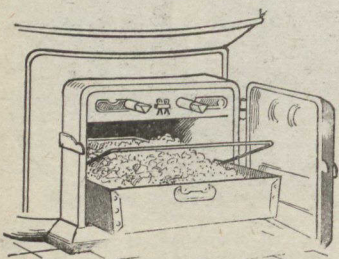


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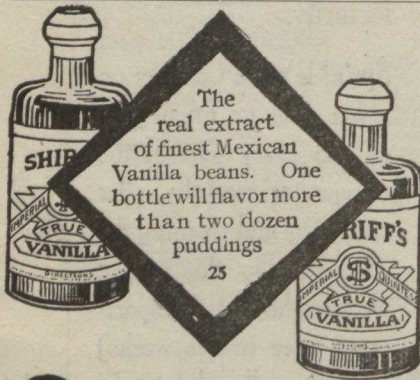


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The bluff that rose steadily higher came back to them, willow and straggling birch flashed by, and at last Payne drew bridle where a rutted trail wound down between the trees to the bridge in the hollow. A swift glance showed him that a mounted man could scarcely make his way between them and he smiled dryly as he signed to his companion.

"Back your horse clear of the trail," he said; and there was a rattle as he flung his carbine across the saddle. "With Hilton behind him, he'll ride straight into our hands."

He wheeled his horse in among the birches, and then sat still, with fingers that quivered a little on the carbine stock, until a faint drumming rose from the prairie.

"He's coming!" said the trooper. "Hilton's hanging on to him!"

Payne made no answer, and the sound that rang more loudly every moment through the greyness of the early daylight was not pleasant to hear. Man's vitality is near its lowest about that hour, and the troopers had ridden furiously the long night through, while one of them, who knew Lance Courthorne, surmised that there was grim work before him. Still, though he shivered as a little chilly wind shook the birch twigs, he set his lips, and once more remembered the comrade who had ridden far and kept many a lonely vigil with him.

Then a mounted man appeared in the space between the trees. His horse was jaded, and he rode loosely, swaying once or twice in his saddle; but he came straight on, and there was a jingle and rattle as the troopers swung out into the trail. The man saw them, for he glanced over his shoulder, as if at the rider who appeared behind, and then sent the spurs in again.

"Pull him up," cried Corporal Payne, and his voice was a little strained. "Stop right where you are before we fire on you!"

The man must have seen the carbines, for he raised himself a trifle, and Payne saw his face under the flapping hat. It was drawn and grey, but there was no sign of yielding or consternation in the half-closed eyes. Then he lurched in his saddle, as from exhaustion or weariness, and straightened himself again with both hands on the bridle. Payne saw his heels move and the spurs drip red, and slid his left hand further along the carbine stock. The trail was steep and narrow. A horseman could scarcely turn in it, and the stranger was coming on at a gallop.

"He will have it," said the trooper hoarsely. "If he rides one of us down he may get away."

"We have got to stop him," said Corporal Payne.

Once more the swaying man straightened himself, flung his head back, and with a little breathless laugh drove his horse furiously at Payne. He was very close now, and his face showed livid under the smearing dust; but his lips were drawn up in a little bitter smile as he rode straight upon the levelled carbines. Payne at least understood it, and the absence of flung-up hand or cry. Courthorne's inborn instincts were strong to the end.

There was a hoarse shout from the trooper, and no answer, and a carbine flashed. Then Courthorne loosed the bridle, reeled sideways from the saddle, rolled half round with one foot in the stirrup and his head upon the ground, and was left behind, while the riderless horse and pursuer swept past the two men who, avoiding them by a hairs-breadth, sat motionless a moment in the thin drifting smoke.

Then Corporal Payne swung himself down, and, while the trooper followed, stooped over the man who lay, a limp huddled object, in the trail. He blinked up at them out of eyes that were almost closed.

"I think you have done for me," he said.

Payne glanced at his comrade. "Push on to the settlement," he said. "They've a doctor there. Bring him and Harland the magistrate out."

The trooper seemed glad to mount and ride away, and Payne once more bent over the wounded man.

"Very sorry," he said. "Still, you see, you left me no other means of stopping you. Now, is there anything I can do for you?"

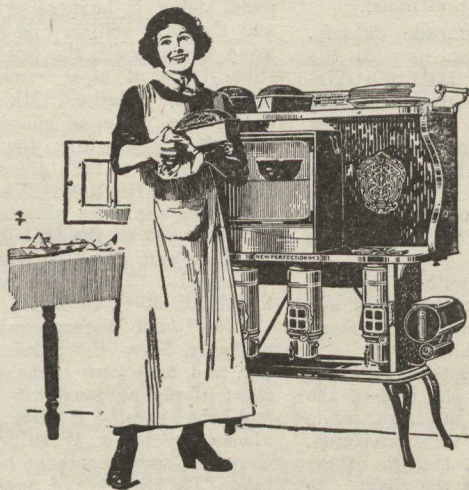


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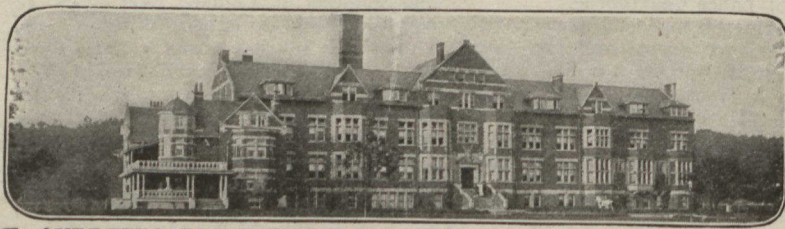
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