



SQUATTERS' LAW

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

*Dal Baldwin and the courageous settlers of Sun Bear Valley
battle bravely against Runkin's outlaw band of pillagers!*

DAL BALDWIN, first settler in Sun Bear Valley, stood erect on a newly-dovetailed corner of a hewn-log building well in the process of erection. He looked down across his homestead acres where essential seasonal spring work was completed. Beyond the brown loam, soon to feel the lance-like thrust of

shooting oat blades, his buildings nestled cosily against the rich backdrop of spruces.

He could visualize Mary at her housework, work increased by their five-year-old, adventuresome son Jimmy who, right now, likely as not, might be trying to pull an ear off his little brother Ten, age three. Shortly, all the womenfolk of the settlement

would be gathering with their children and lunch for everybody at the Baldwin homestead from which point they would come by wagon to the building bee.

Dal Baldwin lowered his gaze to view the operations below where little Doc Carson hopped around a skidway score-hacking lodgepole pines into rafters for the new building. Doc skipped about on his arthritic knee like a crippled chipmunk.

Dal smiled. Doc and his good wife, Marta, had been the first neighbors of the Baldwins. Marta had delivered both the Baldwin children. Doc, himself, had been of great help to Dal—a man of all trades, this boastful little man who was responsible for the erection of this new log building, the first school-house at Sun Bear Valley.

Helping Dal Baldwin with the building were Tom Bruce who, with his wife, Ella, and little Donna, age five, had been the third family to settle in the valley. Swinging on the end of a crosscut saw with Bruce was rangy Jud Morrison, the last settler in. With him had come his wife, Olga, their twins, thirteen-year-old Martin and Maureen. There were also the married son, Jack, his wife, Rhona, with little Jud, aged two years, Nell nearly six and Ollie going on for eight.

Small wonder then that Doc Carson had pressed the men of Sun Bear into this building bee. He and Marta had no children, but considered every child in the valley as their own.

Jud Morrison had promised that a niece of his would come in for at least part of each year to teach school. . . .

Dal frowned. He was restless. For some time the settlers of Sun Bear Valley had known peace and quiet, but Dal was disturbed. Not yet had he discovered just what rights squatters had. There were rumors that renegade bands of rustlers, the backwash of Jackson Hole cattle wars, were on the prod, harassing nesters and homesteaders. Because of this misgiving, young Jack Morrison had ridden on across country to Cody in an effort to discover what rights the squatters had, or what assurance there was that their district might soon be surveyed so that homesteads could legally be filed on.

DAL BALDWIN wanted no more trouble here. Progress was being made by each settler. Dal had a fair acreage in crops, with more land cleared and some broken. He had good buildings, a grand field of alfalfa now under irrigation through a system built by Dal, Carson and Bruce. Doc Carson had a good oat field in

crop and considerable pole fencing done, as had Tom Bruce, though Bruce intended eventually to attempt the experiment of breeding in captivity wild fox and other small fur-bearers.

Though the Morrisons had been here at Sun Bear Valley less than two years, they had made a good showing. On breaking, inoculated from soil from Dal Baldwin's alfalfa field, they already had sign of a good stand. Their stock, some Jud had imported at heavy expense, was as good stock as any of the settlers had ever seen—Polled Angus, sleek black youngsters calculated to thrive here.

Then there was Dal's horse band—splendid young stock from a cross between Naieta, a blooded little black mare Dal had brought with him when first he and Mary settled, and King, the handsome gray stallion leader of the wild band. A further cross was effected out of a little wild band mare Dal had captured, by Prince, the first born colt of the Naieta-King breeding.

The early settlers had suffered many vicissitudes at the hands of drought, big snows, flood and fire, not to mention wild life and a human carcajou, one "Quirt" Malotte who, before he died, made plenty of trouble for Dal Baldwin especially. Grizzly bear and cougar had taken a toll of stock, and fire had swept the homesteads, but the squatters had fought back, reclaiming, rebuilding and now—they wanted peace.

The wagon was now rattling along a dim game trail. Young Martin Morrison was on the drive seat with Marta Carson. Baldwin could hear the youngsters singing, with Mary leading.

Whenever possible, these community picnics were arranged. It broke the monotony for the womenfolk, and gave the kids a treat.

Dal Baldwin shook his head as he climbed down. It was grand to see the youngsters gathering, growing, new ones coming. It was what he and Mary had planned, had looked forward to on their arrival here at this beautiful wilderness valley. But Dad was still a bit fearful. As a wilderness man, he seemed to have that fine sense of intuition so often attributed only to womenfolk.

Roughly-hewn timbers were arranged as tables and the food, contributed by the womenfolk, was spread out, but before anyone was allowed to eat a bite. Doc Carson got rid of his eating tobacco, and raised a hand.

He offered grace.

"A'mighty Gawd," he began, as was his custom, "Cast thy blessin's and good favor down on these

young uns and all of us, and may the word Jack brings back to us from Cody, give much pleasure an' hope to us all. We thank Thee for all this good food and for—”

Marta Carson coughed. It was Doc's cue that his grace was plenty long enough already. So he broke off with a long-drawled, “A-a-a-men-n.”

The food was excellent as it always was in days of plenty at Sun Bear Valley.

“I was so hungry I'd like to have et the southwest corner of a striped . . . Doc was in voice again till Marta checked him.

The kids were especially happy, gorging themselves as if they had never before seen such victuals. But suddenly the sharp drum of hoofs brought Dal Baldwin springing lightly to his feet. Jack Morrison brought his lathered horse to a halt and dismounted flying.

Jud strode up also, as Jack walked his horse away from the assembly. The two men followed him around to the far end of the building, where he slowly began to unsaddle.

“Well, what is it, Jack?” Dal asked, finally.

Jack wiped sweaty dust from his face with a soiled bandana. He shot meaning glances from Dal to his dad.

“It's not good news,” he said. “The rumors that half-breed brought us are straight. There's no law that gives us much if any rights. We have to defend our own spreads with whatever law we can lay out our own-selves. Here's the worst news: there's a salty outfit of owlhoots herdin' in about a hundred head of the mangiest lookin' critters yuh ever seen. One big longhorn at the lead. A longhorn by the name of Runkin is ramroddin' the outfit.”

MORRISON frowned. “Yuh talked to this man, Jack?” he cut in.

“Shore. An ugly feller he is, too, built heavier'n Tom Bruce. He packs two six-guns slung low. He claims he intends settlin' at Sun Bear.”

“Hunh!” Doc Carson had limped up and heard. His little eyes seemed to spill fire.

“Now, the best news from Cody is, they're assemblin' an engineerin' party quick to survey this whole area in homesteads. They've heard of us. Said if there was any trouble from outside for us to get in touch with Frank Simes a deputy marshal who works out of Cody. I couldn't get to see Simes, though.”

“How far back's this salty outfit?” Bruce asked.

“Around forty miles, or so, Tom,” Jack answered.

“They're grazin' their stock as they come along. And by gravy, that stock needs it—a rustled band of starved critters if I ever saw such. They pack more vented over brands than yuh ever saw. A young Apache kid is ridin' with the outfit—half-loco little feller who evidently is gettin' kicked around.

“As I rode away he must've snuk through the brush because I ran into him ag'in three miles from the owlhoot camp. He was tellin' me the Runkin outfit was treatin' him bad. He wondered if'n he could come here to us. I gave him a silver dollar and told him one day we might take him in.” Jack paused, his eyes staring into space. Then suddenly his brows flicked up.

“One day we might need that Injun kid,” he said. “That's all the news I got. How's for some chuck? I ain't et today.”

“Go ahead,” Jud said softly. “I'll dry yore hoss off and fix him up.”

The other men strode back to the lunch site where everyone greeted Jack. Mary Baldwin flashed Dal Baldwin a glance and he seemed to be able to reply to her silent question with his own eyes. She was breathing rapidly for she understood that trouble was brewing.

That night, at home, the children bedded down, Mary turned to Dal and ran a hand gently through his thick, curly hair.

“We'll have to meet whatever trouble comes, Dal, with the same spirit we've always met troubles,” she said. “If we have to fight, we'll fight. This land is ours; it is all we've got. We'll let the law of self-defence be our squatters' law, and with that, we'll hang on until the surveyors come!”

Dal gathered her into his arms.

The night had let down its enveloping mantle, with a gentleness that was not in keeping with the disturbed mood of the settlers.

Dal Baldwin lay awake listening to the occasional plaintive wail of a night creature, or to the weird cries of the small owls which were rearing their young in the spruces near by. But in time, weariness overcame him, and he slipped into sleep. Mary, hearing his heavy breathing, snuggled close to his side. Soon she also fell asleep. . . .

Sunday—a night of gathering at the Baldwins for a community supper and small home service of song and music by Doc and Jud Morrison. But first Doc gave a Bible reading from memory which Marta interrupted to tell Doc his talk tonight was a mixture of the Gettysburg address, a Bible story an' the unsolved climax to a dime novel mystery.

But Marta said it with a chuckle.

"Yuh an' Jud better git to whangin' some music out," she said. "I want to hear Mary lead us in some good old Gospel tunes. Now yuh and Jud see how close yuh can come to hittin' the same key. . . . Mary and Ella can sing parts. . . ."

Doc grinned as he reached his fiddle down. He struck about as close as he ever got to "A," and Jud Morrison finally persuaded his banjo to fall nearly in line, as close as "B flat" and Doc twanged a chord, to lead off with the opening bars of, "The Gospel Bells Are Ringing."

Marta quickly took hold and before three bars had pre-empted a claim on the whole work as a solo effort. . . .

A screech owl on a stringer log of the cabin screeched as if in protest, causing Doc to look sharply up, then over at Marta. He grunted and increased both tempo and crescendo in an effort to drown out Marta.

SUDDENLY a new sound startled Dal Baldwin. He got to his feet and stepped swiftly out of doors. As he cocked his head on one side, he heard the shrill bugle of a bull flinging a challenge. . . . Came the seductive bawl of a heifer, and then a shrill, high-pitched bull cry!

Trouble was brewing at the Morrison range. A rival bull was about to invade.

Dal returned to the house and beckoned to Jud Morrison.

Outside, they listened.

"Bulls challengin', Jud," Dal said sharply. "We'd better go take a look-see. Sounds like that Runkin outfit is mighty close in. That wild bull, if he's the same longhorn Jack mentioned, won't give yore Angus, with no horns, a chance."

Dal asked Jack Morrison to stand by the womenfolk. He, Doc, Bruce and Jud, armed with their guns, were going quickly up to the Morrisons' place.

But before they reached the Morrison fence, Jud gasped. By the guttural battle roars, he knew the big range critter had come through the fence.

"My gosh, Dal!" Jud said huskily. "I've got to save that two-year-old of mine. He cost me nearly eight hundred dollars and I couldn't replace him nohow."

Jud jerked up his Winchester and broke into a run. Dal followed quickly, snugging his own rifle in the crook of an arm while Doc and Tom Bruce trailed. . . .

In the bull pasture, the sturdy little black Angus reared and lunged, as a great, widehorned creature bore down, but the longhorn whirled and drove a smashing side-swiping blow at the black's flank.

Jud Morrison's trigger mechanism clicked, but Dal caught at his arm.

"Stand yore hand a bit, Jud," Dal cautioned. "This might all be a frameup by Runkin to get us tangled up into a war. Anyhow, the light's bad: you might easy hit yore critter."

But Jud realized that both bulls were in angry rivalry for the favor of the heifer who called out from the Morrison home corral.

The high trebles and deep guttural basses of the battling bulls blasted night as if demons of the wilds had gone beserk.

The settlers watched the longhorn whirl. He came at the challenging black with head down. Suddenly he swerved off and even in the half light Dal and his companions could see that terrific horn point score the flank of the pedigreed black prize of Jud Morrison.

But the black was game. He whirled and plunged headlong into the lean side of the longhorn. They crashed earthward together.

Both struggled to a recovery. The great head of the longhorn loomed up first. He bawled from deep in his throat and Jud Morrison, who could stand the strain no longer, jerked up his rifle.

Cr-ran-n-ng! The long gun blasted. The big wilding critter's muzzle seemed to reach for the sky. Then he slumped and laid over kicking, while the bloodied sleek Angus, now on his feet, almost choked on his guttural bellows as he threw pawed turf over his back.

Jud Morrison turned to the menfolk and coughed.

"And that is where the lid's pried off the powder keg," Doc Carson observed. "But don't think we blame yuh, Jud. We don't. But it's the spark that touches off the Runkin fuse."

He unlimbered his gun and grandiosely gave the cylinder a whirl.

"Too bad it had to happen, boys," Jud apologized. "But it was all I could see clear to do. Mebbe it's—uh—part of the only law we have to work with."

"It's all right by us, Jud," Dal assured him. "We're backin' each other's play. As Doc says, it's the detonator cap in the stick of stumpin' powder."

Dal turned to Tom Bruce.

"If you'd be good enough, Tom, it might be best if you went back and warned the womenfolk we'll be held up here a while," Dal went on. "There's no tellin' just when Runkin and his gang'll be ridin' down on us. No need to alarm the women, but it's as well they know that Sun Bear Valley's in for a storm session."

TOM BRUCE grunted and moved off. The other men helped Jud shift the young, wounded bull up to the home yard for veterinary attention, ably administered by Doc Carson.

Dal Baldwin's forehead wrinkled. His dream of a bountiful summer and autumn for all had been shattered, yet he had not forgotten his premonition—that something ominously stalked the peace of Sun Bear Valley and its good folk.

Two days and two nights of suspensive vigilance followed the killing of the longhorn bull.

On the third day, close to sundown, Dal Baldwin and Tom Bruce were out searching the brakes and timber north and east of the Morrison place for Doc Carson, who had insisted on going out alone to cruise for more building logs. Doc had an obsession for dressing, hewing and building.

Doc Carson was limping along from one stand of spruce to another when he was jumped by a big and ugly stranger mounted on as ugly and as relatively rangy a roan horse.

"Runkin, by the leapin' sailors!" Doc gasped almost aloud. His hand moved down toward his gun butt, but long, previous experience with renegades of Runkin's character warned him not to start any sign of gunplay. As well, Doc had glimpsed the big walnut-handled forty-fours in tied-back holsters Runkin wore.

The big man dismounted and strode up as Doc fitted his cheek with a fresh wedge of tobacco.

"Howdy, stranger?" Doc said gruffly. "Lost?"

"Sassy little old codger, ain't yuh?" Runkin answered back, dark eyes flashing in a manner calculated to scare Doc.

"Uh—no, not special." Doc answered. "Just somethin' to say."

"Wal, I ain't lost, and I ain't in no mood to take lip off a crippled up little gopher like yuh." Doc knew from this, that the big desperado was in an ugly mood. Doc didn't like his looks at all.

"Yuh're one of the Sun Bear Squatters, ain't yuh?" the leader of the outlaw band asked belligerently, moving a pace close to Doc.

"That's right. One of the first to settle in the valley and—one of the last to leave, if yuh should be interested."

"Shut up! Yuh'll l'arn to button yore lips before I get through with yuh," Runkin exploded. "I'm after information. Somebody—one of yore outfit, threw down on a bull critter of mine the other night. We aim to take payment. Yuh know who fired that shot?"

Doc's eyes began to sparkle.

"Expect me to blab to yuh if I did know?" He stuck out his chin heroically and Runkin lunged in, swinging. A savage left hook struck Doc a terrific blow flush on the jaw, rocking him back. His foot caught in a windfall and he crashed flat, striking his head on a leaning dry cottonwood on the way down.

Runkin drunk with desire to really harm this lippy little mossback was about to lunge in when a cold voice from the brakes at his back arrested him.

"Hold it, big feller!"

Dal Baldwin stepped into the clearing, his rifle still in the crook of his arm. Following up closely, his own long gun ready for action, came Tom Bruce.

Runkin's hands hovered over his gun butts but a sidelong glance at Bruce told him he hadn't a chance.

Dal Baldwin glanced down at Doc's unconscious form. A wave of resentment shook him. He turned to Bruce.

"Take his hardware, Tom," he said.

Bruce jerked the Colts from their holsters and Dal proceeded to lean his Winchester against a tree bole, then turned to face Runkin.

"All right, you salty big mouth," he called. "I'm pounds lighter than you, but for what yuh done to our friend Doc, I'm goin' to whip yuh so yore own gang won't know yuh. Come and get it."

Runkin struck. Dal scarcely saw the blow coming and only partly ducked. He was rocked back on his heels from a stinging blow to the forehead. With a bellow of rage, the big man lunged again, but Dal ducked the punch. He shook his head to clear it, then nimbly sidestepped and brought a sweeping hook round flush to Runkin's broad nose.

BLOOD commenced to flow. Tom Bruce, guns ready for any emergency, dropped to his knees beside Doc Carson. Doc was regaining his senses, to the sound of thudding fists and grunts as the big men slugged it out with no rules to guide them. With Tom's help, Doc at last sat up.

"Uh—gosh-jimminy!" he gasped. "I done got Dal into this. Help me all the way up, Tom, so's I can lend a hand I—"

He broke off. Dal was down, with Runkin's heavy bulk astraddle him. Runkin was attempting to gouge Baldwin, his thumbs preciously close to Dal's eyes.

But Dal suddenly bridged, then swiftly rolled. His strong body suddenly bunched, and momentarily off balance, Runkin was caught unawares, unprepared

as Dal came up in a powerful heave. Runkin crashed back.

On his feet, now, Dal wished he'd worn his heavy boots so that he could have started tramping, but he and Tom Bruce had worn moccasins for silent scouting in the woods.

Runkin came to his knees, Dal watching him warily. Blood smeared the big man's stubbled face and was still coursing freely from his nose and mouth. Suddenly he lunged to his feet and rushed.

But Dal was ready. He caught Runkin by a wrist and jerked savagely, butting the desperado hard under the armpit with his shoulder. Then swiftly he hunched his body and heaved.

Runkin's heavy form went hurtling over in a perfectly-executed flying mare. Before he could recover, Dal rushed in and again seized a wrist. He dragged the heavyweight up, shoulder-butted him again, and once more hurled him over.

This time Runkin smashed hard against the bole of a tree and subsided into unconsciousness.

"Uh!" Doc Carson was speechless. Tom Bruce rushed in and caught Dal's arm. In his excitement and anger, Dal Baldwin didn't seem to realize that he had bested the big outlaw terribly.

"That's enough, Dal boy!" Tom said. "Jumpin' catamounts! The big buck's out so cold yuh could cut his liver out and he wouldn't feel it. Man dear! If I live to be seven hundred an' ten, I'll never see a better finish to a fight!"

"Me nuther," Doc Carson cut in. "Where at did yuh l'arn the flyin' mare, Dal? I ain't seen it since one time down to the Mex border, I was—"

"Cut it, Doc," Tom Bruce interrupted him. "It wasn't you who was in that fight. It was me, and it wasn't at the Mex border, but over in Utah, when I fought Phil Macey, the ex-sailor, and it wasn't a flyin' mare, but a half Nelson."

Dal glanced at Tom. They exchanged smiles. Rankin was stirring now. . . .

Dal Baldwin moved in on the big desperado as Runkin struggled to his feet.

"We're a peace-lovin' outfit down to Sun Bear," Baldwin said sharply. "But if yuh need any more evidence that we aim to apply our squatters' law, come and get it. You and yore outfit start anythin' more and, by the great Jordan, we'll hang yuh all!" Runkin snorted blood from his nose. He fished a dirty bandana from his jeans and blew his nose vigorously.

"Yuh win for now, mossback," he growled. "But y'aint' heard the last of me or my outfit."

Dal Baldwin's right hand cocked again, but he withheld the blow.

"Hightail! Ride back to yore wide-loopin' owlhoots and tell 'em from me that if yuh as much as show up within five miles of the valley, somebody belongin' to yore outfit'll get shot—and with yore own guns, Runkin!" Dal concluded with emphasis.

"Huh! My guns! Yuh can't hold a man's guns in a wild country like this!" Runkin protested.

"We're holdin' 'em. They're the same caliber as Doc's an' we've got plenty ammunition. Get mounted before I beat yuh so you won't be able to ride again."

Runkin mounted stiffly and rode off mumbling thickly.

DAL BALDWIN turned to his companions, shaking his head.

"That feller's plumb ugly, boys," he said. "From now on none of our outfit goes out alone. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Doc Carson grunted. "I mind once I was bringin' up drag on a trail herd out of Cheyenne. We—"

"Tcha!" Tom Bruce spat testily. "That bat yuh got in the head has set yuh dreamin' again, Doc. Yuh ain't never rid trail herd out uh Cheyenne. Yuh ain't never seen Cheyenne."

Doc puffed out his face and started to protest, but a sly little smile toyed with the corners of his mouth. The men moved back to Morrison's place, where Doc suggested cutting a slab of raw beef from the dead longhorn bull for the purpose of applying to Dal's swollen, black-and-blue eyes.

Jack Morrison listened intently to the men as they discussed their problem at supper. He was thinking of the little Nitchi lad in Runkin's gang. That boy might come in useful now, and Morrison was determined to talk this angle over with Dal Baldwin at the first opportunity.

The squatters organized themselves into sentry shifts.

"Two hours on, and four off, until we see how it works, an' what move Runkin intends to make," Dal suggested.

Runkin had evidently elected to play a wary game of waiting, too. He was keeping the squatters in suspense. Days and nights dragged by, with many a scare for Dal Baldwin and his sentries in their vigilant patrols, but it was over a week before Runkin sent a sporadic raid down on the valley, when five of the Morrison prize young heifers were rustled.

On the following Sunday, the alertness of Dandy,

Tom Bruce's shepherd dog, saved Maureen Morrison from being kidnapped.

Marta Carson had purloined one of Runkin's captured guns. She had boasted of having once cut the head off a diamond back at thirty-five paces, and not even Doc dared deny the story.

Dal Baldwin was worried by this wait, this endless lurking threat to the safety of home and womenfolk.

Jack Morrison was doing a sentry shift with Baldwin tonight. They met on patrol in the cottonwoods to the northeast and Jack Morrison presented his idea.

"I could talk with that Injun kid," he said. "He told me if I ever need him to give a whip-poor-will call three times in a row. We got to do somethin', Dal. What d'you think?"

Dal took a moment to answer. He it was who had laid down the rule that no man was to go out alone.

"I'll agree to yore plan, but on'y if yore Paw agrees to let you go, Jack," he said. "Don't forget, if those Runkin outlaws really figger to take over the valley, they'll be watchin' every move we make. It'd be plumb dangerous for yuh to be caught out alone. On the other hand, if yuh could contact the Nitchi, and send him off up to Cody. . . ."

Baldwin outlined a tentative plan.

They separated to take over their patrol area again, but never getting outside signal range of one another.

Two evenings later, Dal Baldwin rode in to the Morrison ranchyard with young Jack Morrison draped across his saddle.

Jud Morrison met Dal, his brows up with concern.

"Uh—Dal! He—he broke rules, huh? He went off alone!"

"You mean yuh never gave him permission, Jud?" Baldwin's heart beat a furious tattoo.

"Me? Shucks. He never said nothin' to me about goin'. How bad's he hurt, Dal?"

Jud Morrison moved in and, as Baldwin dismounted, helped him lower the young man gently from the saddle.

"He's got a slug lodged some place up in the left shoulder," Baldwin said. "We'll have to get Doc probin'. He'll be glad to go to work with those tools Tom Bruce made for him at the forge."

Shortly Doc was giving orders to everyone, including Olga Morrison who had come up from the Baldwin place with Maureen.

"Want a pot to bile my instr'uments," Doc said proudly, fingering a set of long, narrow forceps and a probe, skilfully fashioned by Tom Bruce, the blacksmith.

THE INSTRUMENTS sterilized and all ready, Doc nodded to Dal Baldwin. "Yuh take his arms, Dal. He's drunk all the medicine whisky there was around. You, Tom, hang onto his feet. Jud can hold the light in close and you, too, Maureen, can hold a spare lantern."

There was nothing awkward about Doc's movements as he inserted the probe. Jack Morrison winced, but not much. Suddenly Doc's eyes opened wide and a faint sly smile curled his lips. He nodded to Olga, who handed him the forceps which he dipped in an antiseptic solution of his own concoction.

Doc Carson muttered an oath as the forceps slipped when Jack Morrison kicked his legs out, but Doc's jaw was set now. The veins in his neck were standing out, and in the stillness of the tense room, he steadily withdrew his forceps.

"There!"

He held the instrument up displaying a partly mushroomed slug in their jaws.

"Disinfect now, Olga. Eh-h-h—but yuh'd make a fine nurse. Thanks." Doc dipped a thin piece of cloth in solution and inserted it in the wound on the end of the probe, leaving an end trailing "Soon as we know it's clean inside, I'll sew him up partly," Doc Carson said.

He bandaged the wound and slung the arm. Jud Morrison reached over and shook his hand.

"Yuh got real learnin', Doc," Jud said brokenly. "Thanks. We're mighty grateful to yuh." Carson batted his eyes.

"Eh! 'Taint nothin', when a feller's been doin' it most all his life, from the Mex border up to the Canadian Line." He held up his hand for silence and mumbled a prayer of thanksgiving.

"And, Gawd," he concluded. "Bring Jack around soon, on account we'll be needin' his extry gun hand, no doubt. A-men!"

Two weeks later, Dal Baldwin, the head of the settlers' forces, realized that all his guns would be needed. Runkin's rustled stock had been finding good enough pasture-age and had steadily grown fatter, but in the long period of hot weather, the top land grass had gone. Now the owlhoot chief decided the time was right to hurl his full force against the squatters.

All day, lowering thunderheads had cast gloom over the valley where the heat had grown oppressive. Ordinarily these clouds would have been welcomed, but the nerves of the squatters had become frayed.

This evening, Dal Baldwin strode back from a visit to his homestead, bringing up food supplies to the garrison at the Morrisons. Dal's irrigation flumes had

been destroyed by Runkin's marauders and the little acreage of oats and alfalfa was in a bad way. Dal stood to lose his crop this year.

Jack Morrison was up and around, able to handle a gun again. Olga, his mother, had stayed on at the home ranch to nurse him. She was still there.

Suddenly a fusillade of shots blasted the evening quiet. Dal Baldwin started, cocking his head as if to try to determine whether the shots had been local signals or the shots of battle action.

It was a sharp flare at the Morrison place that gave Baldwin the answer. A fire was blazing in the Morrison home yard. A calf-shed, stocked at one end with slough hay for bedding, was in full blaze.

Suddenly Baldwin heard the sound of axes.

"Fence-breakers," he gasped. "The fire's been set to hold the boys up to the home yard."

Then Dal Baldwin brows jerked up as he conned a hogback rise. Cattle were being ridden on down. He saw the silhouettes of riders hazing stock on toward the break in the fence.

A rider on the rim of the hogback presented a momentary target and Baldwin lined his sights as best he could in the uncertain light.

His rifle spanged and rider and horse disappeared.

Came a blast of gunfire from Baldwin's right. He ducked as lead whined by.

The battle was on—a grim night raid in the heart of the untamed wilds, with invaders and defenders shooting at gunflashes.

DAL BALDWIN heard Doc Carson's rasping voice. Evidently the boys up at the yard had decided to let the shed burn itself out. They were coming on down to the fence line.

Baldwin started. He heard Runkin's throaty voice giving orders.

"You, Dago, take the west route and cut another gap. We want to get through to that bottomland in the valley. It don't matter which homestead we take over first. I'm goin' in to the east, hopin' to fetch up with that big bruiser who wrassled me up at the woods."

"Stand yore hand, Runkin!" Dal boomed from the shadows.

Runkin swung around, firing. Dal Baldwin felt a slug brush his shirt sleeve as he leaped to the deeper shadows. He raised his Winchester and pulled. There was a crashing of the underbrush and a yell from Runkin. But another bullet splatted into a tree just past Baldwin's head.

A bright fork of lightning slashed the sky, and a terrific blast of thunder shook the wilderness with deafening reverberations.

Baldwin heard a shot off left, almost at his back and gasped. Were the owlhoots ringing him in!

Crack! Runkin's gun barked. Baldwin dropped, but he was not hit. Now he commenced to crawl like an Indian, circling to his left.

He parted a wild fruit thicket as a fierce hissing flash of lightning struck.

Baldwin glimpsed the thick form of Runkin stealing around right. Dal coughed. He had no desire to shoot any man in the back. Runkin spun, shooting. But Dal Baldwin had pulled and the big renegade spreadeagled onto the leafmould. A gun-packing henchman who had come up, made a gurgling sound and turned to head into the thicket, but two shots cracked from almost at Dal's rear.

"Eh-h, I got 'im, Tom!"

Dal Baldwin's heart thumped with pleasure at the sound of Doc's boasting voice.

"Uh, Tom, they's another. I see him move. Here goes for a center shot."

"Hold it, Doc. This is Dal Baldwin. I'm in this fight too, I reckon. Say! What in tarnation's Jack doin' up to the house? Sounds like ten guns blastin'. Come on!"

Baldwin hurdled the fence and the men broke into a trot.

"They've gotten help from someplace," Baldwin wheezed to Bruce. "Unless, unless the owlhoots has taken over the ranch house an'——"

At the yard, Baldwin hailed the house and got an answering call from Jack Morrison.

Rain was falling heavily as Dal and Tom Bruce moved in, trailed by Doc Carson who wheezed and groaned and complained about his arthritis.

Jud Morrison came loping up, and all were informed by Jack Morrison that help had come.

"There's a deputy marshal from Cody, and the advance party of surveyors. The little Injun lad got through, Dal," Jack went on, "but"—his voice broke some—"the kid was bad hurt when he reached Cody."

Deputy Marshal Frank Simes strode up and shook hands all round.

"Most glad to meet yuh, Baldwin, and boys," he said. "Y'all done a right good job of defence, with yore squatters' law. Yuh been a big help to me, for they'd asked for me from Jackson Hole to keep an eye peeled for the Runkin band."

"Mighty glad you come, Marshal," Dal said.

"Runkin's lyin' face down in the brush, south uh here. Reckon some bad damage has been done our places, but—we're mighty grateful it was no worse. Reckon these salty cattle can now be claimed for beef by us, huh?"

"That's right, Baldwin," Simes replied, chuckling. "I'll write out a sort of bill of rights for you all."

The deputy and the survey party stayed on two days and nights in Sun Bear Valley. There was a lot of cleaning up to be done, burying, and some reports to be drawn and signed by all the menfolk of the settlement.

On the third night, at the Baldwin home, the womenfolk served up one of their best suppers. Jack Morrison had killed a young buck the previous day, and Dal Baldwin had bagged a half dozen grouse.

DOC CARSON took over and said grace, inserting a word now and then in self tribute for the great part he had played in the battle of the fenceline.

This time Marta did not interrupt. She disliked belittling Doc in the eyes of strangers. Anyhow, he was doing a good general job of the grace.

Supper over, the men talked, while the women cleaned up.

Then Doc Carson reached for his fiddle and nodded to Jud Morrison, who hauled out his banjo.

Doc struck up the weird lilting strains of an old Canadian frontier tune, "Red River Jig."

Frank Simes swung sharply, his eyes bugging. He cut Doc off.

"Where'd y'all learn that, Carson?" he asked.

"I freighted one winter up at a place called Winnipegosis," Doc Carson said, grinning.

"Used to play it for the Injun dances at the forts."

Simes got to his feet.

"I'd admire to dance this with one of you ladies," he said. "But I don't reckon any of yuh know it, huh?"

Mary Baldwin blushed prettily, and flashed a glance at Dal Baldwin who smiled and nodded.

"If you'll wait till I get my moccasins on, Mr. Simes, I'll dance it with you," she said. "I had to take it up when I was learning to teach. It was one of our frontier folk dances."

Spellbound, as Doc Carson and Jud Morrison wailed and strummed the intriguing strains, Simes and Mary light-footed through the old Red River Jig.

Harden Daly, the young surveyor chief, called Dal Baldwin out of doors.

"If you settlers aren't too pressed for time," he said, "we'd appreciate your help off and on for a spell—line cutting. There'll be good pay in it for you. How does it sound?"

"It sounds like a chance to repay providence some," Baldwin replied. "You can count on us in, say a week's time. We got things to clear up. I got my irrigation flumes to repair."

They moved back to the house. Dal Baldwin's face was beaming. The future held much promise for them now.

Later that night, Dal gathered Mary into his arms.

All was still and peaceful at Sun Bear, a welcome fine rain falling.

"It's workin' out as we'd planned, that first day we struck the valley, honey," Dal said softly. "Survey lines; settlers; schools and roads—a community! Progress!"

Mary kissed him and blinked contentedly with her lovely moist eyes.

Tomorrow, the sunlight of a new hope would shine brightly down Sun Bear Valley.

