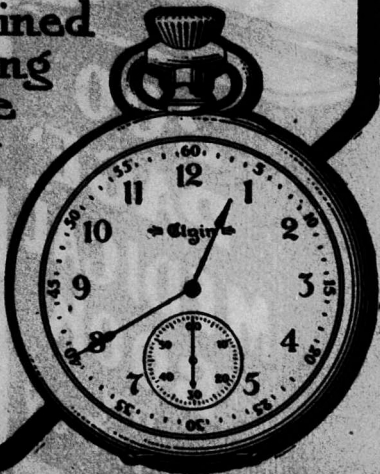


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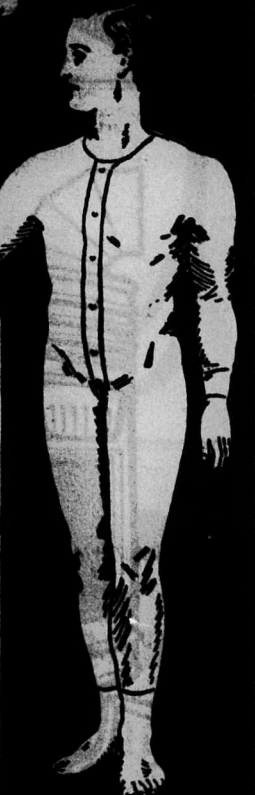
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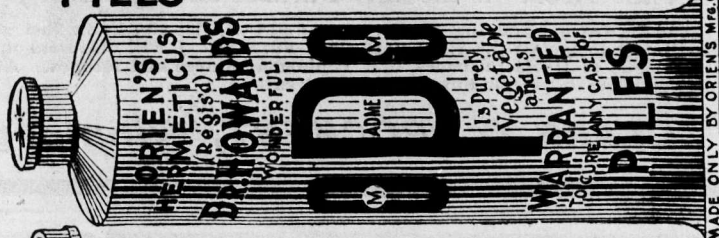
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His Last Christmas Gift.

By John Fox, Jr.,

THE sergeant got the wounded man to his feet and threw one arm around his waist. Then he all but carried him, stumbling along, with both hands clasped across his eyes, down the ravine that looked a night like some pit of hell. For along their path a thousand coke-ovens spat forth red tongues that licked northward with the wind, shot red arrows into the choking black smoke that surged up the mountain-side, and lighted with fire the bellies of the clouds rolling overhead.

"Whar you takin' me?"

"Hospital." The mountaineer stopped suddenly.

"Why, I can't see them ovens!"

"You come on Jim." Next morning Jim lay on a cot with a sheet drawn to his chin and a grayish-yellow bandage

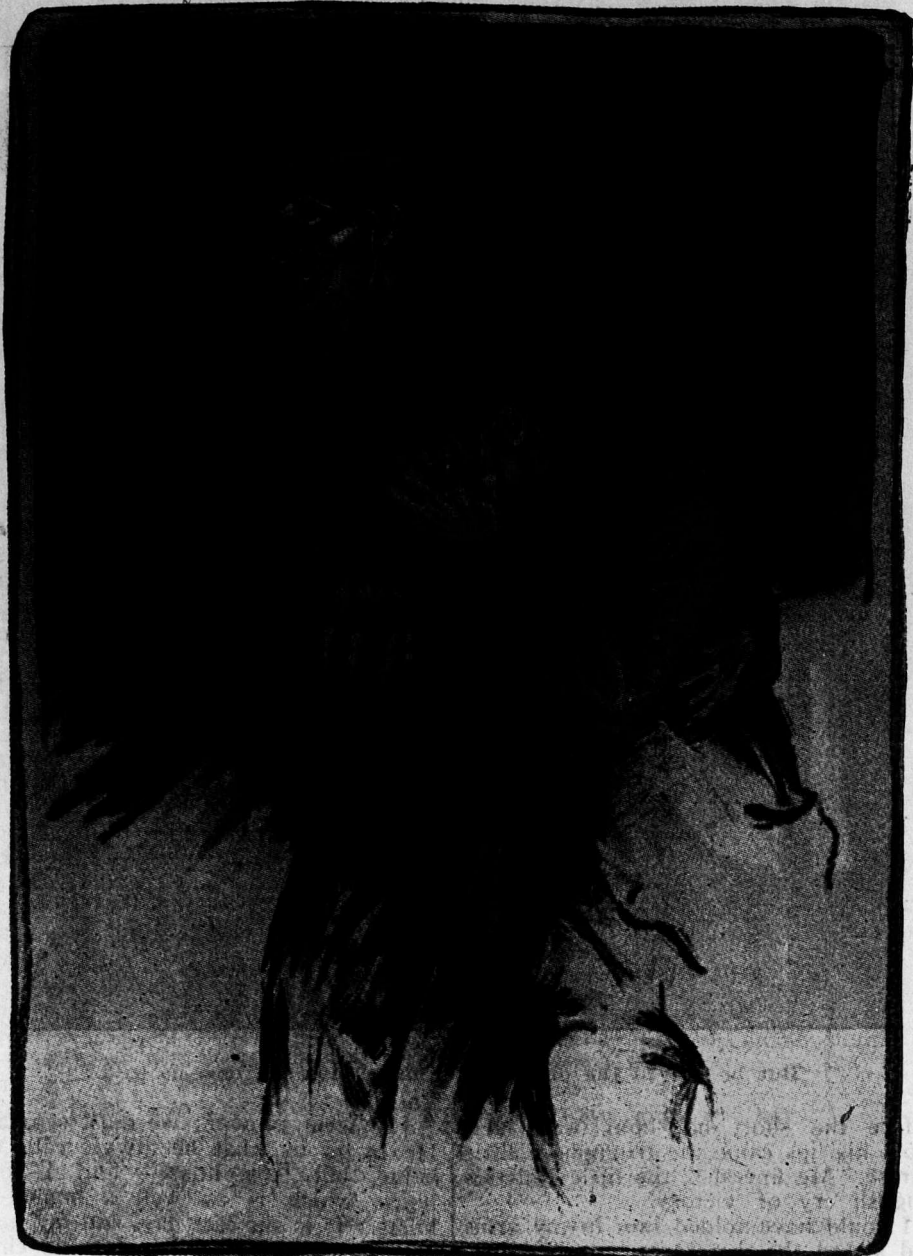
the border of Etherland, and once only he muttered: "Yes, she was a cat, no doubt about that. Yes sir, the old girl was a cat." But when he was conscious, that much even he would never say again. He simply lay grim, quiet, uncomplaining, and not even the surgeon, whose step he got quickly to know, could get him to tell who had done the deed.

On the fourth day he showed some cheer.

"Look here, Doc," he said, "when you goin' to take this rag off o' my eyes? I hain't seen a wink since I come in here."

"Oh, pretty soon," said the surgeon, and the nurse turned away again with drops in her eyes that would never be for his eyes to shed again.

On the sixth day his pulse was fast



Stumbling along, with both hands clasped over his eyes

covering forehead and eyes down to the tip of his nose. When the surgeon lifted that bandage the nurse turned her face aside, and what was under it, or rather what was not under it, shall not be told. Only out in the operating room the smooth-faced young assistant was curiously counting over some round leaden pellets, and he gave one low whistle when he pushed into a pile a full fourscore.

"He said he was a-lookin' through a keyhole," the sergeant reported, "an' some-body let him have it with both barrels—but that don't go. Jim wouldn't be looking through no key-hole—he'd bust the door down."

Nor could the sergeant learn more. He had found the man stumbling down Possum Hollow, and up that hollow the men and women of the mining camp did not give one another away.

"It might have been any one of a dozen fellows I know," the sergeant said, for Jim was a feudsmen and had his enemies by the score.

The man on the cot said nothing. Once, to be sure, when he was crossing

and his blood was high—and that night the nurse knew precisely what meant the look in the surgeon's face when he motioned her to leave the room. Then he bent to lift the bandage once more.

"Why don't you take 'em all off, Doc? I'd like to see the old girl again. Won't she come to see me?"

"Yes, she'll come, but she can't now—she's sick abed." The man grinned.

"Yes, I know them spells."

"Jim," said the surgeon suddenly, "I'm going to be very busy to-morrow, and if you've got any message to send to anybody or anything to say to me, you'd better say it before I go." He spoke carelessly, but with a little too much care.

The sheet moved over the hands clasped across Jim's breast. "Whv, Doc, you don't mean to say—" He stopped and drew in one deep breath slowly.

"Oh, no, but you can't always tell, and I might not get back till late, and I thought you might have something to tell me about—" He paused help-

lessly, and then moving his head low.

"Why, Doc, you—don't—that the old—whisper, 'has—' Who finish—say finished y—"

A curious coarse lips and tightened and bandage made quick brain, a

ence. At last: "D'you ever woman bein'—"

"Yes, Jim."

And then: "Doc, am question the another, bend—"

"Jim, what wife?" The

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