups sitting and lounging on their ponies; down in the valley, here and there, were Indians racing; and others were chasing the wiry mustangs. Beyond this gay and colorful spectacle stretched the valley, merging into the desert marked so strikingly and beautifully by the monuments.

Bostil was among the last to ride down to the high bench that overlooked the home end of the race course. He calculated there were a thousand Indians and whites congregated at that point, which was the best vantage ground to see the finish of a race. And the

occasion of his arrival, for all the gayety, was one of dignity and importance.

If Bostil reveled in anything it was in an hour like this. His liberality made this event a great race day. The thoroughbreds were all there, blanketed, in charge of watchful riders. In the center of the brow of this long bench lay a huge flat rock that had been Bostil's seat in the watching of many races. Here were assembled his neighbors and visitors, actively interested in the races, and the important Indians of both tribes, all waiting for him.

As Bostil dismounted, throwing the bridle to a rider, he saw a face that suddenly froze all his thrilling delight of the moment. A tall, gaunt man, with cavernous black eyes and huge, drooping black mustache, fronted him and seemed

waiting. Cordts! Bostil had forgotten. Instinctively Bostil stood on guard. For years he had prepared himself for the moment when he would come face to face with this noted horse thief.

"Bostil, how are you?" said Cordts. He appeared pleasant and certainly grateful for being permitted to come there. From his left hand hung a belt containing two heavy guns.

"Hello, Cordts," replied Bostil, slowly unbending. Then he met the other's proffered hand.

"I've bet heavy on the King," said Cordts.

For the hour there could have been no other way to Bostil's good graces, and this remark made the gruff old rider's hard face relax.

"Wal, I was hopin' you'd back some other hoss, so I could take your money," replied Bostil.

Cordts held out the belt and guns to Bostil.

"I want to enjoy this race," he said with a smile that somehow hinted of the years he had packed those guns day and night.

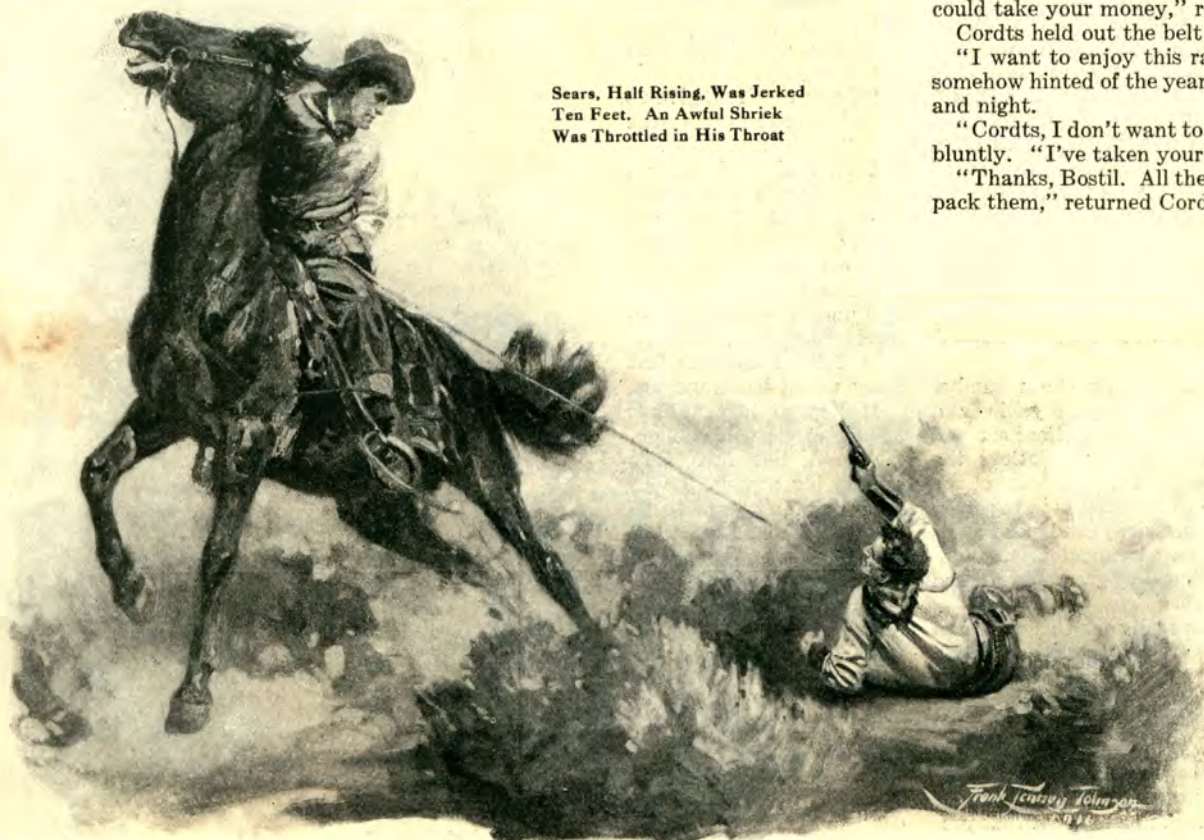
"Cordts, I don't want to take your guns," replied Bostil bluntly. "I've taken your word an' that's enough."

"Thanks, Bostil. All the same as I'm your guest I won't pack them," returned Cordts, and he hung the belt on the

horn of Bostil's saddle. "Some of my men are with me. They were all right till they got outside of Brackton's whisky. But now I won't answer for them."

"Wal, you're square to say that," replied Bostil. "An' I'll run this race an' answer for everybody."

Bostil recognized Hutchinson and Dick Sears, but the others of Cordts' gang he did not know. They were a hard-looking lot. Hutchinson was a spare, stoop-shouldered, red-faced, squinty-eyed rider, branded all over with the marks of a bad man. And Dick Sears looked his notoriety. He was a little knot of muscle, short and bow-legged, rough-looking



Sears, Half Rising, Was Jerked Ten Feet. An Awful Shriek Was Throttled in His Throat

as cactus. He wore a ragged slouch hat pulled low down. His face and stubby beard were dust-colored, and his eyes seemed sullen, watchful. He made Bostil think of a dusty, scaly, hard desert rattlesnake.

Bostil eyed this right-hand man of Cordts' and certainly felt no fear of him, though Sears had the fame of swift and deadly skill with a gun. Bostil felt that he was neither afraid nor loath to face Sears in gun play; and he gazed at the little horse thief in a manner that no one could mistake. Sears was not drunk; neither was he wholly free from the unsteadiness caused by the bottle. Assuredly he had no fear of Bostil and eyed him insolently. Bostil turned away to the group of his riders and friends, and he asked for his daughter.

"Lucy's over there," said Farlane, pointing to a merry crowd. Bostil waved a hand to her, and Lucy, evidently mistaking his action, came forward, leading one of her ponies. She wore a gray blouse with a red scarf, and a skirt over overalls and boots. She looked pale, but she was smiling, and there was a dark gleam of excitement in her blue eyes. She did not have on her sombrero. She wore her hair in a braid and had a red band tight above her forehead.

Bostil took her in all at a glance. She meant business and she looked dangerous. Bostil knew once she slipped out of that skirt she could ride with any rider there. He saw that she had become the center toward which all eyes shifted. It pleased him. She was his—like her mother—and as beautiful and thoroughbred as any rider could wish his daughter.

"Lucy, where's your hoss?" he asked curiously.

"Never you mind, dad. I'll be there at the finish," she replied.

"Red's your color for today then?" he questioned, as he put a big hand on the bright-banded head.

She nodded archly.

"Lucy, I never thought you'd flaunt red in your old dad's face. Red—when the color of the King is like the sage out yonder. You've gone back on the King."

"No, dad, I never was for Sage King, else I wouldn't wear red today."

"Child, you sure mean to run in this race—the big one?"

"Sure and certain."

"Wal, the only bitter drop in my cup today will be seein' you get beat. But if you run second I'll give you a present thet'll make the purse look sick."

Even the Indian chiefs were smiling. Old Horse, the Navajo, beamed benignly upon this daughter of the friend of the Indians. Silver, his brother chieftain, nodded as if he understood Bostil's pride and regret. Some of the young riders showed their hearts in their eyes. Farlane tried to look mysterious, to pretend he was in Lucy's confidence.

"Lucy, if you are really goin' to race I'll withdraw my hoss so you can win," said Wetherby gallantly.

Bostil's sonorous laugh rolled down the slope.

"Miss Lucy, I sure hate to run a hoss against yours," said old Cal Blinn. Then Colson, Sticks, Burthwait, the other principals, paid laughing and complimentary respects to the bright-haired girl.

Bostil enjoyed this hugely until he caught the strange intensity of regard in the cavernous eyes of Cordts. That gave him a shock. Cordts had long wanted this girl, as much probably as he wanted Sage King. There were dark and terrible stories that stained the fame of Cordts.

Bostil regretted his impulse in granting the horse thief permission to attend the races. Sight of Lucy's fair, sweet face might inflame this Cordts—this Kentuckian who had boasted of his love of horses and women. Behind Cordts hung the little dust-colored Sears, like a coiled snake, ready to strike. Bostil felt stir in him a long, dormant fire—a stealth along his veins—a passion he hated.

"Lucy, go back to the women till you're ready to come out on your hoss," he said. "An' mind you, be careful today!"

He gave her a meaning glance, which he saw she understood perfectly, and then he turned to start the day's sport.

The Indian races of twos and threes, up to a number that crowded the race course; the betting and yelling and running; the wild and plunging mustangs; the heat and dust and pound of hoofs; the exciting speculation; the surprises and defeats and victories; the trial tests of the principals, jealously keeping off to themselves in the sage; the endless, moving, colorful procession, gaudy and swift and thrilling—all these Bostil loved tremendously.

But they were as nothing to what they gradually worked up to—the climax, the great race.

It was afternoon when all was ready for this race, and the sage was bright gray in the westering sun. Everybody was resting, waiting. The tense quiet of the riders seemed to settle upon the whole assemblage. Only the thoroughbreds were restless. They quivered and stamped and tossed small, fine heads. They knew what was going to happen. They wanted to run. Blacks, bays and whites were the predominating colors; and the horses and mustangs were alike in those points of race and speed and spirit that proclaimed them thoroughbreds.

Bostil himself took the covering off his favorite. Sage King was on edge. He stood out strikingly in contrast with the other horses. His sage-gray body was as sleek and shiny as satin. He had been trained to the hour. He tossed his head as he champed the bit, and every moment rippled his muscles. Proud, mettlesome, beautiful!

Sage King was the favorite in the betting; the Indians, who were ardent gamblers, plunged heavily on him.

Bostil saddled the horse and was long at the task. Van stood watching. He was pale and nervous. Bostil saw this.

"Van," he said, "it's your race."

The rider reached a quick hand for bridle and horn, and when his foot touched the stirrup Sage King was in the air. He came down, springy, quick, graceful, then pranced into line with the other horses.

Bostil waved his hand. Then the troop of riders and racers headed for the starter's point two miles up the valley. Macomber and Blinn, with a rider and a Navajo, were up there as official starters of the day.

Bostil's eyes glistened. He put a friendly hand on Cordts' shoulder, an action that showed the stress of the moment. Most of the men crowded round Bostil. Sears and Hutchinson hung close to Cordts. And Holley, keeping near his employer, had keen eyes for other things besides horses.

Suddenly he touched Bostil and pointed down the slope. "There's Lucy," he said. "She's ridin' out to join the bunch."

"Lucy! Where? I'd forgotten my girl. . . . Where?"

"There," repeated Holley, and he pointed. Others of the group spoke up, having seen Lucy riding down.

"She's on a red hoss," said one.

"Pears all-fired big to me—her hoss," said another. "Who's got a glass?"

Bostil had the only field glass there and he was using it. Across the round, magnified field of vision moved a giant red horse, his mane waving like a flame. Lucy rode him. They were moving from a jumble of broken rocks a mile down the slope. She had kept her horse hidden there. Bostil felt an added stir to his beating pulse. Certainly he had never seen a horse like this one. But the distance was long—the glass not perfect—he could not trust his sight. Suddenly that sight dimmed.

"Holley, I can't make out nothin'," he complained. "Take the glass. Give me a line on Lucy's mount."

"Boss, I don't need the glass to see thet she's up on a hoss," replied Holley as he took the glass. He leveled it, adjusted it to his eyes, and then looked long. Bostil grew impatient. Lucy was rapidly overhauling the troop of racers on her way to the post. Nothing ever hurried or excited Holley.

"Wal, can't you see any better'n me?" queried Bostil eagerly.

"Come on, Holl, give us a tip before she gits to the post," spoke up a rider.

Cordts showed intense eagerness; all the group were excited. Lucy's advent, on an unknown horse that even her father could not disparage, was the last and unexpected feature to increase suspense. All knew that if the horse was fast Lucy would be dangerous.

Holley at last spoke: "She's up on a wild stallion. He's red, like fire. He's mighty big, strong. Looks as if he didn't want to go near the bunch. Lord, what action! . . . Bostil, I'd say—a great hoss!"

There was a moment's intense silence in the group round Bostil. Holley was never known to mistake a horse or to be extravagant in judgment or praise.

"A wild stallion!" echoed Bostil. "A-huh! An' she calls him Wildfire. Where did she get him? . . . Gimme thet glass."

But all Bostil could make out was a blur. His eyes were wet. He realized now that his first sight of Lucy on the strange horse had been clear and strong, and it was that which had dimmed his eyes.

"Holley, you use the glass—an' tell me what comes off," said Bostil as he wiped his eyes with his scarf. He was relieved to find that his sight was clearing.

Then everybody watched the close, dark mass of horses and riders down the valley. And all waited for Holley to speak.

"They're linin' up," began the rider. "Havin' some muss, too, it 'pears. . . . Bostil, thet red hoss is raisin' Cain! He wants to fight. There! He's up in the air. . . . Boys, he's a devil—a hosskiller like all them wild stallions. . . . He's plugin' at the King—strikin'! There! Lucy's got him down. She's handlin' him. . . . Now, they've got the King on the other side. Thet's better. But Lucy's hoss won't stand. Anyway, it's a runnin' start. . . . Van's got the best position. Foxy Van! . . . He'll be leadin' before the rest know the race's on. . . . Them Indian mustangs are behavin' scandalous. Guess the red stallion scared 'em. Now they're all lined up back of the post. . . . Ah! gun smoke! They move. . . . It looks like a go."

Then Holley was silent, strained in watching. So were all the watchers silent. Bostil saw far down the valley a moving, dark line of horses.

"They're off! They're off!" called Holley thrillingly.

Bostil let out his deep and booming yell, loud above that of the men round him, and heard even in the din of Indian shouts. Then quick as the yells had risen they ceased.

Holley stood up on the rock with leveled glass.

"Mac's dropped the flag. It's a sure go. Now! . . . Van's out there in front—inside. The King's got his stride. Boss, the King's stretchin' out! . . . Look! Look! See thet red hoss leap! . . . Bostil, he's runnin' down the King! I knowed it. He's like lightnin'. He's pushin' the King over—off the course! See him plunge! Lord! Lucy can't pull him! She goes up—down—tossed—but she sticks like a bur. Good! Lucy! Hang on! . . . Bostil, the King's thrown! He's down! . . . He comes up, off the course. The others flash by. . . . Van's out of the race! . . . An' Bostil, an' gentlemen, I say to all of you, there ain't anythin' more to this race but a red hoss!"

Bostil's heart gave a great leap and then seemed to stand absolutely stockstill. He was half cold, half hot.



"Bostil, the King's Thrown!
He's Down!"

What a horrible, sickening disappointment! Bostil rolled out a cursing query. Holley's answer was short and sharp. The King was out! Bostil raved. He could not see. He could not believe. After all the weeks of preparation, of excitement, of suspense—only this!

There was no race. The King was out! The thing did not seem possible. A thousand thoughts flitted through Bostil's mind. Rage, impotent rage, possessed him. He cursed Van—he swore he would kill that red stallion. And someone shook him hard. Someone's incisive words cut into his thick, throbbing ears:

"Luck of the game! King ain't beat! He's only out!"

Then the habit of mind of a rider asserted itself and Bostil began to recover. For the King to fall was hard luck. But he had not lost the race! Anguish and pride battled for mastery over him. If the King was out it was a Bostil who would win the great race.

"He ain't beat!" muttered Bostil. "It ain't fair! He's run off the track by a wild stallion!"

His dimmed sight grew clear and sharp. And with a gasp he saw the moving dark line take shape of horses. A bright horse was in the lead. Brighter and larger he grew. Swifter he came on. The bright color changed to red. Bostil heard Holley calling and Cordts calling—and voices and voices, but he did not distinguish what was said.

The line of horses began to bob, to bunch. The race looked close, despite what Holley had said. The Indians were beginning to lean forward, here and there emitting short, sharp yells. All within Bostil grew together in one great, throbbing, tingling mass. His rider's eye, keen once more, caught a gleam of gold above the red, and that gold was Lucy's hair. Bostil forgot the King.

Then Holley bawled into his ear: "They're half way!"

The race was beautiful. Bostil strained his eyes. He gloried in what he saw—Lucy low over the neck of that red stallion. He could see plainer now. They were coming closer. How swiftly! What a splendid race! But it was too swift—it would not last. The Indians began to yell.

Out of the tail of his eye Bostil saw Cordts and Sears and Hutchinson. They were acting like crazy men. Strange that horse thieves should care! The million thrills within Bostil coalesced into one great shudder of rapture. His stentorian voice took up the call for Lucy to win.

"Three-quarters!" bawled Holley into Bostil's ear. "An' Lucy's give that wild hoss free rein! Look, Bostil! You never in your life seen a hoss run like thet!"

Bostil never had. His heart swelled. Something shook him. Was that his girl—that tight little gray bur half hidden in the huge stallion's flaming mane? The distance had been close between Lucy and the bunched riders. But it lengthened. How it widened! That flame of a horse was running away from the others. And now they were

Then Bostil whirled to see where Van was with the King. Most of the crowd surged down to surround the racers, and the yells gave way to a buzz of many voices. Some of the ranchers and riders remained near Bostil, all apparently talking at once. Bostil gathered that Holley's Whitefoot had run second and the Navajo's mustang third. It was Holley himself who verified what Bostil had heard. The old rider's hawk eyes were warm with delight.

"Boss, he run second!" Holley kept repeating.

Bostil had the heart to shake hands with Holley and say he was glad, when it was on his lips to blurt out there had been no race. Then Bostil's nerves tingled at sight of Van trotting the King up the course toward the slope. Bostil watched with searching eyes. Sage King did not appear to be injured. Van rode straight up the slope and leaped off. He was white and shaking.

The King's glossy hide was dirty with dust and bits of cactus and brush. He was not even hot. There did not appear to be a bruise or mark on him. He whinnied and rubbed his nose against Bostil, and then flinching he swept up his head, ears high. Both fear and fire shone in his eyes.

"Wal, Van, get it out of your system," said Bostil kindly. He was a harder loser before a race was run than after he had lost it.

"Thet red hoss run in on the King before the start an' scared the race out of him," replied Van swiftly. "We had a hunch, you know, but at thet Lucy's hoss was a surprise. I'll say, sir, thet Lucy rode her wild hoss an' handled him. Twice she pulled him off the King. He meant to kill the King! . . . Ask any of the boys. . . ."

"We got started. I took the lead, sir. The King was in the lead. I never looked back till I heard Lucy scream. She couldn't pull Wildfire. He was rushin' the King—meant to kill him. An' Sage King wanted to fight. If I could only have kept him runnin'! Thet would have been a race! . . ."

"But Wildfire got in closer an' closer. He crowded us. He bit at the King's flank an' shoulder an' neck. Lucy pulled till I yelled she'd throw the hoss an' kill us both. Then Wildfire jumped for us. Runnin' an' strikin' with both feet at once! Bostil, thet hoss's bad! Then he hit us an' down we went. I had a bad spill. But the King's not hurt an' thet's a blessed wonder."

"No race, Van! It was hard luck. Take him home," said Bostil.

Van's story of the accident vindicated Bostil's doubts. A new horse had appeared on the scene, wild and swift and grand, but Sage King was still unbeaten in a fair race. There would come a reckoning, Bostil grimly muttered. Who owned this Wildfire?

Holley might as well have read his mind.

"Reckon this feller ridin' up will take down the prize money," remarked Holley, and he pointed to a man who rode a huge, shaggy black horse, and was leading Lucy's pony.

"A-huh!" exclaimed Bostil. "A strange rider."

"An' here comes Lucy, coixin' the stallion back," added Holley.

"A wild stallion never clear broke!" ejaculated Cordts.

All the men looked and all had some remark of praise for Lucy and her mount.

Bostil gazed with a strange, irresistible attraction. Never had he expected to live to see a wild stallion like this one, let alone his daughter mounted on him, with the record of having put Sage King out of the race!

A thousand pairs of eyes watched Wildfire. He pranced out there beyond the crowd of men and horses. He did not want to come closer. Yet he did not seem to fight his rider. Lucy hung low over his neck, apparently exhausted, and she was patting him and caressing him. There were horses and Indians on each side of the race track, and between these lines Lucy appeared reluctant to come.

Bostil strode down, and waving and yelling for everybody to move back to the slope he cleared the way, and then stood out in front alone.

"Ride up, now," he called to Lucy.

It was then Bostil discovered that Lucy did not wear a spur and she had neither quirt nor whip. She turned Wildfire and he came prancing on, head and mane and tail erect. His action was beautiful, springy, and every few steps, as Lucy touched him, he jumped with marvelous ease and swiftness.

Bostil became all eyes. He did not see his daughter as she paraded the winner before the applauding throng. He recorded in his mind that which he would never forget—a wild stallion, with unbroken spirit; a giant of a horse, glistening red, with mane like dark-striped wind-blown flame, all muscle, all grace, all power; a neck long and slender, and arching to the small, savagely beautiful head, the jaws open; and the thin-skinned, pink-colored nostrils that proved the Arabian blood; the slanting shoulders and the deep, broad chest; the powerful legs with knees not too high nor too low; the symmetrical dark hoofs that rang on the little stones—all these marks so significant of speed and

endurance. A stallion with a wonderful physical perfection that matched the savage, ruthless spirit of the desert killer of horses!

Lucy waved her hand and the strange rider, to whom Holley had called attention, strode out of the crowd toward Wildfire.

Bostil's gaze took in the rider's splendid, lithe build, the clean-cut bronzed face, the dark eye. This fellow had a shiny coiled lasso in hand. He advanced toward Wildfire. The stallion snorted and plunged. If ever Bostil saw hate expressed by a horse he saw it then. Likewise he seemed to be tractable to the control of the girl upon him.

Bostil swiftly grasped the strange situation. Lucy had won the love of the savage stallion. That always had been the secret of her power. And she had hated Sage King because he alone had somehow taken a dislike to her. Horses were as queer as people, thought Bostil.

The rider walked straight up to the trembling Wildfire. When Wildfire plunged and reared up and up the rider leaped for the bridle, and with iron arm pulled the horse down. Wildfire tried again, almost lifting the rider, but a stinging cut from the lasso made him come to a stand. Plain it was the rider held the mastery.

"Dad!" called Lucy faintly.

Bostil went forward, close, while the rider held Wildfire. Lucy was as wanfaced as a flower by moonlight. Her eyes were dark with emotions, fear predominating. Then for Bostil the half of his heart that was human reasserted itself. Lucy was only a girl now, and weakening. Her fear, her pitiful little smile, as if she dared not hope for her father's approval, yet could not help it, touched Bostil to the quick, and he opened his arms. Lucy slid down into them.

"Lucy, girl, you've won the King's race an' double crossed your poor old dad!"

"Oh, dad. I never knew—I never dreamed Wildfire—would jump the King," Lucy faltered. "I couldn't hold him. He was terrible. . . . It made me sick. . . . Daddy, tell me Van wasn't hurt—or the King!"

"The hoss's all right an' so's Van," replied Bostil. "Don't cry, Lucy. It was a fool trick you pulled off, but you did it great. You sure was ridin' thet red devil. . . . An' say, it's all right with me!"

Lucy did not faint then, but she came near it. Bostil put her down and led her through the lines of admiring Indians and applauding riders, and left her with the women.

When he turned again he was in time to see the strange rider mount Wildfire. It was a swift and hazardous mount, the stallion being in the air. When he came down he tore the turf and sent it flying, and when he shot up again he was doubled in a red knot, bristling with fiery hair, a furious wild beast, mad to throw the rider. Bostil had never heard so wild a scream uttered by a horse. Likewise he had never seen so incomparable a horseman as this stranger.

Indians and riders alike took thrilling interest, as this was an incident after their own hearts. The rider had hooked his long spurs under the horse and now appeared a part of him. He could not be dislodged. This was not a bucking mustang, but a fierce, powerful, fighting stallion. No doubt, thought Bostil, this fight ensued every time the rider mounted his horse. It was a sort of thing riders love. Most of them would not own a horse that would not pitch.

Bostil presently decided, however, that in the case of this red stallion no rider in his right senses would care for such a fight, simply because of the extraordinary strength, activity and ferocity of the stallion.

The riders were all betting the horse would throw the stranger. And Bostil, seeing the gathering might of Wildfire's momentum, decided with them. No horseman could stick on that horse. Suddenly Wildfire tripped in the sage, went sprawling in the dust, throwing his rider ahead.

Both man and beast were quick to arise, but the rider had a foot in the stirrup before Wildfire got going. Then the horse broke, ran free, came circling back, and slowly gave way to the rider's control. Those few moments of frenzied activity had brought out the foam and the sweat—Wildfire was wet. The rider pulled him in before Bostil and dismounted.

"Sometimes I ride him; then sometimes I don't," he said with a smile.

Bostil held out his hand. He liked this rider. He would have liked the frank face, less hard than that of most riders, and the fine dark eyes, straight-glanced and steady, even if their possessor had not come with the open sesame to Bostil's regard—a grand wild horse and the nerve to ride him.

"Wal, you rode him longer'n any of us figgered," said Bostil, heartily shaking the man's hand. "I'm Bostil. Glad to meet you."

"My name's Slone—Lin Slone," replied the rider frankly. "I'm a wild-horse hunter an' hail from Utah."

"Utah? How'd you ever get over? Wal, you've got a grand hoss—an' you put a grand rider up on him in the race. . . . My girl Lucy—"

Bostil hesitated. His mind was running swiftly. Back of his thoughts gathered the desire and the determination to get possession of this horse Wildfire. He had forgotten

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close—coming into the home stretch. Ashrill, screeching, deafening roar of yells engulfed all other sounds. Astraining, stamping, arm-flinging horde surrounded Bostil.

Bostil saw the whip of Lucy's golden hair out of the flame-streaked mane. And then he could

only see that red brute of a horse. Wildfire before the wind! Bostil thought of the leaping prairie flame, storm driven.

On came the red stallion—on—on! What a tremendous stride—what recovery—what savage action!

He flashed past—low—pointed—long—going faster every magnificent stride—winner by a dozen lengths.

XVII

WILDFIRE ran on down the valley, far beyond the yelling crowd lined along the slope. Bostil might have been deaf to the throng; he watched the stallion till Lucy got him stopped and turned.



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WILDFIRE

(Continued from Page 1151)

what he might have said to this stranger under different circumstances. He looked keenly into Slone's face and saw no fear, no subterfuge. The young man was honest.

"Bostil, I chased this wild horse days an' weeks an' months, hundreds of miles—across the cañon an' the river—"

"No!" interrupted Bostil blankly.

"Yes. I'll tell you how later. . . . Out here somewhere I caught Wildfire, broke him as much as he'll ever be broken. He played me out an' got away. Your girl rode along—saved my horse—an' saved my life too. I was in bad shape for days. But I got well—an'—an' then she wanted me to let her run Wildfire in the big race. I couldn't refuse. . . . An' it would have been a great race but for the unlucky accident to Sage King. I'm sorry, sir."

"Slone, it jarred me some, thet disappointment. But it's over," replied Bostil. "An' so thet's how Lucy found her hoss. She sure was mysterious. . . . Wal, wal."

Bostil became aware of the others.

"Holley, shake hands with Slone, hoss wrangler out of Utah. . . . You, too, Cal Blinn. . . . An' Macomber. An' Wetherby, meet my friend here—young Slone. . . . An' Cordts, shake hands with a feller thet owns a grand hoss!"

Bostil laughed as he introduced the horse thief to Slone.

"Howdy, Slone," drawled Cordts, with hand outstretched. "I sure am glad to meet yuh. I'd like to trade the Sage King for this red stallion!"

A roar of laughter greeted this sally, all but Bostil and Slone joining in. The joke was on Bostil. Slone did not even smile.

"Howdy, Cordts," he replied. "I'm glad to meet you—so I'll know you when I see you again."

"Wal, we're all good fellars today," interposed Bostil. "An' now let's ride home an' eat. Slone, you come with me."

The group slowly mounted the slope where the horses waited.

Bostil observed that Cordts had hurried ahead of the group and now appeared to be saying something emphatic to Dick Sears and Hutchinson. Bostil heard Cordts curse. Probably he was arraigning the sullen Sears. Cordts had acted first-rate.

Cordts and Hutchinson mounted their horses and rode off, somewhat to the left of the crowd. But Sears remained behind.

All the horses except Wildfire stood in a bunch back on the bench. Sears appeared to be fussing with the straps on his saddle.

Suddenly there came a halt in the conversation of the men—a curse in Holley's deep voice—a violent split in the group. Bostil wheeled to see Sears in menacing position with two guns leveled low.

"Don't holler!" he called. "An' don't move!"

"What now, Sears?" demanded Bostil. "I'll bore you—if you move!" replied Sears. "Holley, turn yer back!"

The old rider, who stood foremost of the group, instantly obeyed, with hands up. He took no chances here, for he alone packed a gun. With swift step Sears moved, pulled Holley's gun, flung it aside.

"Sears, it ain't a hold-up!" expostulated Bostil.

"Ain't it?" scoffed Sears malignantly. "Bostil, I was after the King. But I reckon I'll git the hoss thet beat him!"

"Sears! You ain't a-goin' to steal this boy's hoss!"

"Shut up!" hissed the horse thief.

He pushed a gun close to Bostil. "I've always laid fer you! I'm achin' to bore you now. I would but fer scarin' this hoss. If you yap again I'll kill you anyhow—an' take a chance!"

"Sears, if it's my horse you want you needn't kill Bostil," spoke up Slone.

"Lead him round hyar!" snapped Sears.

Wildfire appeared more shy of the horses back of him than the men. Slone was able to lead him, however, to within several paces of Sears. Then Slone dropped the reins. He still held a lasso which was loosely coiled, and the loop dropped in front of him as he backed away.

Sears sheathed the left-hand gun. Keeping the group covered with the other he moved backward, reaching for the hanging reins. Wildfire snorted—appeared about to jump. But Sears got the reins. Then quick as a cat he vaulted into the saddle. Wildfire snorted, lifted his forefeet in a lunge that meant he would bolt.

Sears in vaulting up had swung the gun aloft. He swept it down, but waveringly, for Wildfire had begun to rear.

Something whistled. Bostil saw the leap of Slone's lasso—the curling, snaky dart of the noose up to snap round Sears. The rope sung taut. Sears was swept bodily, clean from the saddle, to hit the ground in sodden compact.

Almost swifter than Bostil's sight was Slone's action—flashing by—in the air—on the plunging horse. Sears shot once—twice. Then Wildfire bolted as his rider whipped the lasso round the horn. Sears, half rising, was jerked ten feet. An awful shriek was throttled in his throat.

A streak of dust on the slope—a tearing parting line in the sage!

Bostil stood amazed. The red stallion made short plunges. Slone reached low for the tripping reins. When he straightened up Wildfire broke wildly into a run.

The other riders, recovering from a horror-stricken silence, burst out in acclaim of Slone's feat.

"Dick Sears' finish. Roped by a boy rider!" exclaimed Cal Blinn fervidly.

"Bostil, that rider is worthy of his horse," said Wetherby. "I think Sears would have bored you. I saw his finger pressing—pressing on the trigger. Men like Sears can't help but pull at that stage."

"Thet was the quickest trick I ever seen," declared Macomber.

They watched Wildfire run down the slope, out into the valley, with a streak of rising dust out behind. They all saw when there ceased to be that peculiar rising of dust. Wildfire appeared to shoot ahead at greater speed. Then he slowed up. The rider turned him and faced back toward the group, coming at a stiff gallop. Soon Wildfire breasted the slope, and halted.

Bostil strode slowly ahead. There was only dust on the lasso. But Bostil knew—they all knew—that none the less it had dealt a terrible death to the horse thief.

Somehow Bostil could not find words for what he wanted to say. He put a hand on the red stallion—patted his shoulder. Then he gripped Slone close and hard.

"Fellers, do you think Cordts was in on thet trick?" he queried.

"Nope. Cordts was on the square," replied Holley. "But he must have seen it comin'—an' left Sears to his fate. It sure was a fittin' last ride for a hoss thief!"

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