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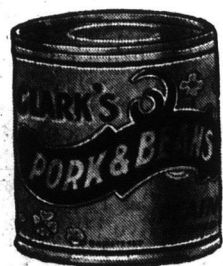
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Mysteries of the Straight Trail.

Written for the Western Home Monthly by W. I. Thomas, Minnon, Alta.



An eruption of volcanic language had broken out somewhere inside the barn. Ned Walsh stuck his head in through the door with the query: "What's up?" "Look at that brandin' iron," said the ranch foreman, vindictively shaking it under Ned's nose. "See that?" he growled pressing it against the barn wall. "Twisted, it touches at two catiwampus corners and the other two corners don't touch at all. Fine job o' brandin' it would do, wouldn't it? There aint no way to fix it here and we'll soon be through cuttin' out the calves; just about ready to heat 'er up, you might say. It will have to go to Nealy's shop to be straightened."

"Send Nelson," said Walsh, "he aint no good cuttin' out calves an' we can't handle them bawlin' cows short handed." "He'd get lost an' then we wouldn't have no brandin' iron; losin' Nelson wouldn't cut no ice but the brandin' iron—gee."

"Lose nothin', it's only ten miles on a straight trail, how's he goin' to get lost?" "Hi there, Nelson, come out here," yelled the foreman.

A young giant strolled leisurely out from the shack toward the barn. At least he stood six feet two, was broad

Old Sandy stood nibbling a wisp of hay on the far side of the corral. Though only an old horseman would have noticed it the slight dip in his fore legs told why he was not helping to cut out the calves, for if there was an expert at that job on the ranch it was Old Sandy but he had had too much of it for the good of his legs. He was superannuated, just a trail horse, a trusty. He had bucked his last buck long ago. The tenderfoot, with much fumbling of straps, got the saddle adjusted and jogged away down the trail toward the creek. He turned to the left according to directions and followed the straight trail through devious curves, twistings, half circles and zig-zags. "According to geometicians," he said to himself, "a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. A straight trail seems to differ from a straight line in that particular." He was scarcely out of hailing distance from the corral when he came to a Y in the trail. He was tempted to ride back to inquire which horn of the Y was the straight trail. He would have endured the jeers of the cowpunchers and taken a chance at getting as much fun as annoyance out of it but it occurred to him that undoubtedly there were more Y's and that if he rode back every time he came to one he would probably be a long time getting to Nealy's shop. He stopped and studied the horns



The Steamer Dock Tete Jaune Cache, July 1912.

shouldered and had several other points supposed to belong to giants but instead of a cowpuncher he was a college man out on his last vacation before taking up the more serious work of earning his living.

"Do you think you could ride over to Nealy's with this here brandin' iron without losin' yer fool-self?"

The youth wore "a smile that wouldn't come off." That depends upon how carefully said Nealy has hidden himself among the intricacies of your bally wilderness," he answered.

"You can't miss it," said Walsh. "All you got to do is to follow the trail. You take the first trail to the left after you cross the creek below here and that's a straight trail leadin' right to Nealy's door." A cowboy's "straight trail" is the mystery of mysteries to a tenderfoot. It winds around a hill, runs up a draw, winds around another hill and down another draw, never holding any one direction for ten rods at a stretch. Frequently you come to a Y and which horn of the Y is the straight trail? But a cowboy thinks that inability to follow a straight trail is a sure sign of inborn mental weakness.

"I suppose I might risk my precious person on a perfectly straight trail if you are willing to risk the branding iron," said Nelson.

"You lose that brandin' iron an' when I find the two o' you I'll brand you right in the middle o' that noble brow o' yours with it so'st you won't get lost again, but if you're goin' to tackle the job saddle up and hit the trail lively or it'll be dark before you get there an' then you will git lost, sure."

of the Y for a time. "Ah, do you observe, Sandy, that one has been used more than the other? I wonder if a straight trail is the most travelled trail instead of the shortest distance between two points. We'll take a chance, Sandy. But the Y was not the greatest mystery of the straight trail. Just at sundown he rode out upon the top of a long gradually sloping coulee bank. The coulee was broad rather than deep and instead of the usual rapidly flowing creek at the bottom there was a broad muskeg, shallow water with no current, willows and rank grass and mystery of mysteries, the trail ended abruptly at the top of the coulee bank. "Bless us, Sandy, do you suppose the straight trail leads down into the earth or up into the sky?" He stopped amazed, a creepy feeling running up and down his spine. He had once read a blood curdling tale of a mysterious trail which lead strangers into the heart of a wilderness where it faded out and left them in the midst of many perils. Here was a distinct, well traveled trail to the edge of the level prairie, but just where the slope of the coulee bank began it vanished into the unbroken, apparently untrodden prairie grass. A less venturesome spirit would have turned back but it was not Nelson's way. He was in the habit of going ahead even when men as well as circumstances stood in the way.

"Do you suppose we have lost the branding iron, Sandy? Looks that way. We seem to have lost the straight trail at any rate. If we have been going right so far, Nealy's shop must be on the other side of the coulee. If it were farther up, or farther down on this side, riders going