

The Lieutenant's Horse

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The kid rode straight and hard for Fire Eagle; raised his rifle and aimed the heavy muzzle for the chief's head

More about that magnificently left-handed youngster whose chief weapon in fightin' Injuns is an outstanding talent for doing things the wrong way

BEN EGAN'S eyes were fixed between the bobbing ears of his horse. He couldn't see anything else unless he looked up at the stars because he and Lieutenant Searles had left the army post at ten o'clock at night.

An hour out of the post Ben halted his horse and listened. He still did not believe in his incredible good luck and would not until he was three or four

hours farther away. The round-faced, adventure-struck kid who had attached himself to Ben and apparently never would be shaken off had not been in the post when Ben had left it.

He was a nice kid, would be interesting company any place where he couldn't do himself or anybody else any harm.

But his place wasn't the Indian country. He had an amazing talent for doing things wrong; only incredible luck had so far kept his hair on his head.

Ben stood in a great deal more awe of the kid than he did of Fire Eagle (the

particular Sioux whom it was now his mission to bring in) or even of the entire Sioux nation.

Five hours out Ben breathed more easily. The kid safely behind, he and Searles could finish the job in orthodox fashion.

Ben didn't quite know about Searles. He was new in the hills, but he had fought in Texas and had been an officer with Grant. He seemed capable enough, but was a bit of a dandy with elaborate uniforms and equipment.

Still, that shouldn't be held against a man who could deliver the goods when necessary.

Searles' horse was a magnificent animal. It was small, but not too small to carry a man and all his gear.

Deep brown except for his black mane and tail, the horse had a large dash of Arab in him. From his small, finely shaped head to his flowing tail and trim legs, he was built like a horseman's dream. His eyes were the most intelligent horse's eyes Ben had ever looked into; and Searles thought as much of the horse as he did of himself.

Ben reserved judgment. Searles and his horse together would fit the grandest notion anybody ever had of the ideal American frontier officer, mounted—but the test of any gun was how it would shoot.

AN HOUR before dawn Ben dismounted, and stood with the reins of his rugged buckskin over his arm while he listened. Through the dark came the tinkling song of a small waterfall. Ben nodded, satisfied.

A little to the left of Beaver Fall was a side canyon whose mouth was screened with evergreens. The Sioux knew of it, but they didn't think any white man did.

Its floor was solid rock; a whole

army of horses could be led up it without leaving any trace. At its head was a rock escarpment that could either be defended or escaped from.

"We better walk," Ben said in his colorless voice.

Searles nodded. "I'll follow you."

Leading his horse, Ben started up the canyon. The night had begun to shade into morning when they reached its head. They turned their horses into a small basin where grass grew sparsely, and climbed back to the top of the rocks. From there they could see anybody coming from either way.

Ben broke open a package of jerky and gave some to Searles.

"We better not have no fire," he said. "Up here you never know who your neighbors'll be."

Searles grinned, and munched on the hard meat. "Tell me about this Fire Eagle," he said. "I confess that I have only the skeleton story."

"Ain't much to tell," Ben said. "The Sioux was pretty peaceful until he showed up. He starts in with some of their damned heathen foolishness about how the great eagle showed him how to chase the army back out of here by fire. Says if anybody smoked up in the fire the eagle showed him how to build, the white man's bullets couldn't hurt."

"Natch'rally everybody suggested he try it hisself first. So he smoked hisself up an' went down to Wadnoka where he kilt three soldiers. That set him up as a great medicine man, an' now there's a bunch of crazy young hellions flockin' with him."

"When we catch Fire Eagle, an' take him in, the rest will cool off. If we don't catch him, they won't. That's why they sent only us instead of a detachment. They figger when the medicine's took out of Fire Eagle's fire, the rest will be good."

"I see," Searles said.

"We better turn in," Ben advised. "Sleep as long as you can. It gets sort of tiresome sittin' on these rocks with nothin' to do. Towards night we'll start out again. Mornin' oughta put us on the McKechnie, an' mebbe we can decide where to go from there."

... Searles slept until three o'clock in the afternoon, and awoke to see Ben, his rifle across his knees, gazing intently down the canyon. Searles crawled to his side. Ben pointed to a lone horseman riding up the canyon.

"Sioux?" Searles questioned tensely.

"No," Ben groaned. "It ain't a Sioux. I wish it was. I wish it was a hull army of 'em, or anything except what's comin'."

DISMOUNTING from a wiry black bronco, the lone rider left his horse standing on the edge of the rock and walked into camp.

Searles, silently contemptuous, brought the horse into concealment. The rider, a round-faced youngster, was talking with Ben Egan. Searles gaped as he looked at the newcomer's buckskins—probably the fanciest suit in the West.

Ben's air was that of a man who knows himself beaten and hates to admit it.

"Will you tell me," Ben asked helplessly, "just how you knew we were up here?"

"I didn't," the kid said blandly. "I was looking for a shortcut to the McKechnie, and when I started up the hill I rode through some spruces into a canyon. I thought I might as well ride up it."

Ben groaned. "Would you have the least idea that if you kep' ridin' in the direction you was headin' in when you come up here, you couldn't find no

directer way away from the McKechnie?"

"Oh well," the kid said airily, "I would have found it."

"You prob'ly would," Ben said respectfully. His voice rose to become slightly hysterical. "The chances is fifty to none the hull Sioux nation couldn't of found us up here. But you did. *You* did!"

The kid scratched his head perplexedly. "I thought you needed my help."

Ben shook his head. "We couldn't possibly of got along without it. Tooker'll have my everlastin' thanks for sendin' you out."

"Tooker didn't send me," the kid said. "I—"

"I know," Ben cut in. "You come on your own hook to save the West from the red menace. This is Lieutenant Searles."

"Glad to know you, Lieutenant," the kid said amiably. "I'm Ben's partner."

The contempt was gone from Searles' face now. He saw the kid for what he was: a toddler during the Civil War who'd heard only glowing stories, who'd come west as soon as he could get away from his mother. And now, eighteen and grass green, he was an adventure-crazy nut playing Indian hunter.

Searles extended a hand.

"Glad to know you," he said gravely. "Ben told me a lot about you. And now I might suggest that we detail you to carry important dispatches back to Tooker."

Behind the kid's back, Ben was making violent negative gestures. Searles read the awe in the old scout's face. He let the kid's hand go.

"Kid," Ben said, "will you go down and haze them hosses back up here?"

"Sure thing, Ben." Trying to walk bowlegged like a cowboy, the kid

plunged into the basin.

Ben stood watching him. "Gorm!" he breathed. "Gorm! Don't never try to send him nowheres alone. There just ain't no tellin' what kind of shape the country between here an' the post'll be in if he rides through it twice.

"An' I'm tellin' you, don't take your eyes off him a'tall. You might of rode in wars, an' fit Indians, an' done plenty of other things, but you ain't done nothin' unless you rode in Indian country with that kid."

The kid came back with the horses. He nodded casually at Searles' mount. "Nice horse, Lieutenant."

"Thanks," Searles said caustically.

The kid had taken a revolver from a holster and was ostentatiously twirling it on his finger. Ben stared at it. The grip was of ivory, featuring on one side a picture of a gory scalp with blood dripping from it and on the other a cut of a wild horse rearing and the words "death before dishonor."

The rest of the gun was inlaid with carving that must have cost the price of a good team and wagon. The kid oozed with pride.

"Like it?" he asked Ben. "It cost a hundred and ninety dollars. My mother had it made for my birthday, but I designed it."

"I can see you must of designed it," Ben said dryly.

The kid extended his arm. "Lemme show you how—"

In one wild leap Ben was on him. "Don't shoot it here," he pleaded. "Wait with your target practice until we get back to the post. I'm just crazy to see you shoot your new gun, but I'd just as soon wait until we got a coupl'a more soldiers around us. After all, the Sioux got ears too."

"Well I—" the kid said bewilderedly.

"I know," Ben cut in. "You never

thought of that. Come on. We're ridin', I'll go first, you next, an' Lieutenant Searles will bring up the rear."

THE McKechnie was the dividing point between army influence and Sioux influence. On the eastern side a few hardy settlers had crept in. The country beyond the McKechnie was still, by tacit agreement, the hunting ground of the Sioux.

It was in there, fifty thousand miles of wilderness, that Fire Eagle was marshaling the band that, given the protection of the eagle's fire, would be immune to the white man's bullets and able to reconquer the West.

Ben was sure that Fire Eagle had not as yet led his band across the McKechnie, but was equally certain that he had scouts in the settlers' country. He had ridden to the McKechnie by night so the advantage of surprise would be his.

Ben, the kid, and Lieutenant Searles rode up on the McKechnie shortly after dawn the second day, and looked out upon an apparently endless country of low hills, rocky knobs, valleys, and forests.

Ben sat his horse staring. He still did not know how he was going to do it, but knew that somehow he had to ride into the country he saw, take Fire Eagle, and bring him back out.

Searles spoke. "What now?"

"I dunno exactly," Ben confessed. "We could go to a village, but they won't know nothin' about nothin'. The older warriors don't care to mix it up with the army any more, but it's a cinch ever' last one of 'em hopes Fire Eagle makes out.

"We'll find him some place—my guess is up some canyon or draw—where he's holdin' his army 'til he recruits as many more as he can get.

We'll surely have to take him there."

"Can we do it?" Searles asked quietly.

Ben shrugged. "We can try. If we don't, the army'll have to come in an' get him. If that happens there'll be hell to pay an' no pitch hot. A lot of good boys'll get killed."

"Is there much danger?" Searles asked.

Ben pondered. "If they kill us, the army'll be after 'em. But the army wants Fire Eagle anyway. He ain't got nothin' to lose. I reckon he'd as soon lift our hair."

"I just wanted to know," Searles said calmly.

Ben studied the country. Fire Eagle would not be in or near any village; that ruled out the entire southern half of the Sioux country. He would not be far from the settlers' side of the McKechnie, and he would have his hide-out concealed as well as it was possible to conceal it. That, to Ben, spelled a maze of rocky canyons to the north.

Ben looked at the young lieutenant who, with a two-day beard and a hard ride behind him, wasn't quite so dapper; and Ben liked what he saw. He pictured Searles stripped and broken, tied to the earth with his belly ripped open and ants streaming into it. It was up to Ben to see that that didn't happen.

He shifted his eyes to the kid; young, foolish, Indian crazy. He saw the kid—

Nope. Ben shook his head. He couldn't see the kid as anything but a crazy youngster without a thought in his head, making wiser men look like amateurs.

TOGETHER they rode down the Sioux side of the McKechnie. Ben, studying the earth, the sky, the streams, and the trees, led. Every ten minutes, frequently every five, he stopped his

horse and sat still in the saddle to listen.

His face was anxious, worried.

They entered a maze of little canyons with rocky walls and Ben rode more slowly. Searles watched carefully, as a good officer should. If ever it came his turn to lead men through a place like this, he would know something of how to go about it.

At the foot of a rocky little hill Ben dropped back to Searles' side.

"There ain't a sign of the varmints," he whispered. "Nary a breath, an' that's just when you want to look for a Sioux lance under your nose. You wait here. I'm goin' up this knob for a look-see."

Holding the reins of Ben's horse and his own, Searles stood at the foot of the knob. The kid sat his saddle easily, his blasé boredom knowing no bounds. They were in Indian country, and all good scouts brushed that off the way they brushed mosquitoes from their cheeks.

Searles watched him, a little irritated. The kid seemed to have not the slightest conception that everything depended on teamwork. Any blunders now and two lives besides his own would pay for them.

"I'm goin' to look over there while Ben's on top," the kid announced carelessly. "If he comes down before I get back, have him wait for me right here."

"But—"

The kid and his black bronco were gone. Searles waited, his anger rising. The kid had been ordered to remain where he was, but apparently orders meant nothing to him. Searles decided he would like to put that kid under Sergeant Moran for six months.

After a bit, as silently as he had gone up, Ben Egan came down the hill. "Couldn't spot nary a thing. Where's the kid?"

"He said he was going to look around

over there," Searles reported dryly. "His orders are for you to wait here until he gets back."

Ben Egan leaned back against his horse, his face pale. "Gorm!" he said. "He's loose! We got to catch him!"

They swung to their saddles. Then, as rapidly as one gun can fire them, six shots sounded. There came the clatter of hoofs. Hanging over his bronco's neck, urging the little horse as fast as he could, the kid came flying out of a canyon six hundred yards away. He drew up with Ben and Searles.

"Ben! Hey, Ben!" he yelled. "I found them!"

A moment later Ben saw the first of the pursuing Sioux.

SEARLES wheeled his horse. Ben, whose mount was trained to stand under fire, stood his ground until Searles and the kid were past him. Just on general principles he sent two shots crashing toward the pursuing Indians. Searles came back.

"I didn't know you were going to fight," he said apologetically.

"Ain't gonna," Ben answered. "Get goin'."

Horsemen were streaming out of the canyon now. Ben wheeled his buckskin, turned for one last look, and bent in the saddle for flight. But, in the split second before he raked the buckskin's belly with the spurs, he drew erect again and swore savagely.

Standing in his stirrups, six inches of daylight between himself and the saddle, the kid was coming back.

"We got to stop them," he panted. "I reached for my gun and it wasn't there. I must have dropped it without noticing when I put it back in the holster."

Ben exploded. "What! Mebbe you better stay here an' ask Fire Eagle for it! Ride, you fool!"

With the end of his own reins, Ben cut the kid's bronco across the flank. Like a startled deer the little black leaped away.

Searles, who had drawn up again, fell into place behind the kid and ahead of Ben; he held his horse in to match the pace of the other two.

The brown horse gnawed the bit and tossed his head. The yells of the Indians were making him angry instead of nervous.

Twisting his head, but not throwing the buckskin off stride by moving his body, Ben glanced behind him. There were, he calculated coolly, about eighty of the Sioux. They were well armed, but they had stopped shooting because the distance was too great for effective shooting.

That bespoke cool leadership on somebody's part. Most Indians would sling their ammunition around as if they had a supply train right at their backs.

They weren't so well mounted, though, that they could run down Ben, Searles, and the kid. Already there was another hundred and fifty yards between them. The thing to do was head back over the McKechnie, and make a new start from there.

Ben spurred up even with Searles, intending to turn the kid towards the McKechnie. The kid bent over the neck of the little black, his face happy. This—being chased by Indians—was the breath of life to him. It didn't seem to matter particularly where he was chased, as long as he could ride a horse at full gallop.

Searles dropped back as he saw Ben's intention. Ben drew up until his buckskin was running nose to flank of the kid's black, gained another foot. He saw the kid's horse pitch forward on his nose and throw his hind legs high

into the air as the kid was catapulted from his back.

Then Ben heard the rattle of rifle fire as his own horse went down. Instinctively he reached for his rifle.

Ben came up shooting. From the corner of his eye he saw the kid getting shakily to his feet, and he saw Searles calmly drawing a bead on one of three Sioux who stood in a side canyon.

They had no horses, were probably a hunting party who'd gone out on foot. And now they'd bagged two horses and cut off escape for the white men.

Searles shot. An Indian slumped forward. Ben laid a second beside him. The third scuttled back up the canyon.

Ben grabbed the kid's rifle from his dead horse and shoved it into the kid's hands. The kid blinked stupidly, and glanced at the Indians thundering down on them.

"They must have muh gun," he muttered angrily. "I must of dropped it when I thought I was putting it back in the holster."

"We'll take to the ridge," Ben announced calmly. "They can't ride fast in all that brush an' they'll have to track us. Come on."

THE ridge Ben chose led at an angle in the direction they had been traveling. Leading Searles' horse, the three plunged into the stunted pines and hemlocks that covered the ridge.

Except for the ground under their feet, and the trunks of the trees around them, they could see nothing.

After five minutes Ben called a halt. The Sioux had pounded to the bottom of the ridge and then, as if they had melted away, became silent.

Ben worried. The escape had been too easy; and when anything involving Sioux became easy, it was likely to get harder with a smash.

Ben knelt close to the ground, peering back among the thickly growing tree trunks. He could see quite a long way, but he saw nothing except tree trunks and the carpet of brown needles beneath them. He shook his head as he got to his feet.

"I don't like it," he announced.

"Smell that," the kid said suddenly. "It smells like pine burning."

Ben sniffed the air, into which had crept a heavy, pungent odor that burned the lungs if inhaled too deeply.

"It is pine burnin'," he said savagely. "The skunks have fired the ridge."

"Rather smart of them, I think," Searles said airily. "They get us, and we don't get any more of them. Well, we can make a run for it."

"No. Wait." Ben pressed him back. "That's just what they figger on us doin'. It's a cinch this ridge comes out on some place that's open, an' the whole shebang will be waitin' there for us. They'll fire the sides, just to make sure we don't come down that way."

"I'd as soon fight through 'em as burn here," Searles said.

"We'll prob'ly have to fight through," Ben admitted. "But we don't want them at our faces an' fire at our backs. Searles, can you manage that hoss 'of yours?"

"I'll manage him," Searles said softly.

"Hang on him then," Ben said. "Kid, you help me."

With his hands Ben scooped the evergreen needles away, revealing the black earth beneath them. Blue smoke was drifting among the trees now. The kid coughed, and put a hand over his mouth to stifle another cough.

"Go on scoopin' the needles away," Ben said, getting to his feet. "Put your han'kerchief over your face."

Ben ran along the trench already dug,

with his knife slashing branches off the trees that flanked it and kicking the branches aside. The roar and snap of the flames behind them was growing louder as the fire got nearer.

Ben knelt in the center of the trench, and fired the needles on the upper side of it. He picked up one of the branches he had cut, lit it in the blazing needles, and with it in his hand ran along the trench igniting the needles every ten feet.

The kid, with another torch, ran enthusiastically in the other direction.

The fire gained headway, roared up the hill. The evergreens became flaming torches as the fire devoured them in one hungry gulp and raced on.

Searles' horse quivered and neighed as a burning brand, drifting upward in the hot blast created by the fire itself, settled back to land on his shoulder.

"Follow me!" Ben yelled. "Breathe as close to the ground as you can."

Searles' horse reared and plunged as Ben led the way into the burn-over he had made. Searles quieted him with calm hand and soothing words.

Thick yellow smoke billowed about them as the smoke from the fire the Sioux had started met that from the one Ben had started.

The kid pitched to his knees, stayed quiet a moment, then got up and staggered on. Searles coughed rackingly. Ben's head was whirling; it seemed that he never would get a breath of fresh air again.

Then the fire coming up the hill hissed itself out against the burn-over and the air became a little clearer.

Ben looked at Searles. Except where the little rivers of sweat had run from it, his face was black with soot. His shirt was ripped down the back and his hair, singed at the ends, stood straight up. Leading his horse, Searles plodded

grimly along. Searles had plenty of fight left in him.

Ben looked at the kid. Staying as close as he could to the burning brush, the kid was stepping softly along, shading his eyes with his hands and holding his rifle as if he expected a Sioux to jump right out of the fire at him.

Ben shook his head. Everything was a dashing adventure to the kid. His soul was too full of romance to recognize the reality he was facing.

AFTER an hour's walking, following the fire Ben had set, they drew up among a nest of huge boulders on top of a cone-shaped hill. The smoke began to thin out more; the fire was stopping.

Ben held up his hand, and whistled the kid to a stop. The cone-shaped hill was at the end of the ridge, and before going down the other side it was a good idea to find out what they were going into.

The smoke continued to drift away. They could see the sides of the hill they stood on now. They were rocky; the brush and grasses that had grown on the rocks had burned away, and apparently there had been no trees on the hill.

Ben looked south into a valley and saw the little creek that had stopped the fire spreading in that direction. He looked north into another valley and another creek. They had come from the west.

Then the rest of the smoke lifted and he looked east towards the McKechnie.

A wide valley, where the fire had burned itself out on rocks, stretched away toward a shimmering line of hills showing tantalizingly beyond it. But three hundred yards from the bottom of the cone-shaped hill were twenty mounted Sioux.

Ben sat down. Three mounted men

might cut through them to the hills, but three men with one horse couldn't possibly make it. The kid withdrew to one side and watched the Indians with rapturous eyes.

"What now?" Searles asked.

Ben shook his head. "Nothin'."

Searles smiled. "In other words, if you know any prayers, this is a good time to say 'em?"

"Not yet," Ben said simply. "They don't know whether we got caught in their fire or not. Of course, sooner or later they're gonna find our trail. When they do, they'll find us. But it's only five hours until dark. We can stand 'em off for awhile here. When dark comes, we can have a try at makin' it across."

Ben sat looking over a rock, watching the trail they had come in on. The Sioux, following the trail, would come from that direction. For an hour he sat motionless.

Then, down the ridge, he saw two Sioux slipping along. He watched them. They were not, he decided, on the trail but were just hoping to find it. The best thing to do was let them go on.

Walking with their eyes on the ground, the two painted Sioux continued to cast for the trail.

Then came the sharp *spang* of the kid's rifle and one of them fell. The other, as if by magic, disappeared.

"I got one!" the kid chortled. "Ben! Ben! Did you see him fall?"

BEN gasped. The mounted Sioux surrounding the hill sprang into action. From one of them came a high-pitched rolling yell that was answered from some place down the valley.

Ben cast one mystified, awe-stricken look at the kid. Searles, from where he had been watching at the peak of the cone-shaped hill, came running down, his rifle ready and his eyes angry.

"You damned fool!" he snapped. "You've brought the whole tribe down on us!"

The kid's lower lip trembled. "Me? What'd I do?"

"You—"

"Lay off," Ben cut in. "We're gonna have plenty of fightin'. Searles, go back to the peak. Kid, stay here. Don't waste no bullets because we ain't got none too many."

At the foot of the hill riders were collecting to join those already there. Horses of every color and every shade of color mingled in a milling mass while their riders palavered.

Then they came, a yelling charge straight at the hill and up it.

Ben shot calmly, taking time to aim and making every shot count. Searles shot the same way. The kid emptied his gun in a frenzy and reloaded it to shoot again.

A half dozen Sioux came to within thirty yards of the hill top, but could not face the fire of the three entrenched in the nest of boulders. The Sioux broke and ran, leaving behind fifteen dead horses and five men.

Searles and the kid joined Ben, who had been lying prone on top of a high rock just under the slope of the hill. He was tying a handkerchief around a bullet nick in his right arm. Calmly he drew the knot tight with his teeth and his left fingers, and patted the bandage into place.

Ben Egan had found out long ago that it never paid to get unduly excited when fighting.

"How many ca'tridges you got left?" Ben asked.

Searles, who had lost his hat and had a bloody scratch down his right cheek, counted his.

"Fifteen," he announced.

"I've got quite a few," the kid said.

"How many?"

"I—I—none," the kid confessed.

Ben gazed off to where the Sioux had withdrawn out of rifle range. "I've got nine," he said. "We broke 'em the first time, but they'll bust us if they come again.

"I dunno if they will. Fire Eagle's gotta do some tall talkin' to get 'em up here again; with enough am'nition we could hold this hill against the hull Sioux nation. Mebbe he can spiel 'em into it though.

"Searles, have your last ca't'idge for yourself. Kid, stay close to me. Under no conditions don't get took prisoner."

"If only I had my gun," the kid said. "I've got more'n seventy rounds for it. I just gotta get that gun back."

Searles whirled on him. "If only you had a grain of sense we wouldn't be in this fix!"

"I—I didn't do anything," the kid said humbly. "I thought we ought to shoot Indians when they come on us."

"Look!" Ben said.

A LONE brave detached himself from the band and advanced a hundred and twenty-five yards. For five minutes he walked slowly back and forth there, then stooped to the ground.

A column of smoke, that changed from yellow to blue and back again finally to mingle the two colors, arose.

"The eagle's fire," Ben said. "Searles, how many of the varmints are layin' back of that fire?"

Searles gave the assembled Sioux a quick glance. "Thirty," he said.

"That's about what I figger," Ben said mildly. "There was anyways eighty."

He glanced into the two valleys, and back across the fire-swept ridge up which they had come. "That means there's between forty an' fifty of 'em

snuck off during the fight, an' are layin' in the trees all around us. The rest kicked up enough dust so we didn't notice.

"Fire Eagle's down there puttin' on his little show. As soon as he talks enough guts back into them slobs of his, they'll be back up here.

"But he ain't in any hurry. He's givin' us time to cut an' run. I thought there was less of them howlin' snakes than there should of been. Only six come anywheres close to us."

The kid glanced bewilderedly at the two valleys, open and inviting. He looked back at the ridge they had come up.

"You mean," he asked, "that there's Indians hid in the trees so we're surrounded on all four sides and can't get out?"

"Kid, you seem to of hit the nail right on the head," Ben said gently.

"Fire Eagle's dumb like a fox," Ben remarked to Searles. "I'll bet nine to one he don't put no more stock in his blasted smoke than we do. But he's sure got them warriors convinced. Time he's got all of 'em smoked up, if meanwhile we don't take his invite to leave an' get shot anyway, he ain't goin' to be able to stop 'em comin' up here an' gettin' us."

Ben and Searles were aroused by the clatter of hoofs. Mounted on the lieutenant's horse, the kid was trotting down the slope. He stopped a minute, waved his hand.

"I'll get help," he called.

"Come back!" Ben roared. "Come back, you fool!"

But the kid rode on.

THEIR jaws slack, Ben and Searles saw him reach the bottom of the hill and start directly toward the main body of Indians. A rifle cracked, a little

geyser of dirt flew a yard in front of the horse.

Fire Eagle drew himself up and stood as he watched the kid ride on. It was, for him, a Heaven-sent chance to demonstrate the potency of the eagle's fire.

The warriors remained in their places. The kid was Fire Eagle's game; and anyway there was no sense in their coming to get him since he was riding straight at them.

Indians had an eye for horses, too. If by some miracle the kid got past Fire Eagle, they would try to kill the kid without hurting the lieutenant's horse.

Holding the horse in with one hand, the kid was riding at a trot. It wasn't good sense on the kid's part, Ben assured himself, because the kid hadn't any sense. But it was the best way to ride. Get as close as he could and, at exactly the right moment, risk all on a mad dash. That way he stood a chance: maybe one in a thousand.

"Lord!" Searles groaned. "I goaded him into it. He figured he got us into this mess, so it's up to him to get us out."

"Watch him," Ben counseled grimly. "My money's on the kid until I see his hair lifted."

Ben was sweating. Under his breath he muttered the only prayer he knew. He would never again ask anything for himself if only this time, this once, the kid could ride safely through those Indians.

He couldn't. Ben knew that. There were too many hungry rifles waiting to cut him down. The wildest luck any man could have wouldn't get him through.

And, if the kid turned and came back now, a bullet would get him. He was in range of the Sioux.

Ben tried not to look, but couldn't help looking. The kid still held the lieu-

tenant's horse to an easy trot. Fire Eagle had his rifle resting in the crook of his arm, and the kid's course would take him within thirty yards of the fire.

As if it had already taken place, Ben knew what would happen. Fire Eagle, not knowing that the kid had no ammunition for his rifle, would try to provoke a shot. Failing to do so, he would shoot the kid anyway.

Ben vowed silently that, granted life through this day, he would hang Fire Eagle's scalp in his cabin if he never did another thing.

BEN'S heart seemed to stop. The kid's only chance, the one in a thousand possibility, was for him to bend over that horse and ride for all he was worth right now.

But he wasn't riding hard. He wasn't doing anything but just going along at that slow trot. The fool! The empty-headed, bubbling little fool! Why—oh why—didn't he see the chance.

Ben tried to shout; his voice died in his throat. In another ten seconds the kid would be past Fire Eagle, and anybody could hit a man on a trotting horse.

Searles gasped. "Look, man! What's he doing?"

Ben's eyes bulged. He saw the lieutenant's horse rearing, pawing the air with his front hoofs. When he struck the ground he was running, thundering down on Fire Eagle.

The Sioux, as surprised as Ben, milled uncertainly. Ben saw Fire Eagle shoot, heard the shot, but the kid kept coming.

Fire Eagle tried to run, but the kid was on him. Ben saw the kid raise his rifle. The heavy muzzle came down on Fire Eagle's head.

The kid was leaning from the saddle now, with his hand clasped around Fire

Eagle's arm, dragging Fire Eagle on the ground beside him. Somehow, Ben didn't quite know how, the kid lifted Fire Eagle up, laid him across the saddle in front of him.

A yell broke from the assembled Indians. Like hornets swift little ponies cut toward the kid. But the lieutenant's horse was really running now. He drew away from the Sioux ponies the way a hawk will draw away from buzzards.

Ben's rifle spoke, and the foremost of the pursuing ponies tumbled end over end in the dust.

The kid was sweat-stained and dust covered when he drew up before Ben Egan and Searles. He tumbled the reviving Fire Eagle from the saddle, climbed down himself. The expression of awe written in Ben's face was reflected in Lieutenant Searles' now. They

were like children watching a magician pull rabbits out of a hat.

The kid wiped the sweat from his face. "I hated to come back once I was started," he said amiably. "But I thought I better bring him here. I'll start right out again for help."

Ben's voice was respectful. "I don't think you'll have to. The war's over. This is Fire Eagle, that's how come the rest didn't shoot. Kid, why'd you bring him back?"

The kid stooped, and with his knife cut a buckskin belt around Fire Eagle's waist. He stood erect, and revealed his ornate revolver dangling on the belt.

"When I got close to him I saw he had it tied around him," the kid said. "I didn't have time to cut the belt out there, and I just had to get that gun back."

MATALA

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