a PIONEER FOLK Story

RED HARVEST

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Dal Baldwin and his wife Mary can even forgive woollies when a sheepman comes to their aid in a time of trial!

HEAT WAVES RIPPLED and shimmered along the meager acreage of growing oats in the Sun-Bear Valley homestead of Dal Baldwin and his young wife, Mary. Though still scarcely an hour after sunup, the morning was hot and the oats, not fully in the shot blade, drooped, as if too limp to hold up their heads.

Dal Baldwin frowned as he stood at the edge of his acreage. Harvesting of this crop would mean a lot to these pioneers. He must have seed for the following year.

He and his new neighbor, Doc Carson, to the southwest, had planned a crude system of irrigation. They would whipsaw dry poplar logs for rough lumber, and out of this a flume would be constructed to carry water down from the springs nearby, in the upper levels.

This new land in northwestern Wyoming was unknown to Baldwin. He had selected his homestead for its beauty, for its timber, for its potential pasture land. He planned to raise a strain of horses from a cross between Naieta, his blooded young mare, and King, the great gray wild stallion leader of the band in the hills. He must have oats for his breeder stock. He must have alfalfa for winter feed. There would be some rains, he knew, but for cultivated land there must be irrigation.

From the stoop of their log cabin, Mary Baldwin watched her husband as, in the sunlight, she nursed their firstborn, young James Dallas Baldwin. Jimmy was part of their plans for the future. It was for Jimmy and his brothers and sisters that might come, that the Baldwins had moved to this free new land.

It was because of the tomorrows with the coming and rearing of their children that Dal and Mary had welcomed the arrival of Doc Carson, and his good wife Marta. Marta had come in time to deliver Jimmy. Today, as yesterday, Dal and Mary would drive down to the Carson place, where Dal was helping Doc build the Carson home.

Dal turned and waved to Mary. He strode up and smiled down at his son, now relaxed from his voracious nursing.

"Darned if the little wrangler don't begin to recognize me some, honey," he said. "I believe he smiled at me. Honest."

Mary smiled. She had her doubts. Babies were known to grimace with gas pains. But she didn't attempt to disillusion Dal.

"Breakfast's all ready, Dal, dear," she said, rising and entering the cabin.

THEY sat down to a breakfast of side bacon—some of the stock Doc Carson had brought in for them—and biscuits and coffee. There was cornmeal mush and syrup to start, and Dal was hungry. Mary coughed sharply as he raised a spoon to his mouth. Dal nodded and they lowered their heads. It was Doc Carson, on his first visit, last winter, who had suggested to them that thanks should be given before commencing a meal.

Doc, who, on occasion, could cuss a thunder storm out of the sky, maintained, as he put it: "'Tain't fair nohow to expect A'mighty God to give ever'thing as a matter of course. Folks has got to realize that they, too, got to give somethin' back—thanks, for instance."

A little while after breakfast, on the spring seat of the wagon, along the dim trail to the Carson homestead, Mary watched the fluttering birds in the willow fringe along the creek bank. She loved the pompous displays of the orange-winged blackbirds. Now she thrilled as she glimpsed a teal coming around a bend in the creek leading a brood of ducklings.

As they drove into a thicket of cottonwoods, Dal pulled up the team and pointed off right. A muledeer doe was stealing off into the wild fruit shrubbery.

"Look farther right, honey," Dal whispered. "Where the leanin' spruce is. See 'em? Twin fawns sneakin' off."

Mary at last caught movement. The spotted fawns were slinking into the underbrush to cover, while their mother still attempted to divert the attention of the man creatures her way.

Life! New life! It abounded in every thicket. Mary reached a hand out and plucked a wild rose bud which she stuck in her hair.

As the baby stirred, she bent and commenced humming a pioneer lullaby Marta Carson had taught her:

Wagon wheels have ceased their squealin'
Now the stars begin to peep;
Hush along, lest shadows stealin'
Steal the night afore you sleep . . .
Hush along . . . Hush along . . . To sleep . . .

Dal half turned and smiled. He was proud of Mary, very proud.

Now they sighted the Carsons, just finishing up breakfast. Doc rose to meet them and as Dal pulled up, the little man moved in to lift the baby down, but Marta beat him to it. The older woman hugged the baby to her and carried him to a little crib in the shade, a crib Doc had fashioned out of willows. Marta had lined it with some cheap print, and Doc had made a mattress of spagnum moss.

These were grand people—Doc, the ingenious little man who had done "most ever'thin' that could be done, from the Mex Border to the Canadian line"; Marta,

droll, angular, a woman of patient, good pioneer stock to whom, for her affection and kindliness and for her work, America of the future would owe a tremendous debt.

To Dal, himself a good ax- and saw-man, Doc Carson was the best he had ever seen. Despite the deformity caused by his "art'ritis," which bent his left leg at the knee, he was quick along the logs, quick and expert with either felling ax or broadax. He had selected carefully a set of dried, fire-killed silver poplar logs, some of which he had already begun to skin and polish on the inside.

"Eh-h-h, Dal," he boasted, "one of these days I aim to make a trip outside and bring back a gallon or two of b'iled oil for the inside of the cabin. Yuh'll see a room that'll make city slickers envious."

Doc worked as he spoke, and he talked incessantly, boasting of the shacks, cabins, houses and barns he had erected from south Texas to the Canadian line and beyond. Now and then he turned on Dal a full-mouthed grin of gold-crowned teeth and occasionally took time out to aim a squirt of tobacco juice expertly at some definite target.

The cabin reared its walls to ten logs high. Doc score-hacked the plate logs for the pole rafters. He slid along the score-hacking with a special ax, shaving them down to a flat surface that brought an exclamation of admiration from Dal.

Doc called a halt. He was frowning. The women were busy at the dressing of deer hides. Mary was teaching Marta how to flense them and prepare them for buckskin clothing. Doc's clothing, to quote Marta, "was mostly hangin' on every bush in the district."

DOC led Dal down to the creek, now and then pausing, to con the area beyond the Baldwin homestead. He pointed to a well he had begun to dig.

"Crick can dry up one day," he said. "I aim to have a reserve water supply. But this ain't what I brung yuh down for, Dal," he went on. "Mebbe I'm a loco old coot, but I got a good sense of smell. There's sheep somewheres not too far off!"

"Sheep! Why, Doc"—Dal was astonished at Doc's statement—"must be the tang of mountain sheep. I've seen sign of a band up in the hills. Come in from the Yellowstone country I reckon."

Doc spat testily.

"I meant woollies, as we know 'em, Dal. Not wild sheep. I been in sheep-cattle wars enough to know how sheep smell, and nothin' on earth could muss up our plans here at Sun-Bear more'n smelly sheep. I had a good friend once—we bucked around a lot together, but he was a sheep man, and I . . . Well, we sort of split up."

Dal strode off to a rise of land to eastward. He sniffed into wind and conned the backtrail area, but could detect nothing to give him concern. He concluded that Doc must have whiffed the tang of a nomadic band of mountain sheep, or else was tanging the deer hides Mary and Marta were working on.

Doc said no more about the sheep. He and Dal worked fiercely until Marta called them to eat. She had been upstream and had fished enough trout for the meal. There were soda biscuits and some huckleberry jelly she had brought in with her. Also, she produced slender green onions and leaf lettuce from a small plot near the creek.

Doc squirted a stream of tobacco juice at a too friendly chipmunk near a stump. It was on this stump that he "parked" his precious quid of eating tobacco while he ate.

At the hewn-pole table, Doc bowed his head to say grace.

"An', Gawd," he intoned, "if'n it would please Thee-all, grant that I am, for once, wrong and didn't smell sheep. Keep them out of Sun-Bear Valley. A—men!"

The women exchanged questioning glances. Dal found it difficult to mask a smile. Marta turned to her husband and tiraded him.

"Ought to feel more'n a mite ashamed," she flamed. "As if Gawd A'mighty is responsible for every smell you-all get into your old nose. Sheep! Huh! Like as not it's your own socks!"

Mary and Dal bit into a soft biscuit to stifle their urge to laugh. Doc winked slyly at Dal, then proceeded to praise Marta's cookery.

"I've boarded out aplenty and done quite a bit of cookin' myownse'f in my time," he said, "but I never fetched up with nobody who could fix vittles up like Marta Carson. Eh-h-h-h—there's times when she's got a tongue as sharp as a diamond-back's, but mostly she's—uh. . . . Pass the jelly, Mary, please."

By sundown, Doc and Dal had the roof stringers laid ready to receive the slim poles.

Doc explained how he intended to insulate the roof with spagnum moss first, under the thatching with heavy slough grass.

"Then the sods, Dal," he went on. "Eh-h-h—up in Canada one season, I lived in a sod-roofed shack in the rainy spring season. It'd rain three days outside, then

stop, but it went on rainin' a week longer inside the cabin. Bad roofin', that."

"Want some help to cut in yore door and window openin's?" Dal asked, as he hitched his team.

"No, Dal. Marta's as good as a man on such sawin' work. Yuh've done a right lot of work, son. Git along an' fence that crop. I made yuh a post maul out of a pine knot. Weighs close to fifteen pound. Do like I told yuh. Have some water handy. Drive a ways, pour in some water, then yuh can really sock em home. . . . Storm brewin', Dal. Should crack in sometime before midnight . . ."

The Baldwins boarded their wagon, Marta wiped a tear from her eye as she handed young Jimmy up to Mary. It had been a great day for her, but there would be more such days, for the wilderness had bound these neighbors firmly together. They would continue to trade work and visits, always hoping for an incursion of more good neighbors.

MARY retired early, but Dal stayed up to watch the play of lightning on the rugged faces of the far hills. The night was sultry, and he hoped there would be no hail. That would wipe out his crop completely. But it was the heifer Doc Carson had brought in which kept Dal up. Her time had come.

Dal had stabled her, grumbling, for he was tired.

"Was there ever a critter—cow, mare or ewe—which didn't elect to become a mother either in a blizzard, a bad freeze or a whoopin' electric storm?" he asked.

He tethered his horses, Naieta, and the little wild buckskin he had captured from the wild band, near a shed to which they could go if necessary.

As the night deepened, the mad slashes of fork lightning became more frequent. Fiercely they lanced the sky, reminding Dal of the storm which had caught Mary and him the day of their arrival at Sun-Bear Valley.

He sat hunched against the logs of his stable, glad of a slightly cooler breeze. The plaintive call of a night bird was soothing. . . . A coyote yapped in the distance. Then suddenly, all was hushed, save for the moaning of the spruces at the back of the cabin.

Dal's chin sank to his chest. He was dog weary and succumbed to the claiming power of sleep. . . .

It was a terrific clap of thunder near by that awakened Dal. A spot of rain sharply struck his face, or was it hail! There came a soft moaning sound from the heifer. Dal swung and touched a light to his hurricane stable lantern.

The heifer was down. Dal had something to occupy his mind. The heifer was barely past two years. This was her first calf and she might need help.

Outside the skies were wracked. The storm split with the fury of an inferno and savage rain lashed the trees and buildings. Dal remained cool. He commenced to whistle softly, then louder so that he could be heard above the mad pandemonium of the storm gods. He realized that Mary would be awake, but he dare not leave the heifer to go see.

At a groan from the little beast, Dal darted in. The time had come to help. In the crescendo of crashing artillery, he worked with the skill of a veterinary. The calf was almost dropped when Val started, gasping. Something moist had touched one of his bare elbows. He swung, to glimpse a pair of shining eyes.

"Cougar!" he gasped, scarcely believing.

And then in a brief lull, he heard a whimper.

"Dawg!" he bellowed. "My good gosh, a dog! Out—get out, yuh critter!"

The miserable, half-drowned creature backed out through the open door. Dal dragged the calf around to its mother's head for the washover. He turned, for the presence of that dog had disturbed him. No domestic dog could possibly have wandered this deep into the hinterland on its own. It belonged to someone. But who?

And then as the storm crashed in all its full, blinding force, came the answer—answer in the plaintive blatting of sheep.

"Good glory!" Dal groaned. "Old Doc was right! Sheep!"

He darted out of doors into the lashing rain. Sheep stampeded past him onto his crop. Others were stomping down Mary's garden. They would ruin everything!

A wagon rumbled into the Baldwin yard, and in a blind rage Dal hurried to bellow at the driver, a huddled shape on the seat.

"Blast yuh to perdition, stranger!" he boomed. "Get down and help run these smellin' woollies off'n my oats and garden."

The driver straightened. He was a big man. He turned and called to someone in the wagon, under a tarp.

"Right, suh," he drawled. "I'm cornin' down. I—uh—expected a better greetin' for me'n the wife on a night like this. The man who headed me out this-a-way reckoned yuh'd be glad to have neighbors."

"The—man?" Dal cried. "Somebody sent yuh up here—with sheep?"

"Yeah. Feller by the name of Malotte. Quirt Malotte, he called hisself."

"Malotte! The half-breed! Him again. One of these days I'll. . . . But come now. Get that dog of yores workin'. If I lose my crop, I'll—I'm liable to—to—" Dal was cut off by a smashing tumult of thunder.

The big man whistled shrilly to his dog, and together, with Dal's help, managed to bunch the scared sheep and head them into the upper levels, where the stranger left the dog to guard and hold them.

DAL was striding back toward his cabin when the big man fetched up alongside and caught at one of his arms.

"I'm plumb sorry, Baldwin," he said. "Things would have been different if that cussed half-breed hadn't told us wrong. Took our money and skinned out. I'd figgered on makin' another camp back a piece, but the wife was sick and the young'un cranky. The little dog got scared when the storm broke full, so I reckoned to come on. Never knowed yuh had a crop in. Breed claimed yuh was plumb wild out here yet."

"Yuh say yore wife's got a young'un in that wagon?" Dal asked.

"Yeah. Little gal baby. I—uh—if'n there's damage to the crop, Baldwin, I'll make it good if'n I have to work it out the rest of my life. Bruce is the name. Tom Bruce."

But Dal was moving hurriedly to the wagon now.

"Have the wife pass the baby down to me," he said. "Lift her down yoreself, and bring her in. My gosh, this is no night for a woman and young'un to be out."

The baby in his arms, Dal hurried to the cabin. Mary was up and had a light burning as Dal entered.

"Dal—darling!" she cried. "What is it?"

"Sheep, Mary. Sheep—smellin' woollies. Millions of 'em, all over our crop and garden."

"Dal, I mean in your arms. It—it's a baby, Dal!"

"O, yeah, honey. Mother's comin' in. We got visitors. Touch a light to the stove kindlin'. The woman's some sick, I reckon." Mary had barely got the fire going when Tom Bruce stamped into the cabin, a small, pale woman in his arms.

"Night, ma'am," he said to Mary. "Sorry to bust in on yuh like this, but—uh. . . . Can I lay her down on that settee a spell?"

Mary nodded. She quickly recovered from her first shock. She took the woman's pulse, nodded to Dal, then swung to start giving orders. Dal laid down the baby and started moving in all directions at once. Big Tom Bruce just stood momentarily as if frozen.

"Come on, Bruce, and I'll help yuh unhitch yore bulls," Dal said. "Mary can handle ever'thing here. Yore wife's goin' to be all right. We'll have coffee and food for yuh both in a short while."

The menfolk unhitched the bull team and Dal fed them hay. The storm was receding, off to the southeast.

As they tied up the team, Dal patted the big man's shoulder.

"Get smilin' some, Bruce," he said. "Yore wife's not goin' to die. Yuh meant well enough, I reckon, and until mornin' we can't tell what damage has been done. We'll have to decide about the sheep business then."

Later, at the table, the woman, Ella Bruce, looked up at Mary Baldwin with gratitude.

"It was terrible, Miz Baldwin," she said softly. "I was fearful of this trip from the start. But me and Tom thought we'd best get out of the Jackson country. The cattle wars, nester trouble, is bad down there. And then that awful half-breed Malotte."

A wan smile touched Mary's mouth corners.

"Eat your supper, Ella," she said. "We know a lot about Malotte. He tried to kill Dal once. He stole our trapped foxes, stole our little mare. It was a spite on us that made him direct you to bring your sheep up to Sun-Bear Valley. We're not blaming you. Just forget it, like you would a bad dream. You and the baby can bed down here with me and Jimmy until some plans can be made." Mary turned to Ella's husband. "Were you thinking of settling at Sun-Bear, Mr. Bruce?"

"Uh—yes, ma'am. I figured on grazin' my woollies and later settin' up a black-smithin' shop when more settlers come in. My folks has been in sheep all their lives. But I—I never figgered on discommodin' nobody with the sheep. "If'n yuh-all can bed the missus and little Carol down a while I'd shore be plumb grateful, until I can figger things out. I can take a grubstake and go into the hills with the sheep, until we decide what's best from now on."

Dal told Bruce of cougar and coyote danger to the sheep. The big man nodded.

"I know, Baldwin," he said. "I started out with a hundred and fifty ewes and four rams. Lost some in a river crossin' a ways back. Reckon I got somethin' like seventy left, all told. Coyotes got aplenty."

Dal got to his feet. There was work for him and Tom out of doors. There was the heifer to attend to and a place in the storehouse to be rigged up into a bed place for Tom and himself."

As he strode out, Dal could have been happy over the coming of the Bruces, for he liked them, were it not for the incursion of these sheep!

THE morning dawned bright and clear, with a fragrant freshness of which only the wilderness is capable. Dal was out at daybreak along the edge of his crop, but he thought more at the moment of that faithful little dog still up in the hills guarding the sheep band.

Now he turned to appraise the damage done to his crop. It was severe. There was some hail damage, but the sheep had cut and ground a lot of the oats into the mud. When Bruce joined him, Dal was scarcely in a mood for conversation.

"If'n yuh hauled off and run me out on a rail, Baldwin, it'd be no more'n my due," the big man said. "I know how disappointed yuh are this mornin'. I just come by the garden. Well—I already reached a decision. Me'n Ella's movin' on. We'll just ford the crick and mosey on."

Dal felt a sudden twinge of conscience as he listened to the sincere apologies of the big man. But suddenly he started. Riding over the westerly hogback rise came Doc Carson.

"Visitor," Bruce grunted.

"Yeah—neighbor to the southwest," Dal replied. "He warned me about the sheep. Claimed he could smell 'em in a favorable wind, miles off. I thought he was loco."

Doc rode in closer and closer. He paused at the edge of the crop and shook his head sadly.

Then Baldwin and Bruce heard him. It might have been Doc's own crop the way he poured out his volleys of imprecations on the sheep and their owner. But suddenly he broke off. Bruce was striding hurriedly toward him.

Baldwin gasped with amazement at what he saw and heard. Bruce was bellowing across the few feet of space which separated him from Carson, as if he was trying to make himself heard beyond the mountains in Yellowstone.

"Why, yuh crippled-up little horn-toad," he boomed. "Get down off'n that cayuse and say that all over to my face, so I can wipe up the ground with yuh!"

"My good gosh! It's Tom! Tom Bruce. . . . Dal, we got us a new neighbor!"

Doc dismounted and took the big fellow's right hand in both his. Dal Baldwin strode up.

"This is Tom Bruce, my old pardner," Doc cried. Then suddenly he frowned as he realized that Bruce had brought in his woollies to "muss up" Sun-Bear Valley.

They sat a moment and swapped yarns, recounting old stories of their experiences together. Suddenly Doc stiffened and swung sharply on Bruce.

"Now yuh've got yore smellin' critters here, Tom," he said, "yuh can slaughter 'em off, an' become a honest settler like Dal and me, or yuh can get 'em across the creek, to tarnation and gone. We'll get together and rig up a fence on the south bank to protect Dal's place. Purty soon the coyotes and varmints'll have cleaned out the woollies anyhow, and yuh can get settled like us. That suit you, Dal?"

Dal nodded.

"If it suits Bruce, an' he can keep his sheep to the south," he clipped. "I ain't blamin' him as much as I blame that polecat Malotte. None of this brings my crop back, but it don't help none to beller about it any more. If'n Bruce wants to be neighbors we'll help him get settled. Doc and I'll help yuh get yore logs, Tom, help yuh build your cabin. Now let's go eat breakfast. Join us, Doc? Mebbe yuh can find words to give thanks them sheep critters ain't elephants. . . ."

The summer moved on. Dal Baldwin figured he had lost twenty-five per cent of his crop, but the balance had made good recovery and had seemed to stool out better for the tramping and pounding it had received.

The coming of the Bruces had brought a further hope to the Baldwins. The Bruces had brought with them a few chickens. One of Tom's team was a bull, and taking a general inventory of stock now at Sun-Bear, excluding the sheep, Dal could see a lot of promise.

There were two children here now—Jimmy and little Carol. There was a heifer calf and the promise of a foal from Naieta next spring. There was a cow and a bull. It was likely the little buckskin mare could be bred shortly.

Throughout the last of the hot summer the menfolk toiled ceaselessly. First there was the south fence and a cabin for the Bruces. In between jobs, the men whip-sawed lumber for Dal's flume.

BOTH Doc and Tom knew that they must depend on Dal's production of oats for their own needs. Tom Bruce worked with the tireless strength and power of his oxen. He insisted on doing most of the hauling, taking the team deep into broken and swamp country where Dal would not have dared risk his horses. Bruce also rigged up a small forge and was able to execute repairs to equipment such as Dal might never have dreamed possible.

"Actually a godsend, honey," Dal told Mary. "The comin' of the Bruces establishes a real community spirit. We'll have good trappin' this winter. Both Doc and Tom know a lot about baits. . . . You happy, Mary honey?"

"Very happy, Dal. But the creek, dear. It's getting lower and lower. How soon do you think you can get to work on the flume?"

"A few weeks yet, honey," Dal replied.

He had hoped Mary wouldn't have called attention to the drought. He had already seen its mark on the crop. Not only that, but the near-by pasture grass was dying. He had heard its sinister rustle in the night winds. But he said nothing to Mary of his greatest fear. Lightning hissing into these dry grasses and underbrush could touch off the activities of a deadly grim harvester—a red harvester.

Mary looked off across the creek and touched Dal's arm.

"That's Tom Bruce coming with his bulls, dear," she said. "Were you expecting him?"

"No—not today. He and Doc were goin' to finish the inside of the Bruce cabin. He—he's bringin' his breakin' plow along."

The bull team sank into the mud of the creek, then slowly emerged. Tom called them to a halt in the Baldwin yard.

"Yuh travelin' some place, Tom?" Dal asked.

"Yeah, but not much farther, Dal. This is where I stop. It's gettin' a mite too dry hereabouts, and since you've got most to lose, I figgered I'd plow a fireguard around yore buildin's and the—uh—crop. Doc's leg has busted out on him, so that gives me a day off. Reckon yuh hadn't thought of a fireguard yet, huh?"

"Matter of fact I hadn't yet, Tom," Dal replied. "Right neighborly of yuh to come. I'll take the plow if'n yuh'll drive the critters."

"A fireguard ?" Mary asked, her lovely eyes wide.

"Yes, ma'am," Tom replied. "Not that it'll ever be needed, but oftentimes in this sort of country, yuh'll get sharp lightnin' with no rain, and there's a batch of little firebugs in each fork of lightnin'. Just as well to have a guard."

Mary nodded and strode back to the cabin. Her lips moved as if she breathed a prayer of thanksgiving for Tom Bruce's thoughtfulness and foresight. She turned at the stoop, to watch the men strike out across the broken country—Dan, tall and angular, attempting to hold the plow point in wherever he could in the more rocky terrain; Tom, big and floundering, keeping gait with his slow-moving bulls. They truly symbolized good neighborliness. . . .

The night was stifling, but it seemed not to upset the settlers of Sun-Bear Valley when they gathered at the new home of the Bruces to celebrate their first frontier Thanksgiving at the end of harvesting time. Dal Baldwin's oats were already in the shock. The womenfolk had gathered and preserved many varieties of wild fruits. The garden stuff, such as needed curing, was hanging in their kitchens.

The men had made their estimates of the oats yield. Tom Bruce calculated it would run close to thirty bushels to the acre. Doc figured around twenty-five bushels, but Dal had shaken his head. He knew it might not run above eighteen bushels, but he was grateful for this. He had, moreover, missed by a few days a freeze which might have cost him his seed grading.

It was no wonder then that the settlers gathered at the most recently built home of the three to celebrate their Thanksgiving. The children were safely bedded down in Ella's cooler kitchen annex. Out of doors, unknown to the revelers, flashes of sheet lightning played on the grim faces of the craglands peaks.

Old Doc scraped tunes out of his fiddle, tapping the beat with his foot, while Dal and Tom took turns dancing with the three women.

Finally the dancers paused to have supper. Marta had brought pickles—stuff from her own garden, pickled in vinegar brewed from a "mother" she had brought in from the Outside. As well, she had fluffy biscuits for which she was famous, and fried partridge, which had only needed some "hotting up." Mary had made a layer cake with cream from the cow's milk, and two eggs Ella had saved for the occasion. Tom Bruce had contributed a leg of spring lamb which Ella had baked and served with mint sauce.

IT WAS while they ate this wilderness banquet that the first loud clap of thunder startled them. Dal sprang to his feet and hurried outside. He conned the night sky, a strange sky with scarcely the usual rolling thunder-cloud evident. Most of the storms had previously come from the northwest and west. The lightning now scored the northeasterly horizon.

"Dry storm ag'in," Dal observed as he returned to the table. "Don't seem to be many clouds nowheres."

"Have another slice of lamb, Dal," Tom Bruce suggested. "Figger my sheep owe you plenty yet. . . . Good, huh?"

"Yeah." Dal smiled. "Never thought I'd ever bring

myself to eat so much woollie meat. Reckon it must be Marta's mint sauce that dresses it up so nice. I— "

A fierce crash of thunder cut Dal's words. Mary glanced anxiously up at her husband. Dal was restless.

"Try and enjoy yourself, darling," she called softly. "We've had these storms before. This one'll blast itself out shortly." Dal settled down again and resumed his meal. The time slipped by, but the storm seemed trapped in the canyon bowls like artillery whose sole purpose is to expend unlimited ammunition.

Bruce's dog howled. It was then that Tom swung to the door, his grizzled face drawn with concern. The sheep were blatting and milling. He could tell of their restlessness by the jangle of their bells. Outside, he gasped.

"Dal!" he called. "It's come!"

Dal Baldwin leaped through the doorway, as a ruddy glow in the northeast lit up almost his entire homestead zone.

Fire!

Dal Baldwin thought quickly. His cabin was the safest place in the valley, thanks to Tom Bruce's ploughed fireguard, and the proximity of the cabin to the creek.

He calmly gave instructions to the womenfolk.

"Yuh'll bring the young'uns to our place," he said. "Tom—Doc, we can't be all three at our own places. What ideas have yuh got?"

"Get beyond yore place an' start backfirin'," Bruce suggested.

Doc Carson nodded approval. "Yuh got to fight fire with fire," he said. "Yuh got some tubs yuh use for mixin' sheep dip, Tom. Load 'em aboard the wagon and follow on. We'll need water for soakin' the beater sackin'. . ."

Beyond the Baldwin spruces, the fire had taken quite a hold. Tom Bruce had hitched his bull team to a plough and was attempting to strike a furrow wherever the plough point would enter and stay in the ground. He figured that any kind of a furrow might help in an emergency. It would give the beaters a help.

Dal and Doc Carson moved on in, coughing as the smoke assailed their lungs. They touched off backfires, but the winds in a fire area are fickle and every now and then the men became momentarily trapped in their own fire rings.

Now they were being driven back—back toward the fireguard. Doc's arthritic leg handicapped him and Dal was obliged to drop behind to help him along. At the main guard they realized its pitiful narrowness.

"It'll have to do, Dal," Doc said. "Go get the wet sacks—them wool sacks of Tom's. We got to make a stand. Listen to that old bullwhacker beller!"

As Dal returned with the wet sacking, both men suddenly swung. A whipping wind had carried embers to start a new blaze, and Tom Bruce and his bulls were encircled like some phantasmagoric group of weird statuary.

"It's got Tom!" Doc yelled. "No, by gravy, he's headin' the bulls onto the crop. Come on! We got to help him."

The fire was in the stubble. Tom Bruce had jerked off his shirt and was beating out flame with it. A strip of fire had got by him, tearing for the creek. Before Dal could leap to beat it out, it had reached the dry, grass-filled underbrush. A wind lifted it and whipped it across the creek.

Dal groaned. Once the fire was across the creek, there was no possible help for saving Tom Bruce's place. Then there were the sheep. They were live creatures—senseless creatures in a crisis such as this.

Dal turned and roared to Bruce.

"Don't lose your head, Dal!" the big man boomed back. "Better we save one place proper than attempt to——"

THE rest of his words were lost to Dal, who had plunged himself up to his arm-pits in the water and mud of the creek. That little dog of Bruce's was somewhere in the track of the flame. Marta Carson and Mary Baldwin had come out now and were with the men beating flame, re-soaking sacks at the barrels, while Ella stayed with the children.

Dal found the little dog at last. He was whirling around the frightened sheep band, but they were breaking out, some of them scattering into the path of the flames. Dal caught hold of the dog and held him low as a thick pall of smoke assailed them.

He rose and yelled to the dog.

"Go bring 'em, Dandy boy! Get 'em! Bring 'em along!"

The dog gave a series of broken barks and whirled in an effort to head the stampeding sheep back toward the creek. But the sheep panicked. Finally Dal, himself scorched, his lashes and brows gone, got in behind the terror-stricken band and started them toward the creek, following closely the smoldering track of a fire-killed swath which ran parallel with the drying stream.

At the bank he picked up a struggling ewe and hurled her into midstream. He kneed and thrust others with his hands, over the shallow bank. At last he saw

them all safe, some of them almost dead, their wool and feet scorched, and in some cases seriously burned. He turned, and whistled to the dog, but there was no response.

Dal swung about and headed back into the smoke, across the hot ashes of Sage and grass and sod and earth. He found the dog and lifted him in his arms. As he turned to stride back, he glimpsed the Bruce cabin in flames.

A low groan escaped Dal. Bruce, the man he had hated at first sight, had sacrificed his own home to save his, Dal's home and crop. As he strode on to the creek, Dal thought of his first meeting with Tom Bruce and of the sheep which had pounded his crop. Now in the flare of fire he saw those sheep—what were left of them. Not more than fifteen ewes.

Mist clouded Dal's eyes. The men were coming to meet him as he climbed the far creek bank. Tom reached for his dog, but Dal hung on to the whimpering shepherd. Then a spot of rain dashed his cheek. Rain! It would only be light, but it was welcome as never rain was welcome before. Dal Baldwin stood and let it splash him, then, with Doc and Tom at his heels, he carried the dog to the house.

For a long moment there was silence at the Baldwin cabin. Tom and Dal applied salve to the dog's burns, and to their own burns. The women looked on, their faces drawn and expressionless.

"Uh—it'd help if'n you women would start a mite of cryin'," Doc Carson said. "Trouble is, we're all too proud, or somethin', to let out our real feelin's. We've just come through a—uh—red harvest. It's been bad. Tom's been the heavy loser and some of us should be red-eyed about it. But Tom's gained a lot tonight, too—our respect and—uh—regard. He's made hisself mighty important to all of us here at Sun-Bear."

Mary Baldwin wiped a tear from her face. Ella was sniffling. Doc had broken out the tears, but Marta now took hold.

"Land of sailors!" she boomed. "You talk like you was a travelin' deacon, Doc Carson. Sure we love Tom for what he did. Tomorrow, the land'll be black, but the skies'll be blue again, an' from now on until Tom and Ella get reestablished in a new place, and after, we'll share and share alike. But all of you get this: Never forget what Dal Baldwin done crossin' that crick right into the heart of the flame. Never forget his comin' back, that poor critter in his arms, a critter that's been the most faithful of us all."

"Amen!" Doc cut in.

"Amen? I wasn't makin' no preachment, Doc," Marta snorted.

"Uh-huh, I agree with all yuh said, Marta," Doc breathed, stuffing a fresh quid of tobacco into his cheek. "Tomorrow we start to rebuild for our neighbors. Now, if'n yuh'll bow yore heads, I'll make a preachment, of sorts."

DOC said his prayer with quavering reverence, giving thanks that at least the Baldwin home had been saved. He did not know yet, that he had been fortunate himself.

"An' we thank Thee, A'mighty Gawd," he went on, "that if'n ever we had to test each other for true worth or cussedness, we had to do it in the face of—uh—death and found only the true worth. Bless us, the settlers uh Sun-Bear Valley and never forget we come through Thy own test a hundred per cent when the blue chips was in and the goin'was tough. A—men!"

"A—men . . . A—men!"

Dal stooped and rubbed a crumpled ear of the little dog. Mary dropped to her knees beside him and kissed his smudged face.

"You were wonderful, Dal darling," she breathed with emotion.

Doc Carson coughed sharply and moved toward Marta.

"Stand back, you old coot," she shrieked. "Ain't I told you you're too old for kissin' and stuff? Anyhow, you ain't kissin' me with half a plug of eatin' tobacco in your cheek. . . . I got coffee to make and san'wiches to git ready. You menfolk chase out of doors and see the stock's all right, and remember this, all uh you: There's a lot of honey in a beehive, but there's also a passel of torment in there, too. That's how it is with homesteadin'. You got to take the good with the bad. Tomorrow, we all start smilin' an' workin' and . . . land of sailors! If I ain't makin' a preachment my ownself!"

Smiling, the men moved out. Marta's preachment was sound. They strode on down to the creek to inspect the sheep, quieter now since the coming of the rain.