



CHALLENGE OF THE WILDS

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*Dal and Mary Baldwin Face Disaster When Their
Horse Dies and Their Traps Are Robbed
—but Their Courage Lives on!*

THE COTTONWOODS AND ASPENS had shed their leaves. The late autumn winds were keening. As Dal Baldwin looked out across the Valley, to the sharply rising peaks beyond, he sucked in a sharp breath. It was true that he and his lovely young wife Mary had well established themselves on heir new homestead in plenty of time to meet the approaching winter, yet Dal could not help a twinge of misgiving.

A shaft of rising sunlight was caught by a moving

object down the meadow, close to the creek. Dal started, then gasped as he glimpsed a large, light-colored cinnamon bear.

“Sun-bear!” he exclaimed.

Softly he backed to the cabin and called to Mary. She came to the stoop and Dal pointed.

“Why, it’s—it’s golden, Dal,” she said with amazement. “A gold bear!”

“Big cinnamon, honey,” he corrected “Sun-bear, some call ’em. Beauty, isn’t he?” Mary’s deep blue eyes were wide as she quivered with mixed emotions. She had lived in fear of their wild neighbors ever since coming to the valley. This was the first bear she had seen and now, as he rose to his hind legs, to “woof” protestingly at the tang of wood smoke and human scent, he was a formidable-looking oldster.

“He’s as gold as the sunrise, Dal dear, Mary whispered.

“As gold as the sun—Say, honey, that’s it! I’ve been trying to think of a name for the valley. The bear’s given it. We’ll call it Sun-Bear Valley, huh?”

Mary nodded, but all at once she and Dal started, for down in the meadow, where Naieta, the little filly, and old Pete, the gelding, were tethered, there was action. Naieta was lunging at the rawhide. The bear scent had panicked her. Old Pete stood still, quivering in every muscle.

“If the bear had been a grizzly, old Pete would have dropped dead in his tracks, Mary,” Dal said. He suddenly glanced at his wife and smiled.

“Why, you look more scared than the horses, honey. Watch this.”

He hurried forward a few rods, yelled and clapped his hands. The big cinnamon whirled, rose momentarily to his hind quarters, then went lunging off to the cover of the underbrush.

“See?” Dal said, returning to Mary’s side. “Just an old bluffer. Breakfast ready, honey?”

Mary nodded and they entered the cabin together.

FOR a time they ate in silence.

“Meal and flour are getting low, Dal dear,” she said at last.

“Uh-huh. Reckon so, darlin’. I’ve been thinkin’ about such things, but I’d hoped to stand off goin’ back to the settlement for supplies until I had some fur to trade in. There’ll be trappin’ in the hills come snowfall. Fox, some mountain lion, and mebbeso lynx. I don’t know about the lynx yet. I’ve spotted beaver sign already, but I’ll be goin’ after fox mostly.”

Dal broke off to cast a sly glance at his wife.

“Mountain lions, Dal?” she asked without looking up.

“Of course, honey. We’ll have to watch Naieta if the cats get hungry. They’re plenty death on horses. Then there’ll be an odd grizzly in the higher levels. Lots of coyotes in the lower country. You’ve heard ’em already, but always remember this, sweet—the wild critters, exceptin’ in some cases, like a mother with young, are more scared of us than we are of them. Well, I’ve got to get started cuttin’ rails for our fencin’. The hay’s got to be fenced, or some mornin’ we’ll wake up to find the deer have ate it all.” Dal paused, wondering if his long talk was of interest to Mary.

“I’ve found a stand of fire-killed spruce for fence poles, honey,” he went on. “When there’s enough cut and piled, I’ll ask you to come along and help load ’em. You’ll like it.”

“You mean deep in the woods, Dal?”

“Yep. We’ll go through places on the way where you’ll want to hold your breath, like you was goin’ into a church—it’s so quiet, and—uh—well, it’s where I’m sure the small shy critters gather. I’ve heard their rustlin’s, just after sunset like they was gatherin’ for church, or school, or somethin’.”

A soft, sweet smile played with Mary’s mouth. She tossed a lock of copper hair from her forehead and her lips parted. She was proud of her young husband who, for all his good height and rugged build, could be capable of such artistry as he had expressed.

She watched him as he reached for his hat and gun and a strange quiver stirred her. She wondered if one day there would be a son—a son of Dal’s build. Perhaps he’d even have the same shock of rich brown hair and eyes that laughed—save when Dal was angered. Then they glowed like two live coals.

She handed him the lunch she had packed for him.

“Thanks, honey,” he said. “I’ll mebbe make a good showin’ today. Got to. I must get that sulphur spring near the creek fenced right soon and enough rails for a corral. Got a notion we might catch us a wild horse from the big gray stallion’s band before spring. So long!”

When Dal had gone, Mary made another inventory of their meager food supplies. They would have to go on a bigger ration of fish and venison, in order to conserve the last of their corn meal and flour. But she was quite resigned to letting Dal plan what was best for them.

Even before Dal could get his fence poles all cut, a savage wind hurled heavy snows down on them.

In a flash of time—almost overnight—the meadow seemed filled, while all about them the trees, hills and promontories stood sere and grimly silent in this austere change of scene.

Dal stabled his horses and had to dig paths through the blinding blizzard, from cabin to stable, from stable to haystack.

Came a sharp freeze when, in the night, the timbers of the cabin and the trees out of doors cracked sharply and at times terrifyingly. Wind whined in the eaves and sent drifting snow hissing against the log walls. Small field mice, which had escaped notice at the time of building had established themselves in the slough hay above the pole rafters under the roof sods. Mary could hear them stirring and squeaking as she lay awake.

Suddenly a high-pitched wolf cry startled her. She clutched at Dal's arm, awakening him.

"Wolf, sure, honey," he said sleepily. "I told you we'd hear 'em as soon as the first snows came. Don't be skittery. You're plenty safe here." But he sat up to reassure her and drew her close to his side.

"I'm a bit bothered those wolf critters'll worry the deer, forcin' 'em down to this level before I get the stack fenced," he said. "I've seen deer back home make a sorry mess of a haystack overnight."

THERE were deer tracks in the meadow the following morning—a morning which broke with promise as the sun at last lanced through a cordon of gloom to flood the valley, spreading a rich bejewelled mantle over the whole district.

Dal, however, had little time to give to this new beauty of scene about them. He turned and strode over to the stable. He would turn the horses loose today.

Back at the cabin he reached for his ax.

"You're not going to the woods today, dear?" Mary commented softly.

"Got to, honey. Lot of work to be done. I'd hoped the first big snow might melt and run off, but I somehow don't think it will. Won't take a lunch. Be back at noon as hungry as a wolf."

Mary watched him plow on through the deep snow until the spruce woods swallowed him. She closed her eyes and for a long moment wondered if they had chosen wisely of this wilderness. But all at once she shrugged. She tossed back the curls from her eyes and rolled up her sleeves. There was plenty of work waiting for her. Work! Pioneers since the birth of time had

found it a panacea for most of their ills and worries.

As she strode back to the cabin, she smiled as she watched Naieta, the little mare, attempt some play with old Pete as they moved knee deep toward the creek.

Realizing that winter was upon them, Mary Baldwin took stock of their winter garments. These would have to be augmented by buckskins. Dal, first, would require a buckskin suit. She had coarse homespun wool for his heavy socks and in a small box there was wool of a finer texture which, every once in a while, Mary took out to hold. It was white and soft and fluffy—a present from her mother back home. She touched it now and sighed—wondering, wondering when she would be called upon to start knitting it up.

Dal, she was sure, would be happy and proud to see her start that small, fine knitting. . .

Dal Baldwin wiped sweat from his forehead and eyes. He had shed his jumper coat. He had been cutting for an hour or more, thrilled at the ring of his ax strokes in the timber. Each pole cut and piled, each job done, brought him a strong feeling of conquest, possessiveness. And as he coned the poles already piled, the trails he had hacked in the timber, he smiled.

Here was achievement, accomplishment. He could not guess as to how long this timber had stood, defiant of all the weather elements. The very density of the trees had challenged Dal when first he struck the burnout, but he had swung his ax in meeting that challenge. It would be so with all the work he attempted here in the wilds.

At such times as these, when the pioneer toiled in the loneliness of the timber, he built up his plans for the future. Dal welcomed such opportunities for, as a boy, cutting in his father's timber back in Montana, he had dreamed of such a wilderness as this, and he had begun his planning then.

He sat on a windfall to rest and his thoughts turned to Mary. She hadn't said anything as yet, but there would come a time, he knew, when she would whisper some intimate news. Young as he was, Dal was not without thoughts of his children and the start they would have here at Sun-Bear Valley, whose wildness and challenge would stir them to ambition and purposeful endeavor, as it stirred him.

Now his forehead wrinkled as was its habit when he was bothered. He was still thinking of Mary. She was of pioneer stock and she had taught school for a few years back in Montana. Before that she had gone to the Outside, to Normal School. She was gentle, kindly, sweet-tempered. He wondered how she would feel

and act when, as might be necessary shortly, he would be obliged to leave her for some days and nights. Dal gnawed at his underlip as he imagined what might happen if some day he should suffer some misfortune along the trapline, or deep in the bush. An ax might, could, slip—.

He jumped to his feet and squared back his big shoulders.

“Worrisome fool,” he muttered. He picked up his ax and swung vigorously back into his work. Work! It was good for the pioneer—body and soul.

POLE after pole crashed to the snow which flew up in spume to drench Dal. But he liked the sting of it and smiled as he spat it from his mouth, or shook it from his hair.

As he piled another batch of rails, he hummed an old break-down tune and as he hummed he visualized a night—the night of the first dance at Sun-Bear Valley, when he and Mary would be guests of honor. He tried to visualize the fiddler and the square-dance caller, characters of tomorrow.

*Do-se-do with the corner, lady.
Balance with yore own,
Swing as yuh go with the corner, lady.
Promenade yore own . . .*

He missed the old-time dances, gatherings which had often saved a pioneer community, reviving jaded bodies and spirits frayed by overwork and worry. They—

At the sound of crunching snow Dal broke off his musing and spun to glimpse Mary floundering toward him.

“Mary!” he rushed to meet her.

Dal held his trembling wife closely. Almost exhausted, she sank limply against him, but soon stiffened and looked up into his face through tear-filled eyes.

“It’s—it’s Pete, Dal dear. He—” She broke off, sobbing.

Dal tightened his grip on her.

“Mary, honey, it’s all right so long as you’re safe,” he said softly. “Now take it easy and tell me what happened. You say Pete’s—something’s happened to Pete?”

Mary dashed tears from her eyes and nodded. Her hand clutched Dal’s shirt sleeve tightly.

“The sulphur spring, near the creek, Dal, was almost covered with snow. Pete got in and bogged down. He’s—he’s gone, Dal.”

Dal swore with emotion.

“I might have knowed there’d be trouble. It was such a fine day I—I let the horses out, forgettin’ about the spring. Is there no hope of gettin’ him out, honey?”

Mary shook her head.

“He’s gone, Dal. Only his head was showing when I left.”

A mistiness clouded Dal’s eyes as he stared out over Mary’s head into the bleak bush area. The wilderness had dealt him a sharp blow. The loss of Pete could not be written off lightly. Naieta, the little mare, was far too light, singly, for much work.

Dal composed himself, though. Shrugging, he turned from Mary and picked up his coat and gun and ax.

“Now, honey, let’s go,” he said, and patted her shoulder. “I never figured we’d get by the winter without some bad luck. Got to learn right away to accept the good with the bad. Now I’ll have to rig up a light sled of some sort so the little gal can snake these rails out. It’ll take longer, but we’ll make out.”

He strode on ahead of his wife in order to break better trail for her. As they reached the first of the green spruce-fringed glades he had spoken of so artistically, he did not pause. Cold, stark facts faced him.

They reached the meadow where he glimpsed Naieta. She had climbed the first hog-back ridge and now stood head high, facing off to the hills.

Dal whistled to her, but she seemed not to hear. Then suddenly, from the snowcapped hills, there came the ringing bugle of the king stallion—the wild band leader.

At the call, the short hairs at the nape of Dal’s neck began to prickle. Shortly after his and Mary’s arrival at the valley, he had obstructed an attempt by a thieving half-breed to hold the big gray wild stallion in a pole trap.

From his first glimpse of the stallion, Dal had been covetous. Now Pete was gone and out of the westerly hills there came the wild horse cry, which brought with it hope.

Dal spun to face Mary, his eyes dancing.

“It’s the big gray one, honey,” he said. “That means the wild band is close in. Do you realize what that means? There’s a critter in that band to take old Pete’s place. Mebbeso not the king himself, but—” He broke off. Naieta was whinnying shrilly.

Dal moved on up and took her by the forelock.

“I’m glad you called, gal,” he said softly. “But come

on back now. I'll have need for you. I got to look after you. From now on, for a time, you're stayin' right in the barn."

STABLING the filly, Dal strode on down to the spring. Old Pete's eyes still showed. They were open, but glazed in death. A lump came to Dal's throat, for he had ridden old Pete to school, to the store, to dances . . .

"Sorry, pardner," he intoned. "Sorry I let you go, thisaway." He turned and walked slowly back to the cabin.

In a few moments he was hard at work on a small sled. When finished he would hitch up Naieta and run the sled back and forth to the timber in order to pack a better trail, then he would load lightly and although it would mean many trips, he was sure the filly could handle the work.

When hay and spring were fenced, he would begin his trapping. Fox sets would be his first thought, for pelts meant food and supplies, in trade, but he would also have in mind the design for a horse trap and its erection.

He paused in his work now and then to con the hills, hoping for a glimpse of the big gray stallion, but the wild one was shy. He once had undergone a grim experience at the hands of a man. That man had captured him and beaten him mercilessly with a quirt.

"Some day soon, I'll be on your trail, big feller," Dal breathed. "But first I've got other work to do—plenty."

In a week or so of sharp weather, with Mary's help, Dal had brought all his fence rails in from the woods. Naieta had worked splendidly. Dal didn't attempt to dig post holes, but built a snake fence around the stack and spring. This took more rails than had he dug in permanent posts, but there were plenty of rails in the woods.

Now the fencing was done and the homestead was taking on a homey appearance. Dal set to work to clean his fox traps. First he would scout for sign, then establish a line.

On the morning he set off for the hills, Mary packed him a lunch and wished him luck. This was to be her first day actually alone, but she smiled as he kissed her.

The rising sun seemed to stir the whole district to new and beautiful life. A grouse strutted out of the nearby spruce wood, fluffing his feathers grandiosely, showing no sign of fear. Mary was prompted to get her small-bore rifle and shoot him. He would make a good supper for Dal, but she shrugged the thought from her.

Dal had turned at the peak of the first height. She waved to him, and he waved back, a handsome, rugged form backed by a backdrop of magnificent grandeur in the flaming light of the rising sun.

As the weather settled with firming frosts, the deep snow settled, too. Dal made his fox sets along a line of several miles. He was able to shoot a couple of white-tail bucks, whose venison augmented their food supply and whose hides, well flensed and cured by Mary, were turned into clothing.

Came the day when Dal returned with his first fur catch, a handsome cross fox. He removed the pelt with great care, instructing Mary in the art of carefully stretching it over the stretcher board.

Blizzard winds then buried a lot of his sets under deep snow for days at a time. Disheartening weather, but Dal clung to his patience and hope. As the weather cleared he discovered a new fox run, and remade his sets . . .

Before sunrise, a month after the commencement of his trapping, he was moving along a newly established line with more than usual hope. A light sheet of snow had fallen overnight, just enough to skim-cover his sets. Fox sign had been plentiful.

As he reached his first set, a frown furrowed his brow. There was something wrong here. The area had been disturbed. A trapper can read snow sign instinctively.

He carefully brushed the snow from above his trap. At first glance it seemed undisturbed, and yet Dal was not satisfied.

"Could have been wolverine around," he told himself. But there were no visible tracks, save light depressions under the newly fallen light snow. He got to his feet and glanced about him. Then shrugging, he remade his set and moved on.

Twice more he was conscious of a suspicion he couldn't define. His traps were unsprung, yet he seemed sure they had in some way been disturbed. He pulled a blank along his entire line and turned off toward the far hills in bitter disappointment.

As he strode softly through a small thicket he came to a sudden halt, scarcely breathing, for he had caught the close in whinnying of a horse. He tested for wind direction and moved on. Then suddenly, as he looked down on a small meadow, he glimpsed them—a small band of the wild King stallion's kindred.

HIS eyes narrowed as he watched the shaggy beasts pawing through the snow to the buried meadow grass.

None of the horses was much larger than Naieta, but he wanted one to replace Pete. One would serve as a beginning. His heart beat faster, for he realized that it was the circumstance of heavy snow which brought the wild band down to this level—a fortuitous circumstance. But should a thaw occur, exposing pasture higher up, the big gray stallion leader would certainly desert the low country indefinitely.

On his return to the cabin, Dal made light of his disappointment along the trapline, but his enthusiasm at having seen the small horse band was high.

“I’ll build a trap, honey,” he told Mary. “I’ll use Naieta as a decoy. This is our chance to replace Pete.”

With almost the stealth and cunning of a wild creature, Dal selected a site for the trap, constructing it with as great caution. Shifting winds held him from the site for as long as two days at a time. Twice, marauding cougars threatened to stampede the wild band, harrying them from the vicinity.

At last the trap was ready and its drop gate tested. Dal led Naieta up at twilight. She packed a couple of loose bales of fragrant hay. The night was promising warm, with a moon, and little breeze.

In a small corral, off the trap, Dal turned the little mare loose. He had thrown one of the hay bales into the trap, the other was tossed in for Naieta’s consumption.

Now he crept back to cover and like a small boy watching with expectancy a rabbit run on which a snare had been set, Dal Baldwin crouched down to watch and wait and hope.

He could hear the wild stock snuffling and pawing in the small meadow not far from the open gate of the trap.

Suddenly he was startled by a snort of terror. Out of the higher craglands came the shrill bugle of the wild stallion king.

Dal got to his feet and edged to the fringe of thicket cover, peering down toward the meadow. A shadowy form poised momentarily on a ledge almost directly above the feeding horses. Now it was joined by another—two long, lean forms.

“Lions,” Dal whispered. His heart lunged fiercely, for after all his patience it seemed that the cougar pair were about to cheat him. He was on the point of drawing down on a cougar target with his old Winchester when Naieta suddenly shrilled a high-pitched whinny. In almost that same instant, panic broke out in the meadow. The two cougars leaped as, with a chorus of snorts, the wild horses whirled and

stampeded. The drum of their hoofs on the packed snow was like the hollow roll of tom-toms.

Bathed in moonlight, the meadow was almost as clear as in daytime. Dal now glimpsed a stocky little mare racing madly toward the trap site. Naieta whinnied and snuffled. At the back of the stampeded mare loped two cougars.

Dal could scarcely believe his eyes. He had suffered grave misfortune in the loss of Pete, but here, it seemed, fate was rallying to compensate him.

Near the trap gate the frightened wild creature skidded to a halt. It was almost her undoing. For at her back the greater of the two cougars, a handsome male, sprang. With a frightened squeal the mare leaped, and struck.

Dal gasped as he watched the mare drop sharply to her knees for an instant, then bolt headlong into the trap, the cougar’s talons sunk into her back.

Came a dull crash! The trap had been sprung.

Like a flash Dal jerked up his Winchester and pulled the trigger. As the shot boomed into the night, its reverberations echoing and re-echoing along the canyons, the cougar whirled from his prey. With prodigious leap he cleared the corral poles and hurtled on to cover, leaving the wild mare, staggering but alone, in the enclosure.

Dal felt the cold sweat of sheer excitement break out over his body. He quivered in every nerve fibre, scarcely believing his luck. Now he composed himself and dropped down to the trap level. He went in talking softly to Naieta.

ABRUPTLY the wild mare, recovered from her shock, reared and whirled. Snorting, she lunged at the trap poles, striking madly, fiercely with her forehoofs. Dal paid her no heed. He had a lot to thank Naieta for, and he stroked her muzzle gently, speaking softly to her.

“The night’s warm, gal,” he said. “You’ll be all right out of doors. There’s enough of my scent around here now to keep the lions away from you, but to make sure I’ll hang my jumper up on a top rail. You and the little wild gal get friendly. We need her.”

He stepped back and for a long moment watched the frenzy of the captive. During a lull in her madness, he appraised her and figured she was a mite heavier than Naieta. Already his plans were laid for her gentling. Naieta would play a big part in this. She would become familiar with Naieta’s scent and presence before long.

Taking off his jumper, Dal tucked a sleeve between

the two top rails, then with a word or two to the wild one, he moved off.

The moon was gone and through the steely dark he wound his way down to his own meadow. Mary met him close to the cabin. She was almost overcome by worry. But Dal took her in his arms and executed a little Piute dance with her in his arms.

“Got us a little sorrel mare, honey,” he said. “She’ll weigh around a hundred-and-fifty more than Naieta. But it’ll take me days before I can gentle her enough to bring her down. Tomorrow morning she and I start gettin’ acquainted.”

Dal visited his traps first thing in the morning and was again disappointed. His entire catch consisted of two not too good cross foxes. His keenest disappointment was the discovery of a handsome black fox pelt which an eagle had ripped to pieces. Again he discovered sets which seemed to have been tampered with. He knelt at one such set and examined closely the jaws of the unsprung trap. A sharp hiss escaped him when he discovered reddish hairs adhering to the steel.

His hands balled into hard fists and his eyes narrowed. For upwards of an hour he moved back and forth along his line, examining closely all tracks and sign, but was as deeply puzzled as ever.

He put his catch in a tree fork and moved along to the horse trap, where Naieta greeted him with a series of soft snuffles. The wild one reared and snorted, showing continued hostility. Dal just grinned, making no attempt to draw too close to the pen. He dropped down into Naieta’s corral, and talked to the filly for a few minutes.

This went on for a few days. Now and then, when the nights threatened heavy snow or cold, he took Naieta in to the stable.

He continued to enjoy only indifferent luck with his fox trapping.

At last, this morning, as he visited the pole trap, the wild one did not shy away at his approach. Naieta snuffled and Dal felt a glow of conquest as he imagined he caught a soft snuffle from the wild mare.

Slowly, talking softly as he went, he circled the enclosure and cautiously mounted the rails. From around his waist he uncoiled a short lariat and set his noose. This he dropped expertly over the wild one’s neck. Like a flash she sunfished and struck, then whirled to swap ends, almost pulling Dal in on top of her. He smiled, but soon his face became set as he went into action. With the skill of an expert wrangler he snubbed her down tightly.

He had his hands on her at last. Slipping a rope halter over her head, he spoke to her as he gently rubbed her ears and muzzle.

Her sides heaved like bellows, sides white with lather—fear sweat, but she realized that, save for the tight thing about her nose and throat, the man creature had not hurt her.

Suddenly the man leaped clear. She lunged backward—free. No longer did that snakelike thing about her throat cut off her full power to breath. She tossed her head, savagely trying to dislodge her halter.

Dal moved off, leaving her for a day and night to get used to the halter.

When next he visited the trap, he roped and snubbed her down, close to Naieta’s side and later led them both down to his meadow. As he approached the cabin, Mary hurried to meet them, her eyes misty with tears of pride and sheer happiness.

FOR a day or two Dal fed the mare himself. He then constructed a barrier of poles at her back, so that she could not lash out at Mary.

Soon the time had come for Dal to lead Naieta out on the back trail to the settlement, for supplies.

He packed his fox pelts and a couple of marten. Mary noticed the frown clouding his face. The bundle of furs was woefully small—five cross foxes and the two marten. He would have to dip into their very small reserve of cash.

Dal’s frown was not wholly caused by the small bundle of furs. He had come across sign which he was suspicious about along the trap-line. This sign had not been so obvious during the last week, but nevertheless it had been there. Then, there was the more definite sign—those reddish hairs and the jaws of that unsprung trap. Fox hairs and man sign!

He looked sharply up at Mary now.

“Take no chances with the wild one, honey,” he said, as he was preparing to leave the following morning. “Feed her regular, from a distance. See she gets some snow in place of water. She’ll manage till I get back.”

Dal was leaving, for his wife’s protection, the old Winchester. He had cautioned her never to be far from it, but not to worry.

Their actual parting was hurried, for Dal could not stand much of that sort of thing. Had not fate cheated on them, he had planned to drive Mary out to the settlement with him.

He waved to her before the willows cut her from view. Then, leading Naieta, he commenced the long

trek back along the creek, breaking heavy trail most of the way. This was the lot of the pioneer in the wilderness.

It took Dal three days to make the trip to the settlement. Trappers had been in ahead of him and he gasped at the beauty of some of the pelts hanging in the store. He felt ashamed of his own small catch.

The storeman, John Dolman, was a pleasant middle-aged man, with longhorn mustaches stained by tobacco juice. He remembered Dal from having spoken to him and to Mary, as they passed through on their search for the valley homestead.

"Right glad to see yuh again, young feller," Dolman said and gripped Dal's hand warmly. "Get yoreself and the missus established?"

Dal nodded.

"Right well, Dolman. Nice homestead. Good valley, with creek and timber. Got around eight acres ready to crop in the spring. Cabin and barn up, and a stack of hay."

"Really goin' to stick her out, huh?" Dolman shifted his quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other.

"That's the spirit, Baldwin. I've been through it. The wilderness will buck and mebbeso pile yuh up a time or two, but yuh're young, both of yuh. Now lemme see yore pelts. H'mmm. Not bad. Yuh got 'em well pelted."

He named a figure in trade which satisfied Dal. They were still discussing business when the door opened to admit a smallish man who walked with a limp. Dolman looked quickly from the newcomer to Dal.

"Why look here, Baldwin. Meet up with Doc Carson. Carson's scoutin' for a homestead around here, too. This is Dal Baldwin, Carson."

The little man grinned widely, favoring Dal with a full smile from a mouthful of gold-crowned teeth.

"Eh-h-h-h—Please to meet you, Baldwin," he said. His grin was infectious, as was his handshake.

"Same here, Carson," Dal replied. "I— we'll have a medicine talk about homesteads before we bed down. I—"

Dal broke off. A face had moved past the window outside. Dal moved to the door, his lips firm, his eyes narrowed.

As he flung open the door to step outside, he glimpsed a thick-set man form mount a pinto cayuse. His lips parted and momentarily he froze. When he collected himself to stride forward, the pinto had broken into a lope and the shadows swallowed them. He was the man, the half-breed, who had stolen Naieta, who had trapped and mercilessly beaten the wild king stallion up in the hills beyond Sun-Bear Valley.

DAL re-entered the store, where Dolman looked up questioningly.

"Know the man who rides that little paint horse?" Dal asked.

Dolman frowned and nodded.

"Yep. I know him, Baldwin, and it's too bad there ain't a law says I needn't. He's a bad varmint if ever there was one. Quirt Malotte is his name. He's part Piute, I think. They call him Quirt because when he's licked up, he gets fun aplenty from quirtin' the blazes out of his hosses."

"Quirt Malotte!" Dal almost snarled out the name. His eyes were burning—burning.

"What was his business here this time?" he asked.

"Fur trade," Dolman answered, taking expert aim at a spittoon. "Good trapper for all his faults. That's his fur catch on the wall, over left there, alongside the stable lanterns. Some good blacks in that batch."

"Some good blacks—Quirt Malotte!" Dal breathed.

"You act like yuh'd had a bad meetin' with that hombre, Baldwin," Dolman observed.

"I have, Dolman, and if I ain't miles out in my reckonin', most of that fur catch came out of my traps. I can see where I've got to start a new type of trappin' when I get back."

Until a late hour that night, Dal and "Doc" Carson talked together in the small room to which they'd been assigned for the night.

"I been around, Baldwin," the little man boasted. "Eh-h-h—Nevada, Nebraska. Some blacksmithin', some doctorin', hoss-doctorin', loggin'. Sometimes I cure humans of their ills, with herbs and such stuff. I have a notion to settle down, though. Got me a good woman, and if you've a mind for neighbors and know where there's some more land like your own that's goin' beggin', I'll be glad to check on it. Mebbeso we can get together and swap a lot of work. My wife is not as young as yours, but she's a fine women, experienced and—eh-h-h—she could nurse a sick pole-cat back to health. Mebbeso, if there was a baby happenin' along, you could do worse than call for Momma Carson."

Shortly after dawn the following morning, they set off together, Doc aboard a rangy crowbait of a gelding, Dal leading Naieta, who packed a fairly heavy load of supplies.

At night, when they camped, Doc Carson fished in his war bag and drew out a fiddle and bow. While Dal made supper, the little man tucked the violin against his chest and sawed off a repertory of familiar breakdowns, mostly jigs.

"I've played 'em all the way from the Mex border to the Canadian line, Baldwin," he boasted. "Can call my share of dances, too. Me and old scrape fiddle is never separated."

Dal laughed warmly. He had taken a liking to his smaller, older companion who was all right in his book.

They made fast time on Dal's return trip and it was with amazement that Mary Baldwin paused in her work, on the evening of the fifth day of Dal's absence at the sound of voices.

Dal had company!

At the stoop, she wanted to call out as she heard horses snuffling, but her voice seemed to clog up in her throat.

"Hi-i-i-yah!" It was Dal's voice. He was running ahead of the filly to meet Mary, whom he swept from her feet.

"Listen, honey," he whispered quickly. "We've got a visitor. Great little feller who has a notion to bring his wife here. Neighbors." He kissed her warmly as Doc Carson rode up and tugged off his old fur-trimmed cap.

"My wife, Doc. Mary, this is Doc Carson—from the Mex border to the Canadian line."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," Doc drawled. "I—uh—I've seen almost all I want to now. If there's a valley hereabouts that can match yours, me and the wife'll be here."

Mary gave him her hand.

"I'm so happy, Mr.—Doc Carson, I—" she turned and hurried to the house, and Doc nudged Dal in the ribs, chuckling.

"Purty, son," he said. "Momma'll go for her."

Together they unloaded supplies, then stabled the horses. By the light of a stable lantern, Dal displayed the captured mare.

"Eh-h-h—a real beauty, son," Carson said. "Go all of twelve-fifty. Been clawed by a varmint, I see. H'mmm—I'll give you a hand to gentle her before I leave. Done a lot of wranglin' in my time, clear down to Mexico. Can't ride none any more, though. Crippled with arthritis."

WHEN Dal, told the little man of the big gray wild king, Doc grinned with enthusiasm.

They moved back to the cabin and smoked and talked of the valley, of the future, until Mary served them fresh hot white biscuits, syrup and venison.

But before they ate, Doc Carson reverently lowered his head.

"I ain't over-religious, but when a man finds happiness in such wild surroundin's, I think he ain't

playin' square with the Almighty if he don't acknowledge it some," he said.

Dal and Mary bowed their heads while Doc Carson asked a blessing on the homestead of the Baldwins and gave thanks for the food.

"And, Lord," he concluded, "Since I've a mind to settle hereabouts and be neighbors with these good folk, may I always realize that I'm never out of their debt, nor Yours. Amen."

He looked up and gave Mary his full gold-toothed grin and Mary Baldwin smiled back with warmth.

They talked in whispers of the little man later, when his snores told them he was sound asleep.

In the morning, after an early breakfast, the men moved off. Atop a hogback ridge, some three miles from the Baldwin homestead, Doc Carson's eyes watched the sun flood an undulating valley which ran up into the hills to the northwest.

He wiped his eyes on the sleeve of his coat and turned to Dal.

"That's the Carson homestead, son," he said. "I'm sure grateful to you. It's a place I've dreamed about for many a year, and I don't think you nor your purty missus'll ever regret seein' me and Momma Carson roll in come next early spring. You'll mebbeso hear me come fiddlin' along the creek one evenin'."

I like to fiddle to the creak of the old wagon wheels. Now let's go take a look-see at the little mare. Perhaps I can give you a tip or so about her gentlin'."

Doc Carson stayed two days, and Dal was glad of his advice as he started to break the wild mare. For all his boasting, the Doc always seemed to make good. Dal watched him on one occasion as he cut firewood for Mary. He handled the ax with one hand, as skilfully as a Swede logger.

On the Sunday morning, he mounted his crowbait gelding and headed out along the back trail. At the willows he turned and waved, grinning wide. Then he was gone, and Mary Baldwin felt her bosom rise and fall with sharp undulations as she turned to Dal.

"The little feller brought us a lot of happiness, honey," Dal said. "He's a square-shooter and through him we can look forward to the future with hope. Come spring, we'll have neighbors. Neighbors, Mary, sweet, we've got a mite to be thankful for, huh?"

Mary nodded, smiling.

"I'm happy, Dal darling, very happy. Whatever happens for the balance of the winter, there's always the spring to look forward to. . . . Always—tomorrow."