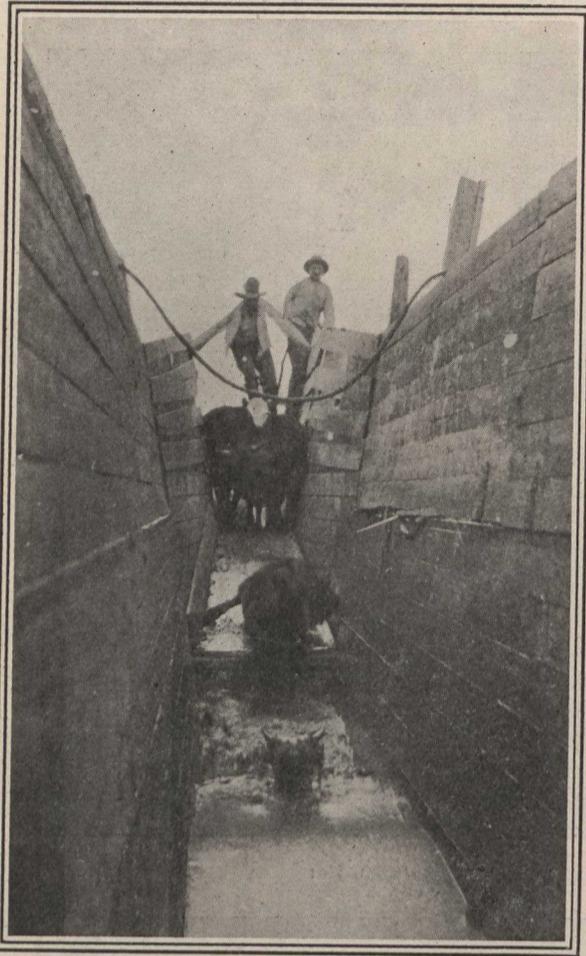


A PLAY OF THE CATTLE RANGES

A Western Dipping.

By NAN MOULTON



Forcing Reluctant Cattle into the Dipping Vat. This is unpleasant for the animal and dangerous for the man.

PARTLY it was a gipsy hunger for the out-of-doors, and partly it was a desire for the fulfilment of written things that sent one in July to a proper ranch to witness what one might of the final things of the cattle range business. A strenuous wind blew us a day's journey from the city across a prairie gone a bit sombre under all its big freedom, with no fence nor line for guidance in its bewildering sameness. Even my Scotch hostess and her western-born daughters, with hats rudely torn from their pin-moorings, and gasping at the buffetings of the madcap whirligigs, became confused once at a crossing of the trails and gratefully hailed a heaven-sent rider. "Ask at him, Nora! Ask at him!" prompted Mistress Middleton. And ask at him Nora did, to the solution of her difficulty.

Towards evening we climbed down half a mile to a wonderful flat by the curviest river, a flat all clustered andavenued and parked with trees, all fragrant with the perfume of wild roses, all hushed under a sober sunset, save where the little stream flowed vocal between the cut-banks seamed with coal and the katydids carried on their endless argument; and in the middle of the flat were home-looking low buildings, weather-dark and we had arrived.

I was regularly tenderfoot, and for days sat at the feet of Nora absorbing cow and horse wisdom "in hunks," as Alan gracefully put it. Nora was a wild, dark little sport of sixteen, the most western vital thing on the ranch. She could ride anything, astride, side-saddle, bare-back; she knew all the intricacies of harness intimately, and all the mysteries of vehicles. For the finer feminine accomplishments, she had been sent some trying terms to the nuns at Calgary. When she was going off rebelliously for her first term, her father said: "Ah, weel, Nor-r-a, they nuns may be able to teach ye ither things, but they canna' teach ye aught about a horse." She adored the ranch, but hated the newer farming element in it.

Mistress Middleton paddled about busily all day in her bit garden or feeding her "calves" or ministering to her broods of turkeys and chickens, "the pair dar-r-lings." Dolly, fair and fat and short-sighted, looked virtuously after the ways of the household. And Nora, erratic as a moth, dashed off a two-step on the piano, then slowly made up a bed, turned on the gramophone at weird melodies to help her through her dusting, then curled up in any old corner for a delicious half-hour with a luridly-bound "Mexican Bill."

It was quiet those first days on the ranch, for the men were all off on the round-up for the dipping

which was compulsory because of the mange which was creeping among the cattle, creeping in from the south. The horses were away, too, except Prince, ancient and dependable, and a couple of mares with foals. Prince kept up a pretence of usefulness by being ridden after the milch-cows night and morning. I had riding lessons on him when I listed, but found him unstimulating. On Sunday two visitors rode in from somewhere beyond the horizon line—a girl of perhaps fourteen, who had ridden all those morning miles in a straggly dotted-muslin dress and run-down-at-the-heels dancing-slippers, a slender thing with a rather pretty, quivery face and an untidy fluff of fair hair. Her escort was a husky youth with long lashes over splendid eyes and a humorous, nonchalant manner of speech. They all talked westernly, cow-talk and wrangling horses.

Next day there was a quickening of pulses responsive to some prescient tremoring of the air, and Dolly baked and stewed till everything was seductively smelly, and Nora's face was sparkingly expectant, and an occasional cow-boy burned a streak in the atmosphere us-wards, a cow-boy just like the picture-postal depiction of him, born to the saddle and lariat as farmer-lads are born to the milking-pens and the furrows. He soon hit the high places again for the spot where the round-up was being consummated and the dipping-vats prepared. The ranchers' wives were to serve dinner at the vats next day, and Mistress Middleton was in charge, so the morning found us packing sustenance to the waggon and "hitting the trail" for the camp.

It was an exuberant morning. There was a haunting fragrance on the wind from the wilderness of roses that rioted in delicious faint pinks as they followed the water, blue butterflies wavered over the swaying buffalo-grass, and, spangled all across the brown old prairie, the thorny cactus (of accursed memory to the careless wayfarer) had broken out into the most extravagant brown-and-yellow bloom like great soft roses of crumpled silk. Bye-and-bye a new sound came faintly over the prairie, and deepened as the horses picked their way down into a coulee, and then, with that new sound an increasing roar and the sunlight "a little bit hotter than blazes" (to quote Alan again), and the waggon doing giddy stunts around a curve, we came upon a scene that for once quite satisfied an undisciplined craving for something lively and rushing in the way of atmosphere.

Strange shoutings of men and an incessant bawling of cattle mounted confusedly to the blue sky; horses, still saddled, the reins dropped over their heads, cropped up and down the sides of the coulee; cow-boys were bunching cattle and driving them into a sort of corral to the right, from which a few at a time were coaxed and driven into a smaller circular enclosure, and then forced single-file into a lane in which there was no turning, and from which they slid, scared and reluctant, into the vat proper, through which seething cauldron of lime and sulphur they swam desperately, climbed the steps beyond, shook themselves in anger and defiance so that a shower of drops spattered the two boys perched aloft calling out brands and the men below listing the brands with stubby pencils on the wooden posts, and then went through a sort of turnstile into the corral to the left and comparative freedom, where they rushed wildly about for a space bawling insulting things about their persecutors. Some of the more frenzied ones even broke out and, rolling their tails for the hills, were pursued by picturesque riders with lariat-ropes hung on their saddle-bows or swung in their right hands ready for action.

Mistress Middleton was received with acclaim, Dolly with deference, Nora with brotherly love, and myself with distant curiosity. Work was dropped and, at a nearby spring that had supplied water for the vat, toilets were proceeded with and pleasantries indulged in. While one youth vigorously dried his face in the common towel, a "smart guy" of sinful profile dumped a pail of water over his head. But Smarty was pursued and was stood ignominiously on his head right in the spring, to the accompaniment of violent laughter from the delighted audience. There were not so many of the genuine western cow-boy on his native heath as one would have desired, for burrs and dislocated aspirates lay thick on the prairie grass, and their owners exhibited a universal weakness for heavy bearskin or llama shaaps (not to mention spurs) in spite of the lurid heat, and made up in hat-brim (Army and Navy



Dipping Sheep.—The far man is about to throw one into the long narrow Vat. The near man pulls them out.

stores) what they lacked in skill or brain or experience. Among the veteran ranchers and punchers, hairy and powerful, strong-voiced from combat with prairie wind and frontier distances, there was little doing in bearskin. One wore old blue corduroy breeches, another ochre-yellow overalls, another fustian, and all just battered, aged, felt hats crushed over their eyes, and yellow slickers when it rained. They rode like fiends and smoked like volcanoes, and were altogether men of action and strong language.

For five hours the play of the ranges went on in an afternoon land with sunshine laid over it as thick as molasses, until one's former life swam away in a luminous mist, and there was nothing anywhere in space but a bawling of cattle. It was a strenuous afternoon for the men. Some "darned steers, fat and sassy and huntin' trouble," refused to go through the lane that had no turning. The men hurled weird phrases at them with deep-throated violence, prodded them with pointed sticks, beat them over their stubborn backs, sat on the fence kicking them, and even, as a last resort, twisted their lashing tails. "Twist 'm tyle! Twist 'm tyle!" shouted an eager Cockney. And the men, with a shout of laughter, drove the last steer into the sulphur bath, and dropped hot and panting to the earth for the solacing cigarette. A fresh convoy took their places, but the spirit of rebellion increased in the cattle still undipped. A group of evil-horned matrons persistently bunched themselves together, heads towards the centre, and did a mad waltz-me-round-again-Willie-round-and-round-and-round-around until the most patient man viciously dubbed the nearest dowager a "son-of-a-gun."

When this difficulty was ended, a blighted acrobatic cow turned herself round in the lane that properly had no turning. While "Weary" manfully thwacked a hind-quarter, Mistress Middleton at his elbow pitied the "puir beastie." "That's nothing," Weary cheerfully assured her, holding up a badly-frayed stick. "That's nothing, Mrs. Middleton, that's noise." Things got quieter a bit, and the sulphur and lime splashed more regularly.

And when the last bunch of cattle, chastened and pure from mange, had disappeared over the horizon line leaving behind them a long ribbon of dust, when at the ranch-house hunger had again been ministered to, when the cow-ponies breathed long sighs of content and slept, when each member of the family and every guest had gone through the particular form of torture that constituted his art, then the coyotes wandered over the yellow moon-lightened prairie clamouring at the peculiar animal odour left by the herd, and the vivid episode of the Dipping dropped away to the Edge of Yesterday.