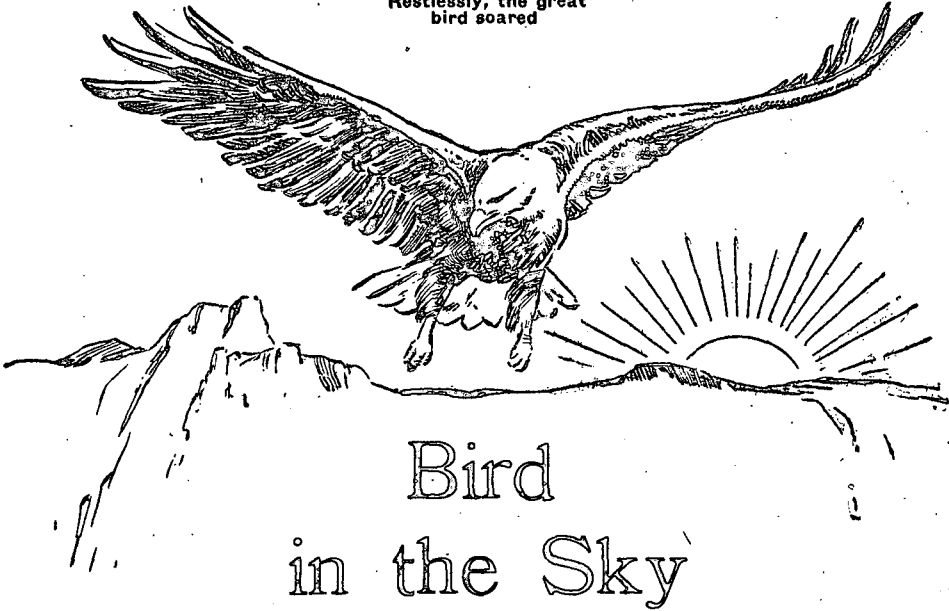


Restlessly, the great  
bird soared



## Bird in the Sky

Hats off to the bubblingest blunderer of the Western plains, the champion of left-handed Injun fighters. Hats off, we say—because your scalp stays on, and all because of the youngster

By JIM KJELGAARD

Author of "North of the Jinx,"  
"Warden Bait," etc.

ON HIS stomach Ben Egan crawled out on a lip of cliff that jutted over a rocky valley. Shading his eyes with his hands, he peered at the ranges of hills that folded into one another for as far as he could see.

He couldn't see anything else, which

was what worried him. It was just when you couldn't see the varmints, and let yourself believe there wasn't a Dakotah or Arikarah within a hundred-mile radius, that their bullets began clipping the rocks around you.

Then, over the fourth hill to the south, Ben detected a single wheeling speck in the sky. For a full five minutes he kept his gaze steadily on it. It was a buzzard. A second bird joined the first. A third



appeared from nowhere, to wheel slowly.

Ben crawled back from the bare cliff into the shelter of the pines on the hill. Somewhere in the hills Running Elk was leading sixty young braves, who would rather go on the warpath than on a reservation, against the hated paleface. The party had skipped out of the reservation two weeks before, and hadn't been seen or heard of since. But a band of Sioux could sink out of sight where chipmunks couldn't find shelter.

As a scout for Terry's cavalry Ben was supposed to find them and report back to the cavalry—a detachment of which, under Lieutenant Tooker, had been camped for three days on the left fork of the Mark River.

He had been in the hills three days now without finding anything more dangerous than a few deer and elk. But the buzzards were swinging over carrion, possibly that left by Running Elk's hunters.

Ben pondered. If the war party was in the vicinity, their most logical objective was the Tomlinson ranch. That was just a little more than a hundred miles southeast on a branch of the Tongue River, and it was defended by only five men.

By riding all day and the rest of the night, Running Elk's party would be within twenty miles of Tomlinson's. They wouldn't ride tomorrow—there was too much danger of some drifting trapper or rancher stumbling onto them and getting away again—but they would be set to sack the ranch tomorrow at dark.

That gave him thirty-six hours. But Tooker's camp was also on a line with Tomlinson's, and only a few miles farther away. The cavalry could make a forced ride all day tomorrow too, and beat Running Elk to it.

Ben walked back to the knob where he had left the kid and the horses. He cocked his battered derby over his eyes as he caught sight of the kid's gay buckskins.

He'd just as soon fight the entire Sioux nation singlehanded as spend another three

days in Indian country with the kid. Ben had known men of marvelous talent when it came to gun work, or tobacco spitting, or something worth while. But never had he known another with the kid's infinite capacity for doing things wrong.

BEN crawled slowly up on the kid, who with his hand shading his eyes was peering intently at a blank wall of evergreens ten feet away. His rifle was in his hands, his knife and tomahawk loose in their sheaths.

Ben tossed a pine cone that lit in the brush ten feet behind the kid. The kid jumped like a startled rabbit, the foolishly long fringes on his buckskin trousers flapping as he jumped.

Ben shook his head. Of all the clothes to wear—

"Ain't you seen nothin' warlike?" Ben drawled.

The kid's chubby face expanded into a grin. "I watched the horses like you told me," he said. "It would of took some Indian to get near them."

"Blind one couldn't possible of done it," Ben remarked dryly. "That is, if he was tied. Come on. We're ridin'."

Ben swung to the saddle. The kid followed suit, drawing the reins tight and making his horse prance. Ben rode past him.

A dozen times he had bawled the kid out, and a hundred times had tried to impress on him the fact that Indian hunting was a cold, hard-headed game—and a dangerous one. But none of it had done any good.

The kid was Indian crazy, frontier wild. He had joined Ben the first morning out with the bland assurance that Tooker had sent him to help find Running Elk.

What Tooker really had told the kid Ben didn't know, but he was reserving several choice things to tell Tooker as soon as he saw him again. He had been afraid to send the kid back until he knew where Running Elk was.

Ben rode his horse into a small creek,

and followed its winding course two miles or more. You never could tell about a war party of young bucks. It was likely to be a loose one, with hunters out and drifting lone braves not at all averse to counting coup on such wandering pale-faces as they might find.

Ben reined his horse out of the creek and onto the bank. He waited for the kid, who appeared presently around a bend in the creek, his arms laden with willow shoots that he was trying to tie onto his saddle.

"What in tunket you been doin'?" Ben's voice was as close to exasperation as it ever got.

The kid's face was bewildered. "Why," he stammered, "I thought these would make a nice basket for my sister back east."

"That's right," Ben said mildly. "Of course, it ain't important that the places them shoots was picked from will show every loose Dakotah and 'Rick'ra that happens by here that we come this way. If it's all the same to you, could you manage to pick daisies and such where there ain't so much danger of losin' your hair doin' it?"

"But these are from a place where there's genuine wild Indians," the kid explained.

Ben turned his horse up the hill. On top he dismounted, and led his horse into a grove of evergreens. The kid followed. Ben retraced their trail back down to the creek, carefully brushing out all tracks.

He looked thoughtfully at the kid when he returned. If he left him with the horses, there'd be no telling what devilment he'd find. If he took him along, he'd at least know where he was.

"You come with me," he said. "Be easy about it."

"Yessir!" the kid said eagerly, his eyes glowing with the prospect of long-awaited action.

**T**HE buzzards had descended to earth when Ben got to the edge of the treeless valley where he had marked them.

The kid behind him, he slowly crawled on out.

Five flapping buzzards took wing as he approached. The skin, head, and viscera of a cow elk lay where they had been. A defeathered arrow still stuck through the elk's neck. Ben twisted it with his fingers.

"War party all right," he announced. "Young Dakotah Sioux. They've all got guns, but they don't want any more noise than necessary, so they're usin' arrows on their game. They'll stop long enough to piece out this elk. We'll get a chance to see them."

"How do you know all that?" the kid asked eagerly.

Ben looked at him gently. In spite of the kid's numerous faults you couldn't dislike him all the time. He was so young, so pathetically bound up in the romance of what he was doing.

"Dakotah arrow," Ben explained. "And they got plenty of guns because they didn't bother to take the arrow with them. They're young bucks because they done things in such a hurry here. Older men would have covered it up."

"And it's a war party because they took only the meat; Indians ain't wasteful. They'll stop and every man will fix three days' rations because they'll have it then if they have to light out sudden and ride hard."

"How did you know they was here to begin with?" the kid pursued.

Ben flipped a hand towards the buzzards swinging patiently above them. The kid's face lighted rapturously. "You knew it on account of them buzzards," he exclaimed.

"That's right," Ben agreed. "Come on. We'll have a look at what Running Elk's got to offer."

Ben led the way back to the horses, and at a rapid trot continued on down the creek. If Running Elk was going to Tomlinson's, he would come down another valley two hills over. Ben swerved from the creek to the top of another hill, with uplifted hand cautioning the kid to silence.

He tied both horses in the evergreens. The kid trembled in excitement. For the first time Ben's rifle was out of its scabbard.

Side by side, they crawled to the edge of another rocky bluff that overlooked a deep valley. Three hundred yards up, the valley made a right-angle turn, hiding from view everything above it. Nothing showed except a few crows flapping lazily below them.

The kid became bored after a bit, and began to pick at the shaly bluff with his finger nail. Ben kept his eyes riveted on the place where the valley turned.

His right arm stole across the kid's shoulders as three braves, mounted on three black horses, came into view. Ben tensed his arm and pressed the kid to the ground as he felt the shudder that ran through his frame.

The kid gasped audibly. Ben's hand flew to his mouth.

The three Sioux, no doubt honored warriors who had already counted coup in battle, rode directly beneath them. A red feather bobbed in the mane of each horse.

They rode with only buckskin pads between themselves and the horses. Parfleche bags were hung from the horses' flanks. Rifles were slung in the crooks of the warriors' arms.

There was little of color or decoration. The Indians, particularly the younger ones, had learned a lot from the whites and lately had dispensed with a lot of color and foorafaw in favor of a swift, deadly attack.

**R**IDING in loose formation, the rest of the party appeared around the bend. Their horses, of every imaginable color, presented a gay pattern against the somber background of the valley. A band of loose horses was driven behind the mounted warriors.

A few of the warriors had stuck war feathers, that they probably had not earned, into their scalp locks, and a few of them had painted their rifle stocks.

In all the party there were not more than half a dozen bows.

Ben counted them. Including the first three there was a total of sixty-one—all warriors. They were well armed and well mounted, and urging their horses rapidly down the valley. Beyond a doubt Tomlinson's was their objective. If they went back, they would either have to stay in the hills or return to the reservation. If they cut east, they would be getting dangerously close to the cavalry.

Ben waited until the last one had passed, then drew the kid back to the horses.

For five minutes he sat unmoving. At last the kid could be of real use; but Ben hesitated. He had come to hold a vast awe of the kid's propensity for blundering. Still, even though important, this was a simple enough mission.

With a pointed stick Ben traced a map on the ground.

"Look," he said to the kid. "Here's where we are now. This strip here is Mark River. All those little gullies runnin' into it cover it from Squirrel Run, where Tooker's camped, down to Beaver Run. This long valley is where the Injuns are ridin' down. They'll camp some-ers this side of Beaver Run tomorrow at daybreak.

"You can reach Tooker by ridin' straight up this holler we're in now, and crossin' the saddle we camped in the first night. Think you can do it?"

"I know I can," the kid said, his eyes shining with thought of the dashing deed that had, at last, come his way.

"Aw right," Ben continued. "Never mind that hoss of yours. Kill him if you have to, but get there. Don't waste any time. Tell Tooker that Running Elk is goin' to Tomlinson's Ranch. He'll be set to take it tomorrow night. Tell him he can cut him off in Beaver Run sure. Have him let Ike Prillifew guide him in there. Don't slip up. There's five men at Tomlinson's might die if you do."

"I won't slip," the kid said. "What are you goin' to do?"

"I'd go get Tooker myself," Ben said in a troubled voice. "But them's all young bucks. I can't just be positive that they're goin' to Tomlinson's, though I'd stake my hair on it. But Running Elk's a crafty devil. Now that we got him spotted I'd like to keep him in sight. If he changes his mind about Tomlinson's I could cut the cavalry off before they got too far down."

The kid achieved a spectacular vault into the saddle. "I'll find Tooker," he promised.

"Ride that hoss," Ben warned.

At full gallop the kid rode up the valley. Ben watched him out of sight, then mounted his own horse to trot slowly along toward the Tomlinson ranch. He'd better, he decided, trail Running Elk all the way down. He told himself again that there couldn't be any slip-up. The kid could certainly get word to Tooker.

Ben had ridden scarcely five miles from where the kid had left him when three mounted Sioux thundered out of a bunch of evergreens straight at him.

Ben wheeled his horse, dropping over the saddle and thrusting his rifle under the horse's neck. He shot. One of the Indian horses jolted to the earth, throwing its rider.

Ben pumped another shell in. A volley of shots rang from behind. A jarring blow smashed against Ben's head.

But only as his horse fell on top of him and he sank into oblivion did he realize that there were more Indians than the three he had seen.

WHEN he awoke, the sun was a golden ball sinking in the west. Ben looked at it, and closed his eyes again while he strove to collect his scattered thoughts and formulate some distinct impression of what had happened.

He was aware both of a great thirst and of a trickle of water running near him.

He opened his eyes again, to look straight up a needle-like spire that stretched above him into a mass of shimmering

blue that gradually resolved itself into the sky.

His head throbbed; he became aware of dry and hardened substance on his face. It was, he realized vaguely, caked blood.

He tried to turn over on his stomach, struggling furiously for a full minute before he became aware that he was held to the ground by buckskin thongs driven in beside him, and that he was stark naked.

Gradually full perception returned. He moved more slowly, trying by sheer force of will to overcome the undulating throbbing in his head. He looked again at the needle spire, and knew a sudden shock of panic as he realized where it was.

He had, he remembered, been following Running Elk's war party toward the Tomlinson ranch. Running Elk had ambushed him. Then he had exhibited some of the qualities that had made him a war chief. He had back-tracked Ben to where he had sent the kid back to Tooker, and had correctly read the story of what had taken place there.

The needle spire was a landmark, but it did not mark the way to the Tomlinson ranch. Instead of wasting time and warriors tracking the kid down, Running Elk had let him go on and carry word to Tooker that the Tomlinson ranch was about to be attacked. Then, with the cavalry a hundred miles down country, he had an unobstructed trail to the settlement of Grant.

Undoubtedly the Indians had gone up the valley in which Ben found himself staked out. Instead of a hundred miles south, they would swing down Mink Creek, twenty miles north of Tooker's camp. From there it was only a day and a night's ride to Grant, that had been impossible to attack with the cavalry in the way.

Ben groaned, and fell to fighting the thongs that bound him.

But he relaxed and lay quietly after a bit. He couldn't do anything but waste his strength by struggling. Cautiously he

wiggled his scalp. It sent pains shooting through his head, but his hair was still on.

He had, he remembered, shot one horse from under an Indian and then been attacked by others that had killed his horse and wounded himself. His wound must be only a superficial one.

Probably the Indians who had attacked him had disagreed as to which of them had counted first coup, and each one had disdained his scalp rather than have it said that another had aided in taking it.

Running Elk's party was in a hurry, which explained why none of them had lingered to witness the torture they had contrived for him. Staking out was a particularly choice method of relieving the hated white man of all worldly cares. It insured a maximum of discomfort, and plenty of time to meditate on past sins, as well as a specially repugnant method of entering the Happy Hunting Grounds.

It was a plains Indian custom, Ben thought; but lately the various young bloods of different tribes had been adopting customs of other tribes that applied to their requirements.

But he was still luckier than he might have been. Anthills were the most favored locations for staking prisoners.

Slowly Ben edged his head around until he could see the farther bank of the creek. He tried not to think of the raging thirst that assailed him. Staking him close to water was a typical Sioux touch.

**H**E TURNED until he was again able to look at the needle spire. A bald eagle volplaned out of the sky, circled the spire three times, and settled beside the mate that rested there.

Ben looked at it gratefully, eagerly. It was distraction, something to take his mind from the maddening trickle of the water. By straining his eyes, concentrating every faculty on the spire, he was able to discern the eagle's nest—a huge bundle of sticks that blended with the gray of the rock on which it was built.

Ben stared hard at it until the lengthening shades of twilight enveloped the spire in blackness. As best he could he fitted his body into the contours of the ground. The night would be endless.

Its beginning brought chill. Ben shivered, but his thirst did not decrease. He thought of his boyhood on a Pennsylvania farm, and how he used to drive his father's cattle home from the pasture every night and wait while they drank from the trough beside the barn.

His throat was burning, dry; his tongue a twisted piece of rope within his mouth. He forced his thoughts away from water and animals drinking and began to concentrate on horses he had ridden, fights he had been in, warm places he had known, fires he had built in storms.

But in spite of his best efforts, toward morning he found himself lying with every muscle tense, every nerve awake. A cold sweat bathed his entire body.

He knew that he had been asleep for a few minutes, in the grip of a horrible nightmare. From somewhere a startlingly clear voice had shouted, "Running Elk and sixty braves burned Grant while Tooker's cavalry was at the Tomlinson ranch.

"Ben Egan sent them there."

**A**FTER an eternity, a faint patch of gray appeared in the sky. Ben stared at it incredulously. It seemed to him that he had never known a year as long as the night had been. It was impossible that it should ever come to an end; he had given up hope that morning would ever be again.

For ages he had been in a black void filled with mounted Indians. At times the chubby face of the kid had grinned at him from the background. Ben was glad that the kid wasn't having to endure this. Somehow he couldn't picture the kid staked out.

The patch of gray widened, to reveal a sky of cloudless blue. Ben lay silently, apathetically awaiting what he knew would be a day of torture. The night had been

bad, but the day would be worse. He tried to speak, and was startled at the croaking whisper that came from his lips.

Then, just as the first rays of the sun began to paint the top of the spire a warm yellow, the eagle took wing from its eyrie.

So surely that there seemed to be solid substance instead of air enfolding the spire, he arose. In great swooping circles he climbed, growing fainter in the distance and at last going out of sight. It was as if the sky in whose lower reaches he made his home had admitted the eagle into itself, as one deserving of a higher place.

Eagerly, anxiously, Ben waited for him to come back. The eagle was something alive, something that moved and could reassure him that life still existed in that great void into which he must stare.

The spire was the only thing he could see, and now that seemed part of the monotony. The sun descended into the valley to send warm fingers creeping over his body.

It warmed him, but Ben shrank before it. What the sun might do in the course of a single day he knew full well; and he could not hope for death in less than three days. He would literally be cooked alive.

After half an hour the eagle came back bearing a jackrabbit in its claws. Ben smiled as he hovered above the nest and alighted there, leaving the rabbit for his hungry mate. He rose again, swooping about the nest in long curves and head-long dives as he assured himself that all was well.

If, by some miracle, Ben should escape, never again would he harm a bird.

But when the eagle flew away again, emptiness returned to smite him like a blow. Ben thought of yesterday. He had failed miserably to do the job he had set out to do, that others had depended on him to do. Only a few dozen miles away, a short ride, Tooker's cavalry were pushing their mounts towards a futile goal.

In his mind Ben reconstructed their arrival at the Tomlinson Ranch, the wonder of the men who would receive them there, and the concern of Tooker when he found no raiding Sioux.

Then, perhaps while Tooker had more scouts out looking for Running Elk, would come the wild-eyed messenger on the lathered horse, the news that Running Elk had gone to Grant.

And always, on every part of the frontier, men would say that Ben Egan had sent the cavalry on a wild goose chase while the Sioux had raided.

THE sun became hotter, began to burn. His inability to escape it; to do anything to help himself, was maddening. He stifled the impulse to struggle in thoughts of the kid. Bubbling and eager, the kid would be pushing his horse along at the front of the cavalry column.

But the kid wouldn't be so eager after he rode to Grant. He had never seen one of the things that a white person became after the Sioux had passed. You couldn't tell the men from the women. You could pick them up, and talk to them, and treat them gently, and never once would they move or talk back.

No, the kid would probably tone down considerably after he rode to Grant with the cavalry. Ben hoped that what he would see at Grant wouldn't spoil him, or rob him of all that bubbling spontaneity that became exasperating at times.

He didn't think the kid should ever become a cold-faced killer of men—even of Indians. What the kid should do was mix it up in a couple of skirmishes and then either go back east or settle down on a ranch.

Ben screamed huskily, and fell to fighting the bonds.

The return of the eagle restored him to sanity. For a few seconds, exhausted by his screams and futile struggle, Ben lay back on the ground watching the bird swing down to the nest. He paused there a moment, then on lazy wings ascended into the air and hung there.

Ben kept fascinated eyes on him. With all his being he hoped that the eagle would not go away again.

Slowly, infinitesimally, the day burned on. His body was parched. But it was not as he thought it would be. The pain did not torment him nearly so much as the absolute helplessness, the inability to cover himself, to get out of the sun when every reason and instinct screamed that that was what he must do.

With gaping mouth he stared at the eagle. The eagle hovered over the spire, changing his position from time to time but doing it so swiftly that he seemed always to be in one place.

Then, toward evening, the eagle flew away. Ben watched with sick eyes. The first faint murmur of delirium stirred in his brain. This time he was sure that the eagle would never return and he would be left alone.

HE LAY back, choking and gasping. The full, unallayed horror of things that were about to be returned to seize him. A curtain of red mist hung before his eyes. The spire grew ten times as high as it had been, and at a dizzy pace expanded and contracted into itself.

Ben emitted a croaking whisper that would have been a scream if his throat had been capable of more sound. Senselessly he began fighting his bonds.

His mouth opened and snapped shut. He writhed to each side as far as the thongs would let him move. Finally, exhausted, he lay still.

With closed eyes he lay a long time. He fought an almost overpowering impulse to open his eyes again and look for the eagle. As long as he kept his eyes shut he could hope that it was there. Opening them, and not seeing it, would be unbearable.

Fantastic visions began to chase one another through his head. He saw three braves mounted on three black horses. The three became thirty, and thundered down on him while he shot at them without hitting any of them. Finally, the thirty

became a yelling horde, trampling terrified people beneath the feet of their horses, shooting others down as they ran.

Then, out of the mêlée, rode one figure. A chubby-faced, grinning kid who put the savages to rout. For a moment thereafter he bestrode his horse, the victor in the field. Then, startlingly distinct, he turned his horse towards Ben.

Ben heard the pounding hoof beats. At full gallop the kid rode, swinging from the saddle as he reached Ben's prostrate figure, bathing his body with cool water, giving him water to drink, wrapping him in a soft blanket.

Weakly, Ben opened his eyes. He stared in wonderment at the needle spire. The eagle had returned, and now hovered scarcely a hundred feet over it. It was nearly night again. But when Ben tried to move his hand, he found that he could do it. He turned to face the creek, and stared full into the kid's face.

The kid knelt beside him, cradling his head in a gentle arm. With his free hand he held a wet cloth to Ben's lips. Ben squeezed the water out, working his throat muscles as it trickled down his throat. The kid heaved a prodigious sigh of relief. Ben relaxed. The kid smiled broadly when Ben looked into his eyes again.

"Running Elk?" he whispered.

"It's all right," the kid assured him. "I did just what you told me. I forgot the name of the ranch, but to make sure I wouldn't forget the creek I kept sayin' over and over again—'creek named for animal that lives in creek.' When I got to the cavalry camp I told Tooker to hustle right up Mink Creek. We met Running Elk there this morning, and licked him plenty. Me and Tooker didn't lose a man, but we did have one wounded one."

BEN shook his head, but the smile would not come off his face. The kid and his blunders! The kid and his mistakes! The blessed kid and his fool fumbling! Beaver Run—Mink Creek! "Animal that lives in the creek!" It was fantastic, the blunder of the century. . . .

"How did you find me?" he whispered.

The kid assumed an exaggerated stance that he probably thought marked him as a professional scout. "I thought something must be wrong when you didn't show up," he said. "Tooker said you could take care of yourself, but I was worried. So I rode back."

He waved a blasé hand at the eagle. "Remember how we found the Indian kill? Well, I found you the same way. I rode to the top of a hill now and then, and as soon as I saw that buzzard up there I suspected you must be under it."

The kid made another broad gesture and nodded complacently.

Ben lay silent, dumbfounded. If the frontier lasted another thousand years it couldn't happen again. Then, suddenly, the kid gripped his hand. His air of hard-boiled professionalism drifted from him like a puff of smoke. He was again a kid, all bound up in the romance of frontier

life. He would never be anything else.

"Ben," he said, "I'm going to tell you somethin'. Tooker didn't send me out. I—I just sort of come on my own hook. But if you think I done all right, couldn't you, couldn't you just sort of take me along on your next trip? I can learn, honest! Show me more and I'll try to do better, Ben."

The kid was silent then for some time; he stared at the prone man, his eyes anxious and pleading.

Ben's smile grew softer on his face as he drifted into slumber—dreamless this time. He saw the kid, amiable and blundering, doing everything wrong—but watched over by some lucky star or under the wing of some mysterious providence. There weren't enough Indians in the West to lift his hair.

Ben squeezed his hand.

"I wouldn't dream of taking anybody else," he murmured.

ON A FROSTY MORNING - WATCH YOUR BREATH TRAVEL

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# Black Bayou

Short Novelet



He goes plumb crazy; jerks out his own knife an' tears into Sleede like a wildcat

**You've killed a man. You're sick and afraid, and you take to the swamps like a hunted animal. Then you wake to the sound of a girl's voice singing. And you set your course with a shotgun . . .**

By **ALEXANDER KEY**

Author of "Saltwater Scramble," "Luck on the Ladybird," etc.

**S**OME o' this I got from young Ranny himself, though I'll not say how. An' some come from Dad Hunter an' Bonnie Fox, an' others I'll not mention.

A lot of it, sure, is plain fancy spun from fact. It couldn't be no other way.

Now, I'm not tryin' to excuse anyone, but you know how it is when a man comes ashore after a hard trip on the

snapper banks. For a couple weeks it's been wind an' squalls an' heavin' blue water, with sharks an' fouled lines to worry him, an' a hot Gulf sun fit to burn him down.

Out there he gits to feelin' that life is a heap too short, so when he unloads the catch he wants to collect his money an' spend it. He's bone tired, but he's all strung up tighter'n a weather lanyard, an' rarin' to bust loose an' do something.

He wants a lot o' likker an' music, an' for a little while he ain't got no more sense than a fool puppy dog.

That's the way it is with young Ranny Beale when the *Flying Fish* comes in.