



FRONTIER COURAGE

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Red tongues of fire threaten the security of Dal Baldwin and the settlers of Sun Bear Valley, but they meet the challenge!

LLOUD AND CLEAR rang the word:
"T-I-M-B-E-R-R-R!"

As he yelled, Dal Baldwin realized that his companion in the woods, little Doc

Carson, his first neighbor here at Sun Bear Valley, could not possibly leap to safety.

They were cutting house logs and the tree now swinging earthward had become trapped. Dal had

gone to cut it loose from a leaning lodgepole pine. Doc had moved off, apparently to cruise for the next tree for felling, but handicapped by an arthritic condition in his left knee, Doc had himself become trapped in a labyrinth of crossed windfalls.

A half sob of despair shook Dal Baldwin as the huge spruce struck, sending up a gout of snow spume. Its wide branches completely blotted out all sign of Doc. Dal stood as if frozen, as if he had suddenly lost all desire himself to live.

Doc Carson, little man of many talents had, with his homely, good natured wife Marta, arrived at Sun Bear Valley at a most opportune time. Marta it was who had delivered Mary Baldwin's firstborn and subsequently the second son. Doc had done much to help plan the future of Sun Bear Valley. He and Dal had worked side by side for some time, against many a sharp challenge of the wilds, to commence and carry on the development of this frontier homestead country.

When a building was planned, when any one or any creature was sick or injured, it was to Doc Carson and Marta the settlers turned. But now Doc was in grave trouble. He was trapped beneath that evergreen mass.

Strong as he was, Dal Baldwin seemed powerless for the moment to move. But suddenly a low, inarticulate cry escaped him.

"Doc!" he called and hurtled forward to begin slashing fiercely at the spruce limbs, lifting them as if they'd been bundles of oats and throwing them to one side.

Now at last he glimpsed Doc, his best friend. The little man's face was ashen gray save where blood trickled through its whisker stubble. Doc looked to be pitifully twisted.

Carefully Dal cut loose the windfalls which trapped Doc's limbs and gently lifted him to the clear. He carried the limp form back and laid it out. Now quickly he gathered spruce bows and made a couch. Doc was wrapped in Dal's mackinaw coat while Dal built up a fire. There was coffee left in a pot from their lunch.

AS THE coffee warmed the injured man Dal massaged Doc's arms and legs. He bathed the little man's temples with snow and inside an hour he was rewarded by a stirring of Doc's form.

"D-a-1!" Doc's voice was scarcely audible, but it did much to revive Dal Baldwin who quickly poured coffee into a tin mug. As he slipped an arm under Doc's shoulders and lifted, Doc cried out sharply in pain.

"Doc!" Dal encouraged. "Try and get a sip of this coffee into you. Just a sip now." Dal didn't like the trickle

of blood which oozed from between his friend's lips.

At last Doc opened his eyes to blink unseeingly about him. Dal touched the tin mug to his lips and tipped it. Doc spluttered as the hot coffee touched his lips, but Dal persisted until he saw Doc's Adam's apple move. The wounded man had taken a swallow.

"That's better, Doc. Now have another gulp," Dal said.

Doc gulped, coughed sharply and cried aloud with a resultant pang of pain.

"It's me—danged—ribs, Dal," Doc said weakly.

"Seems like they're—all—stove in."

"Okay, pardner, okay," Dal replied. "But try to take in this whole mug of coffee. It'll set you up until I can high-tail for some help. I got to get a team to tote you home."

A grimace intended for a smile twisted Doc's mouth. His eyes glowed with gratitude for his friend's help. Now he swallowed hard and Dal Baldwin winced along with him in sympathy as with each swallow of coffee, the little man groaned. Now Dal took the empty cup away, smiling. Doc was looking straight up at him, his lips moving.

"I was durned lucky, Dal boy," Doc said. "Lucky it was the—the branches got me an' not the—tree bole. Eh-h-h! You got to help me git out of this, Dal. There's the weddin'—Phil Cody and—Nan Bartlett. We got to get these logs snaked and built for them—kids . . . I— It's up to me to—see the house is built proper for—"

Doc's eyes closed and he slipped back into a semi coma. Dal caught sharply at a wrist. The pulse was weak, but all at once Doc snapped back to consciousness.

"I'll be all right now, Dal—pardner," he said in little above a whisper. "You light out an' get my—wagon and—Marta, Dal."

Dal Baldwin built up the fire and made Doc as comfortable as he possibly could, then swiftly he turned and went hurricaning along the dim forest trail. He must send young Jack Morrison, neighbor to the north, on to Cody for the itinerant doctor. Dal would stand by Marta. But Dal intended to get Tom Bruce, his neighbor to the south, to hitch up his oxen and fetch Marta Carson in. Only the oxen could navigate that woods trail.

Two hours later, Tom Bruce and Dal Baldwin laid little Doc out on his own bed at the shack beside the creek. Dal turned to Marta, whose homely face showed the strain she felt. In her bluff, frontier way, she loved this boastful little husband very deeply. There were times when her tongue railed him, clipping off his

boastful speeches much to Doc's quiet amusement.

Under the stern and outwardly rough veneer of Marta's make-up there was a tenderness that the folk of Sun Bear Valley had long since discovered and learned to appreciate to the fullest.

Now Marta bent in low listening to her husband's breathing. Eyes clouded, she turned to Dal and for a moment, the grand, courageous Marta who had done so much in times of sickness for others, seemed on the verge of collapse. Dal slipped a supporting arm about her broad shoulders.

"Buck up, Marta," he said encouragingly. "Although the doctor'll come, you'll have to do your share to bring Doc back out of this. When he starts to perk up ag'in, it's you who'll have to prod him with your tongue—the way he likes it. We've got to get him back cussin' and then we'll know he's on the mend. Marta, there's a lot ahead for him. There's the buildin' of the new house for Phil and Nan and the weddin' of those young 'uns—the first in our district. Doc'll have to be there to fiddle. It'll be a big night, the best we've ever known. Dale Rankin of the Boxed D and his cowhands are puttin' on a barbecue. Fight the Doc out of it, Marta: hang and rattle!"

SNIFFING loudly, the good woman nodded. She dashed the tears from her eyes and smiled softly at Dal.

"Right," she said sharply. "Give me a chance an' I'll fetch the little old feller out of it with my tongue, if everythin' else fails."

The following evening, when even the stalwart Marta Carson seemed to despair, the folk of Sun Bear Valley and Dale Rankin, whose whiteface cattle, by arrangement, grazed at the far end of the Valley Beyond, sat in the shade of a grove of stately birches and aspens. Tears splashed the cheeks of the women-folk—the Morrison women, Ella Bruce, Nan Bartlett and Mary Baldwin, Dal's wife.

No one in the valley commanded more of Mary's admiration than Doc Carson. He had come to them shortly after their arrival at Sun Bear. He had gone back to bring in Marta and throughout all the years since, Doc had taken a hand in all projects for the betterment of the frontier settlement.

Mary closed her eyes tightly. It was Sunday night and Jack Morrison had not returned with the doctor. Doc Carson was very, very low. Now Mary raised her hand and heads were bowed. For a long moment Mary's mouth quivered before, at last, words came.

"Be pleased, dear Lord to restore to good health

this friend of ours—this good friend who in time of trouble has done all our praying for us. Restore him to good health, Almighty God, so that he might enjoy the fruits of his great labors . . . A-men."

Sweetly now, Mary hummed a note and led the community gathering in a hymn. It was one of Doc's favorites. It had more than once in dark times inspired the settlers to renew their hope.

*Praise be to God for blessings full!
Lift high your heads with hope—*

In the spotlessly clean cabin, seated at the bedside, each holding one of Doc's limp hands, Dal and Marta Carson held their vigil. Tears streamed down Marta's cheeks. There seemed no hope!

Yet suddenly Dal saw Marta stir. A faint smile flashed across her drawn face as if the inspiring words of the hymn had brought some stimulus of hope. Then Dal felt Doc's hand stir in his. The little man's eyelids were fluttering.

Now Doc's eyes opened wide and his lips moved. "Praise be—to—Gawd." His voice was weak, husky.

Marta broke down, but Dal flashed a hand down to her arm and checked her. Doc turned weakly, eyes fully open and smiled softly into Marta's eyes.

"Marta!" Doc had recognized his wife, and her strong arms reached down and gently gathered him close to her ample bosom.

Dal's eyes batted as he got to his feet and stole quietly out of doors as the hymn drew to a close. He moved in on the gathering, an arm raised.

"The singin' has brought him back, folks," Dal said. "Keep singin'. If'n on'y the medico would come now, Doc'd have a—"

Dal broke off, gripping his underlip between his teeth. Turning, he strode back to the cabin as the folk commenced another hymn.

As the deeper shades of night sifted their ashes down on the wilds, the settlers were suddenly startled by the rattle of wheels. Dal came hurtling from the house, his heart leaping fiercely as the silhouette of a team and buckboard showed for a moment over a hogback rise of land. "The doctor at last!" Dal said.

Tom Bruce shortly moved to the heads of Jack Morrison's lathered team, while Dal assisted the old doctor to alight. The medical man went swiftly to work, but not before midnight did he give out with his opinion. He came to the valley folk still gathered beneath the trees.

"Fightin'est little feller I ever saw," he said with a

chuckle. "Folks, your friend will pull out of it. He'll need special care and won't be doin' any work for the balance of this year. Three ribs broken, and some light internal injury, and many minor lacerations and bruises. He's taped up all comfortable and I've given him a stimulant. Now you can all go bed down. I'll be staying on a few days."

MARY rushed to fling her arms about Marta, as did the other women. The menfolk hitched up their teams and drove off, leaving their friend in excellent hands.

All drove off, save Dal Baldwin who elected to remain by Marta's side. "I aim to stick here until Doc's eyes are clear and I can hear him start cussin' like a mule-skinner," he said.

Time, the great healer, worked its miracles with Doc Carson. It also worked its full measure in bringing about the first of the harvest. Dal's oats were in the stack. The Morrisons had stacked their third crop of alfalfa.

Today, Dal drove Mary and their two sons Jimmy and Ten on up into the pass, the pass which led to the Valley Beyond—the future home of Phil Cody and his bride to be. This was the day of the commencement of the big building bee. Doc Carson, still weak, but able to get about, would be on hand to lay out the foundation for the beautiful peeled log house—the wedding present to Phil and Nan from all the settlers, including Dale Rankin and his cowhands.

As they cut into the narrow pass, Dal brought his team to a halt. Before them, below, stretched the sweeping acres of lowland, well grassed, well-watered which, besides being a home for Phil Cody and Nan would also have room for Dal and Mary's sons, and the young sons of the Morrisons. It had been a great struggle for Dal and his settler neighbors to fight for and hold this valley. Blood had been shed in the grim battles.

Dal cast a sly glance at Mary. Her face was clouded. This bothered Dal, for she should have been happy today—this gala day when all the womenfolk would be present to watch the men run up the logs. Lunch would be served and possibly supper, too. A holiday had been declared for the school-children. Nan Bartlett was to be present for the opening ceremony—the axing of the first foundation log. All had been arranged by Doc Carson.

"What's troublin' you, honey?" Dal asked.

Mary started sharply. She shook a wisp of hair from her lovely face.

"I—well, Dal dear," she said. "This might sound

very silly, but I'm a little bit upset. You know Nan drove to Cody to get some furnishings and supplies? Well, she didn't go with Phil, but with Bart Manning of the Boxed D."

"What? That good lookin' red-head ranny? What was wrong with Phil? Mary, you don't imagine there's been trouble?"

Dal's forehead was plowed into deep furrows. Mary shrugged.

"I've heard Manning's been courtin' Nan some time, Dal," Mary said softly. "But, I never paid much attention to frontier gossip. The thing that disturbs me is, she won't be there for Doc's opening ceremony. We all love Nan. I haven't lost my faith in her and don't intend to, but—it seems to me I can feel storm clouds gathering."

"Pshaw now," Dal said. "Let's not have a thing like this throw us. We know Nan's in love with Phil. Mebbeso there's a reason she had to drive to Cody with the cowhand."

But Mary seemed not convinced.

They drove on in silence, to join their neighbors below at the beautiful home-site.

For the first time since he and Marta had come to the valley district, Doc Carson was taking no active part in a building project, save to direct it. There was no better axman than Doc, but today, as he limped slowly about, his only tools were chalkline and chalk and steel square. He had recovered the full use of his tongue and he gave orders briskly to the men—Dal Baldwin, Jud and Jack Morrison, Tom Bruce and Dale Rankin and his cowboys.

Dal was driving a corner peg when Rankin strode up. "Manning's not back with the gal yet, Dal," the rancher said.

Dal started, flashing a glance Phil Cody's way. Phil heard and his face clouded sharply.

DOC CARSON, too, had heard. He hobbled up, his brows raised.

"You mean Nan ain't to be on hand for the openin'?" he asked.

Dal frowned. "Likely got bogged down some place," he suggested. He turned to Rankin. "I wouldn't worry too much, Dale. Reckon we'd better get started without Nan. We've got to run this buildin' up fast because there's still harvestin' work ahead."

Doc turned to Phil Cody, shrugging. "Seems like it's up to you then, son," he said. "Get yoreself a axe and we'll start." Doc turned and bellowed to the womenfolk to gather about the site.

Marta nudged Mary as they strode up.

"Yesterday there was sulphur fumes spillin' out of his mouth," she said with a chuckle. "This mornin' he's goin' to make a prayer."

Doc raised his hand for silence. "Amighty Gwad," he began, "we ask Thee to send Thy blessin's down on this site, on the buildin' to be and to give its owners Phil an' Nan, much of the richness of Thy blessin's and happiness. May they bring stout young'uns to the valley. Amen."

Doc spat from the side of his mouth, proud of his prayer. He beckoned to Phil who raised his ax and aimed at the blue chalk line Doc had laid on the butt of the heavy first foundation log. Before Phil could sock the ax into the log butt, Tom Bruce called, pointing to the narrow defile of the pass out of which there came at a full lope a lathered team of pintos.

Phil frowned as he watched Nan clutching at Bart Manning's arm for support as the buckboard careened madly coming down the slope. Shortly Phil was brushing Manning aside to help Nan to the ground. Nan's lovely face was flushed.

"Sorry, everyone," she said. "We had some trouble and were delayed. I hope I haven't kept you waiting, Doc dear."

Dal Baldwin watched the ugly light spill from Bart Manning's eyes as he led his team off. Mary had been right—storm clouds were gathering.

Doc took Nan by the arm. Phil handed her the ax and skilfully she sank the blade into the log butt. She turned and with tears in her eyes kissed Doc on the cheek.

"I hope you will understand, Doc darling," she said softly.

Doc coughed, and grinned a full, goldtoothed smile.

The bee got swiftly under way, while the womenfolk returned to Phil's temporary shack where they busied themselves preparing lunch, while the children played about the underbrush or picked berries.

It was Dal Baldwin who, during the lunch hour rest, discovered Phil Cody and Bart Manning. The bitterness of these two young frontiersmen had come to a head. Dal paused at the edge of a thicket to watch Phil Cody hurl himself in to smash Manning back with a terrific one-two attack to the face. For the moment, Dal was inclined to let them fight it out. It would do them both good. But it was Rankin who changed Dal's mind. The big rancher, coming in to see to his horses, ranged himself alongside Dal.

"Young Cody can fight this out fair and be done

with it, Baldwin," Rankin said. "But I'm a bit scairt of Manning. Never told you this before, but he's been in bad company. He used to ride with Malotte, the breed who with his gang you were forced to shoot up here at the Valley."

Dal stiffened. This news was shocking. Rankin was right. Manning, no matter what the outcome of this fight, could become a menace to the peace of the valley folk.

Dal turned. Manning had suddenly flung out both feet, catching Phil unprepared for such a form of attack.

Phil dropped at the smashing impact of those booted feet to his face. Manning recovered his balance and leaped back. Before Dal could reach him he had kicked Phil savagely in the ribs.

WITH a hoarse cry. Dal Baldwin struck. His right fist swung in wide sweeping arc, full to Manning's face. The waddy rocked back, to crash heavily against a clump of willows. Snarling, Dal rushed and dragged the cowhand to his feet. Dal's powerful right was raised again when a soft voice called. Nan Bartlett had strode up.

Phil Cody, his face badly cut, got to his feet. Uttering a low cry, he rushed, but Nan Bartlett slid in ahead of him and held him off.

"This is disgraceful," she said heatedly. "If you think I ought to feel flattered, Phil, you're mistaken. On a day such as this, when we should feel so grateful to our friends for all they've done and are doing, you have to mar the happiness of the occasion." With a sharp toss of her head, Nan turned. She squeezed Dal's arm affectionately in passing, then hurried back to join the womenfolk.

Dal turned to the young men, both blowing hard and their eyes spilling flame. "I think Nan made things pretty plain to you," Dal said. "Now supposin' we call this fightin' busines off and get back to work. How about shakin' hands?"

"I'm willing, Dal," Phil said, extending his hand, but Bart Manning hurled himself free of Dal's grasp and moved on into the brush. They heard him hitch his pintos to his buckboard and drive off.

Dale Rankin shot a sharp glance Phil's way.

"From now on, Cody, you keep yore powder dry and yore eyes open. I'll have to fire Manning, but I'm afraid that won't make much difference. He's plumb salty."

An hour after sunset, Phil Cody stood and watched the settlers drive off. Nan had elected to drive home with her Uncle Jud Morrison. Phil turned and conned

the house, now several logs high. A broken sigh shook him. But his conscience was clear on one point: it was Manning who had prodded him to fighting—Manning who had boasted of his attentions to Nan.

What he hadn't told Phil was he had been drinking up at Cody, refusing to return when Nan asked him.

The storm clouds again hovered over the valley and back at his Sun Bear homestead, Dal Baldwin's face was clouded with a frown as he did his chores. He paused to gaze at his grain stacks and then turned to talk to Naieta, his original little blooded mare in her small corral adjoining the stackyard. Naieta was old now—a pensioner—but Dal crumpled one of her ears with deep affection.

"It's been a long time, sister," he said softly. "We've seen a lot of strife together and I'm afraid we ain't seen all of it yet."

The little mare snuffled and rubbed Dal's face with her velvety muzzle. Beyond, at the main horse pasture, a tall, handsome gray stallion bugled shrilly. This was Prince, the son of King, leader of the wild band.

Dal Baldwin, weary, strode slowly back to the house and to bed.

It was a sharp half scream from Mary which brought Dal Baldwin hurtling from his bed. Before he could pull on a pair of buckskin pants, he could see the flare of flame through the shack window. Outside, Mary Baldwin stood quivering in her night attire as with wide eyes she watched flame leap from the grain stacks.

Bart Manning had struck swiftly.

Dal swore savagely as he rushed out. There was no hope of saving the two stacks now ablaze. His only hope was to divert water from his irrigation flume into the watering trough and bucket water on to the alfalfa stacks, to save them. He heard Naieta scream but for the moment could not give her any attention. He felt that she was safe. But the little mare had panicked and had reared to attempt to leap her corral poles. Heavy with foal she crashed.

DAL heard the crash and dropped the small lead flume on the dugout trough. Whirling, he rushed to Naieta's side, but the little mare was making no attempt to fight. Naieta was doomed and for a long moment, while the flames crackled threateningly at his back, Dal held Naieta's head in his arms. This was the greatest loss he had sustained since coming to Sun Bear Valley.

Tears coursed down Dal's stubbled face when at last Naieta shuddered and passed along. Dal got to his feet to feel Mary's hand on his arm.

"Dal, darling!" His wife's broken voice shook him, but it aroused him to a mad surge of passionate anger. He whirled from her and seized a water bucket.

For upwards of an hour, scorched by the leaping flames, Dal hurled bucket after bucket of water on to his haystacks, Mary helping until her strength gave out. As the stack flames died and the embers glowed, Dal was startled by the rattle of wagon wheels.

Doc Carson and Marta were thundering down on the Baldwin home yard. Tom Bruce also came dashing across the creek and before dawn, the Morrisons had gathered from the north. The tang of smoke had awakened them. They had seen the red flare.

The men sat and talked things over while Mary, shaken with grief at the loss of Naieta and at the loss of their valuable grain, strode on to the house with Marta Carson.

"Got any shore ideas as to what caused the fire, Dal?" Doc Carson asked.

Dal nodded. "Yeah. Dale Rankin warned us Mannin' was salty," he said. "I had to smack that boy down when he was stompin' Phil. Reckon he struck back where it could be felt most. It's bad."

There was a long period of silence, until Doc Carson broke it.

"Right, Dal, it's plumb bad," Doc said, wheezing. "But it ain't goin' to help none mopin'. We'll have to get Deputy Frank Simes to roundin' up this Mannin' critter. I'll share my oats with yuh, Dal; so will Tom Bruce and Jud Morrison. From now on, we'll pack belt guns and keep our eyes peeled for this curly wolf Manning. But now, let's go drink some coffee. Yuh're plumb tuckered out, Dal."

There was further talk as they all sat down to an early breakfast.

Doc Carson opined that Manning would strike again, and that he would have help, because Doc was sure the young waddy was in league with renegades who inhabited the saloons of Cody. As he spoke, Doc slid a hand down under his coat-tails to the butt of an old single action Colt reposing in his capacious hip pocket.

Now he grinned. "Let's be gettin' our backs into the finishin' of the valley house now," he said sharply. "We've got a lot to do. The weddin's a week tomorrow. We mustn't let our own sufferin's interfere with the happiness of the young 'uns—Phil and Nan. Theirs is to be the first weddin' in our pioneer life. It must go through, with all the happiness we can contribute."

There was a murmur of approval from the settlers to which Dal Baldwin added a smile as he nodded.

From the ventilator cupola of the little schoolhouse a strangely tuned bell clanged. Doc Carson nudged Mary Baldwin and grinned. They were waiting for bride and groom to come from the converted school house after they had affixed their signatures to the new, big family Bible presented to them as an extra wedding gift from their friends.

“Bell sounds like a couple of longhorn bulls is chasing a lot of belled wethers into a stampede,” Doc said, chuckling. “But Tom did the best he could. He had to forge that bell out of a batch of sheep and cow bells.”

Mary cut Doc off. Radiantly beautiful in a wedding gown fashioned by Olga Morrison, Nan stood smiling at the door clinging to the arm of Phil.

CHILDREN screeched with delight. The friends of the bridal couple showered Nan and Phil with wild flower petals for confetti and with rice specially brought in from the outside. Nan carried a beautiful bouquet of wild flowers gathered in the woods by her school pupils. Now she poised on her tiptoes and flung the bouquet, a hope in her heart that Mary Baldwin would catch it.

A buckboard stood by, Jack Morrison at the heads of the team. Mary Baldwin looked sharply around for her husband, but Dal was nowhere to be seen. Nor was Deputy Marshal Frank Simes here. Dal Baldwin and Simes had ridden on to the Valley Beyond. They could not trust Bart Manning.

Now the young couple drove off as the valley rang with cheers and good wishes. Later, all the settlers would gather at the new house for the supper and the dance. Dale Rankin’s cowhands would have their young beef steer barbecued in time. Doc Carson and Jud Morrison would furnish music for the dance. . . .

A full harvest moon of gold flooded the Valley Beyond.

At the barbecue pit, cowhands and settlers jostled each other good naturedly. The womenfolk heaped succulent slices of the meat on to heavy platters, carrying them to the banquet tables at the big, new house.

The wedding “breakfast” over, Doc Carson hobbled to an improvised platform, followed by Jud Morrison. For a long moment, to Doc’s disgust, they had the usual difficulty tuning up. Jud always growled his affirmed opinion that Doc’s alleged “A” was a “mighty flat G.”

Suddenly Doc slashed his bow across the strings, striking up a lively march for the Grand March, when Nan and Phil led off. Then Tom Bruce, master of ceremonies, called to the settlers to take their partners for a square dance.

A half dozen of the cowhands hurricaned up to Nan, but sweetly, she declined their mass offers. She turned to Dal Baldwin and offered her arm. To Dal, above all others, she owed all her happiness. He had made it possible for all the settlers to find their feet here at the valleys. Dal and Mary Baldwin, the first settlers in the land, were the chief subjects of Nan’s thoughts apart from her present happiness.

“Play ‘Smash the Window,’ Jud!” Doc said raspingly. “And re’llly hit ’er!”

*Honor y’re pardners, corners address,
Join y’r han’s an’ go out to the West;
Break an’ swing ’em aroun’ an’ aroun’—
Now Aleman left with the corners all,
Right hand to yore own,
Do-se-do wiith the corner lady,
Promenade with yore own.*

Feet tapped in perfect rhythm. Dal led his set expertly through the first change. Cowhands in their colorful attire, swung their partners with a grace and lightness of foot that was a pleasure to watch. The sounds of happiness rang long across the valley.

Head low, Doc Carson seemed to be calling to his old fiddle to give of its best as he thrashed the strings. He thumped his right foot sharply as he pounded the beat.

Close to her husband, ready for any emergency, sat Marta, her eyes glowing with pride. Suddenly she started. A shot blasted. There was a crash as a swinging lamp was shattered. In a flash, Dal Baldwin leaped for a blanket and flung it over the burning oil on the floor.

“Down flat, everybody!” Dal called as two more shots crashed the glass of the east window.

Bart Manning had struck again! Biting back the pain in his side and arthritic knee, Doc Carson laid his fiddle to one side and jerked the heavy Colt from his pocket. He hobbled to the door in Dal Baldwin’s wake. Boxed D cowhands with Dale Rankin had already hurtled out of doors, from which there came the sharp crack of gunfire.

DOWN on a knee Dal Baldwin was startled by a sharp slashing flame across his line of vision. His Colt jerked up as a tall lean form headed toward the brush at the north side of the new house. Dal thumbed his pistol and the man creature spilled head foremost into the underbrush.

Came a yell from Deputy Simes. “Yuh got ’im, Dal. That’s the last of the gang Manning brung with him. I got Mannin’ all hogtied here.”

Dal got slowly to his feet and joined Simes, who jerked Manning to his feet. He had the renegade handcuffed. They strode into the house where wide-eyed women stared. Simes thrust Manning up ahead until he jerked him back directly in front of Nan Cody.

Nan stood breathing sharply, breathing heavily in the emotional storm which had upset everyone.

"Nan," Simes drawled. "I've arrested this here man critter for attempted murder. He claims he didn't intend to kill or hurt any of you, but he was just puttin' on a wild chiwari to scare folks. That don't explain why he set fire to Dal Baldwin's grain stacks. Now they's an unwritten law along the frontier that gives you folks the right to demand this man and deal out justice as yuh see fit. I leave it to yuh, ma'am, as the guest of honor, to decide what's to be done with him. . . ."

"String him to a cottonwood," an irate cowhand yelled, but Nan Cody turned sharply to this man and held up a hand.

Nan now turned and cast a soft glance about the assembly. Her mouth quivered a long moment before words would come.

"I am terribly sorry about all this trouble," she said softly. "Bart Manning deserves punishment, but we of the valleys are a peaceful folk. The damage to the Baldwin stacks is something we can't overlook. The law and justice will have to take its course there. For the rest—none of us has been hurt. I think Bart Mannin has learned a sharp lesson tonight."

Nan paused, a soft smile toying with her lovely mouth as her husband drew up to her side.

"I do not ignore the damage to the Baldwin grain stacks," Nan went on. "But for the rest, it is best forgotten."

Bart Manning raised his head, his eyes wide. "I—I thank yuh, Miz Cody," he said huskily. "I shore learned my lesson. Never in all my life have I had the real chance to go straight. Lost both parent folks when I was three. Got to ridin' in bad company. But—I'm willin' to make good to Dal Baldwin, if'n give a chance. I'll give him a whole year's work. I'd admire to be a part of this frontier settlement here because I've had my eyes opened. Mebbeso Dale Rankin'll hire me back on. I—" Manning's eyes began to bat.

Dal Baldwin nodded to Frank Simes, who unlocked the young man's handcuffs.

"Okay, Mannin', yuh're bein' placed on a sort uh parole," the lawman said. "I'm turnin' yuh back to Dale Rankin. You make one mistake and the Boxed D cowhands'll salivate yuh and feed yuh to the coyotes.

Go straight and yuh'll never want for nothin' here at the valley."

Doc Carson nodded to Jud and returned to the platform. Softly he scraped out the strains of a waltz.

"Ladees ch'ice," Tom Bruce called . . . To everyone's amazement, Nan Cody moved toward Bart Manning, smiling sweetly.

"Would you like to dance this with me, Bart?" Nan asked.

Bart Manning swallowed hard. He looked sharply, unbelievably about him. A cheer broke from the gathering. Bart Manning drew the back of a hand across his eyes, then took Nan into his arms and together they led off the dance. . . .

The lovely moon continued to bathe the Valley Beyond as the settlers' wagons rolled on along the out trail. Phil Cody and his wife listened to the happy sound of singing. To eastward, Dal Baldwin, and Mary; Doc Carson and Marta; the Morrisons and the Bruces all sang as they drove homeward. To westward, the cowhands of the Boxed D rode back to their work, singing their trail songs.

NAN shuddered and Phil gathered her into his arms.

The tall spruces now seemed to close over the face of the moon. The courage of the pioneers had brought peace with victory, and even as Phil's lips met hers. Nan's mouth moved to frame a prayer of thanksgiving for all the good which had come.

She pressed Phil gently from her and her eyes glowed as she looked deeply, steadily into his.

"Happy, Phil darling?" she asked. "Happy and terribly proud of you, honey," he said. "I'm happy to be a neighbor to such good folk as Dal and Mary and the others. They've been so good, so big and so kind to us. Nan, it's up to us now. We've got to make good here. I've got some money saved up and do you know what I intend to do?"

"What, Phil?"

Phil held her closely.

"I intend to ask Bart Manning to join with us in buying a present for Dal Baldwin," he replied. "I know where I can get a Palomino filly, a little mare to replace old Naieta. Like the idea?"

"Phil!" Tears coursed down Nan's lovely face and for a long moment Phil held her tightly. Now he gathered her into his arms and carried her across the threshold of the beautiful new home. Out of doors, the soft night cast a mantle of quiet and secrecy over the valley.