

"THE MAVERICK"

By R. E. SHAFF

SECOND INSTALLMENT



SYNOPSIS

Roy Ashley, with his family, moves West from the timber country where he had been in the lumber business. While in town getting extra farm hands for threshing a severe storm breaks, injuring his wife and when he returns it is to find his wife unconscious in the storm cellar and his son Bobby missing. With the help of neighbors Ashley probes the ruins and finds bones believed to be his son's. In the meantime, Bobby is hiding in a cave when he became lost and is terrified by the storm. A half-wild dog enters the hiding place of Bobby only to leap back with a snarl when Bobby exclaims "Decky."

Now go on with the story—

Retreating some distance she saw a small form come crawling out of the hole to stop at the top and in a low voice coaxingly call for "Decky." The dog came nearer in the dark, drawn there by an irresistible force. Soon she was licking the lad's muddy torn face. Chubby fingers made her wince because they were entwined around her neck in an almost strangle hold. Once she grew frightened at the grasping hands, and as they did not loosen, she nipped them, springing back only to return and lick them as the baby held them out calling her again.

Some one called from the draw. Instantly, the dog retreated down the hole. The noise, coming nearer frightened the child. Again he backed down the hole, the dog coming up to snuggle against him.

All thru the long night they lay there in the damp sticky hole, the boy cuddled up to the dog, shivering each time voices were heard out on the prairie.

Morning came at last and the dog started out in quest of game, but the lad went no farther than the opening of the hole. There he stopped and peered out at the breaking day. Soon, something moved in the bottom of the draw and without further ado he backed again to the furthest part of the hole and waited. He was so dry and hungry.

After a while, the dog came back to the hole, making a low throaty noise, but the lad did not appear. Laying the partly grown rabbit at the entrance, the dog went down the hole as far as she was able to go. Bobby came up to the widest part of the hole and the dog made several trips out and back again but he refused to come out. Finally the dog devoured the rabbit and crawled into the hole. This time she worked past and turning, came up beside him. He grasped at her as she snuggled down beside him. Something warm and smooth struck his face. He grasped it with his chubby hand. Something wet sprayed his face and he eagerly lapped it. It was good. He did the same again and again. It was wet and warm and good, and soon he was getting his fill from the fountains. The dog nuzzled him and licked his face and ears. He felt better now, and warmer.

The dog gave a start and growled, because someone was outside. Neither child nor dog moved. Only the low throaty growl of the dog from time to time. Soon she left again by the front way. Bobby followed her to the edge of the hole and that was as far as he went. He looked out, some of his strength and courage coming to him. The dog was gone for a long time. Bobby crawled down in the hole and began to cry. When the dog came back, she was stiff and sore from the conflict, but she was hardy, and the wounds did not tend to quell her spirit. She crawled into the hole and lay by the boy. Soon he was again at that fountain of warmth and wet. Thus several days went by.

One evening, the dog was with him nearly all night and when morning came he had awakened to his rest. At daylight, she went to the mouth of the hole, there to sit and watch. Bobby came out beside her after a while and they started off. They wandered to the west for a long time. Finally the boy grew tired and lay down on the grass. Soon she was beside him, but he was so tired that she went to hunt while he slept.

When he awoke, she was there beside him, her breast and flank in his face. She had been hunting and now was back to feed him. The dog kept starting off, then coming back. Finally Bobby followed her. Perhaps a mile they covered that afternoon, so darkness found them some distance from the den. The dog knew the ground. They came to a brush-filled draw and there in a niche she turned around, dog fashion several times and lay down, whining softly. He lay down by her as usual. After he had quenched his thirst, he went to sleep. He was tired, but the cold from the unprotected side kept him stirring and shivering. Morning found them early astride, the dog going on ahead to

hunt by herself, soon she whirled and nosed the wind. Something had aroused her. Back to the boy she came, nuzzling him and whining. She led off faster, looking back at him but he seemed to think it a game and only stood and watched her.

Down across the prairie that morning, slouched forward in his saddle, rode a dark-skinned man. His mount was a large brown horse. At first glance, the horse and rider impressed you with their power—they seemed as one. The wayfarer was Joel Lamosh. His mother had been Indian, his father French. He had lived a long time with the Indians of the North and had an Indian wife. He never stayed long at the village. Periodically, he made the long trip south and west, then across the river and came to the sage brush and prairie dogs. A long ride, but that meant nothing to him. There he stayed for a year or more at a time. Then he would suddenly disappear, only to show up at the Indian village for a time. Like most drifters he was shiftless, turning his hand to anything that promised gain without much exertion. Under pressure he was not above punching cows.

As he came abreast of a hill, he stopped his horse for a breath and to look around. It was easy to lose yourself in this rough country with no high points to guide you, unless you kept on your guard. As he looked down to his left, he was surprised to see a small boy give him one good look, then bolt for the bottom of a draw. It puzzled him. He was a long way from any buildings. At that moment, he spied a dog playing sentinel from the crest of a hill. He turned and walked his horse in the direction of the draw. All was still there now. As he came up to a patch of buck brush in the upper end of the small gulley, he spied the boy covering there, his clothes muddy, even his hair was plastered with it. His face was frightfully dirty—even more so than the man's. There was a hungry look in the boy's eyes.

"Hello, sonny," came from the man. There was no response from the child. If anything, he covered closer to the ground. Lamosh saw this wouldn't do, so he took a step nearer the child. As he did so, it gave a cry, a sort of animal noise. Joe turned. A black form crept up from the rear. There was murder in the dog's eye, murder in every crouching step as she came, never halting, a growl deep in her throat. It took only an instant to realize his danger. Joe's hand dropped to his waist and there was a spurt of smoke. The dog pitched ahead—dead.

At the report, the child had gained his feet and as the breed swung around, was going up out of the draw as fast as his short legs were able to carry him. Joel mounted his horse and loped after him, soon overtaking the little figure who dropped in a heap, his eyes throwing fire like an animal at bay. The breed dismounted and reached over to pick up the little body, but as soon as he had reached it to his waist, it began to utter harsh sounds and claw. The breed pinched the small hands.

"Where is your home?" he asked. But the lad's only answer was a flash as he tore loose one of the breed's hands. Joel began to understand. There was only one thing to do, and that was to take the unwelcome find along.

Mounting the boy was no easy task, and his reluctant companion did not seem ready to call a halt to hostilities. Every time the breed looked at him, those eyes were still on him like some hunted animal. As time wore on, the motion and heat combined to overpower the unkempt morsel and he slept there on Joel's arm. The breed studied him. His clothes were of good quality and well made. He was small of stature, but puzzle as he did, he was unable to fathom the mystery. The thing that bothered him was what to do with the child. Should he stop and give him to someone? Was he sure they would not discredit his story and detain him? He thought he had better take him along. He might get clear to Cooper's Plains with him. If so, he knew his story would be accepted and there find a home for his burden.

At first glance, the breed looked treacherous, but as you got used to him you found he was not. Except for a dark skin, his features were regular, yet there was something that puzzled; perhaps it was the intelligence and refinement of the French. He was all politeness when sober, but when he drank, the Indian came thrusting its way to his face. It was almost impossible to fathom him with his conflicting emotions. The only thing so far against him was his occasional desire to get drunk, and to stay so long as he was able to get anything to drink, or else the drink made him sick, then he was off liquor for a time.

At noon he stopped and turned the bay loose to graze while he sat

down to eat. The child had at first refused food offered from the breed's hand, but after a while he came near and told him "Bobby is hungry." The breed gave him food and then a drink from his canteen. When they had rested, they started on, Bobby astride, his legs sticking out straight.

Before the afternoon was over, he was talking about mother, and dad, and Deck, the dog, and answered the breed's questions as best he could. Day after day, they kept south and west. The breed talked little, but that did not matter. Bobby cackled on about the things they came in contact with.

At last they hit the rough range country. Nature had, in times past, played her game of glacial action and here had been the finish. Great draws gashed the rough land, here and there lay a beautiful level stretch of the most fertile land, studded with an occasional lake. The draws were filled with scrub oak, box elder and buck brush. Here the breed cut wood and built his fire, stopping now and then to caress a brown bottle that he had nursed along so carefully for days, taking it out every now and then to fondly caress it, saying such tender things, especially about the good times that were in store for them. The bottle meant nothing to the lad.

Tonight the breed did not replace the bottle carefully in the bag as before. Instead, he held it up to the light, gazing over the red contents. The firelight flickered against the side of the rock at the rear of the camp. With much ceremony, the cork was pulled and the red liquor made a gurgling sound in the breed's lips. Bobby took in the operation from his throne composed of saddle and blankets. That had been his throne and palace from the first. The breed looked over at him and offered the information that tonight they were going to have a little drink, and suiting the words he tipped the bottle and again the liquid made that gurgling sound. His face took on a ruddier cast, his eyes became mere burning slits in his long skin face but Bobby seemed no change.

The breed started to sing short snatches of song in a rasping voice. Rising, he came across to the lad—the bottle in his outstretched hand. "Have a drink," he offered.

Bobby accepted the bottle which the breed shakily held for him. The scalding contents burned his tender lips. Before the man realized what had happened, Bobby recoiled as the struck, the contents spurring from the unsteady hand of the breed upon the saddle and blankets. Surprise and injury filled the torn dirty face of the lad. Roaring an oath, the breed reached for the boy, but he was too late. Bobby was now on the other side of the fire. The breed lunged to his feet but the race was short. As he gathered himself for a leap after Bobby, his foot came in contact with one of the long sticks left there for the fire. One end came up against the boulder, the other firmly against the foot of the breed. Crashing head first into the rock, he lay still.

Bobby did not stop to look back—terror was again with him. Down the side of the butte, he rushed crashing into the brush, squealing

out in terror as the heavy branches threw him to the ground, only to get up and charge again. Soon he became impaled in the midst of a dense growth of limbs, glaring back, he lay there. All was quiet as far as he could see or hear. Upon the butte, the breed nursed a lump on his head that was fast overcoming the liquor which had started all.

Bobby slid out of the limbs and picked his way farther down the hill but it was dark and the going was bad, so he sat on the ground to hide from the breed. He cried softly to himself. Thus he put in the long prairie night, shivering with the cold.

When the day came, the breed picked up his things, saddled his horse and without so much as a glance towards the way his companion of days had gone, rode off down the side of the butte.

When the sun came up, Bobby crawled into the sunshine where he was blessed by its genial warmth. He fell asleep.

Joe MacDonald dropped back a bar in the corral gate and edged thru. Turning, he slid it back into place. Before he slipped that bar out, every horse in the enclosure had been leisurely stalling around. The instant he had clicked the pin, every one of them had come to an about face in his direction, and by the time he had put it back every one stood in the farthest end from him, their heads up, all attention.

There was nothing about the size of Joe to warrant so much respect. He was only five foot six, yet one glance at his trim, well-set body gave the impression that he needed neither height nor breadth. His clear cut leathery face held the plump healthfulness of youth and a determination of purpose.

Joe and "Mom" as he always called his wife, were of stern old Scotch stock, and had come up from farther south and started ranching on a small scale until they were the proud possessors of, as the Chinese cook had said "Muchie land, plentie cattle."

Joe slid the long slender, hairy thing he carried on his arm down into his hand, transferred the largest part over to his left, and started on a trot at that bunch of horses. Instantly, all was action. Away they went around the outside of the corral, Joe traveling on the small inner circle. Soon the rope swirled, and shot out, then became taut.

A big chestnut came to a stop, shaking his head from side to side. Running the rope around a pole, he soon had saddled the horse and was up at the "shack," as he called the ranch house.

Mother MacDonald handed him a lunch which he slid in the saddle-bag. She stepped up and got her kiss, then she mounted to the back door, to watch the chestnut and her man slide down across the level and drop into the lee of a knoll out of sight. Joe's mission lay farther afield.

Over rough knolls and hills lay a wide valley. The grass was good, and there their hands were working with the mowers, buckers and a stacker, putting up hay for winter in case of snow. It was a new venture in these parts and Joe, the good business rancher that he was, had seen the possibility of being prepared for blizzards. It was new business for the men, the horses, too, because as often as possible, Joe rode out to inspect the job.

They had moved "Hop-Wa," the Chinese cook, out to the field of operations, because Joe well knew to keep a man happy at work you had to keep him well fed, and it was a well-known fact that Joe MacDonald fed his men. Things were going fine when he came to the valley.

It was yet early in the day, and in his talk with the foreman, turned

to the cattle. Some of the boys had allowed there was a maverick hanging around Sand Butte, somewhere near the big ledge that cropped out near the top of the draw. They had seen him several times, they said.

A "maverick" is a calf that does not follow any particular cow and the first brand on it claims it.

Joe left early to ride over and look around. To get a better view, he climbed the Sand Butte part way and rode around. The view was good from that vantage point. The he searched the surrounding land and brushed he failed to see any stray calves. Coming on the homeward side, he eased the horse down the hill.

At the bottom, the horse threw up its head and swerved to the left. Joe's knee nudged and the horse turned facing the scent. He knew the meaning of the half snort and the quick paw thrust of fright that was characteristic of Flick, whenever he smelled a rattlesnake. Even before Flick had turned, Joe had been intently studying the brush, his short gun in his hand. Many a bell fish had felt the tearing shock of a forty-five from Joe MacDonald. Not car-

ing to risk getting the horse any closer, he slipped from the saddle and cautiously went ahead, leaving Flick to look out for himself. Working his way up within a short distance, he came to a sudden halt, twenty feet in front of him lay a big yellow and tan and black-twisted, sliding, shiny snake.

Those eyes that can seem to fairly shoot fire and hate were turned in the direction of Joe's shadow, slowly twisting and turning, the snake began to throw out that buzzing whirl that once heard is never forgotten. But it was not the snake that made the perspiration start and the color leave Joe's face.

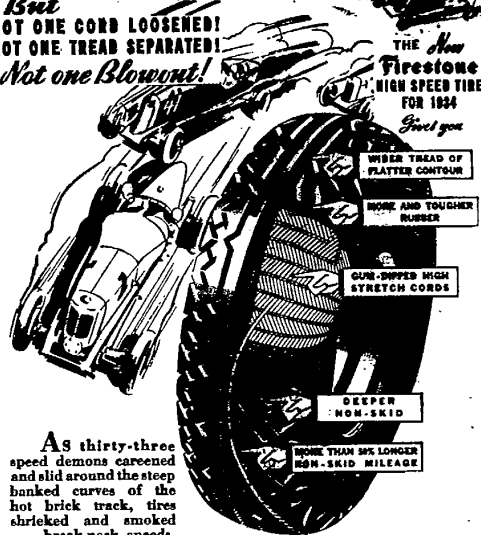
There, not two feet away from the snake, was a dirty, grimy little boy, lying on his side with his head on his arm. He was sound asleep. His free hand was not six inches from that now thrashing shiny tail with its row upon row of vibrating rings.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

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