



THE VALLEY BEYOND

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Dal and Mary Baldwin join other settlers in a finish fight against the horse thieves who invade Sun Bear!

RANGE RIDERS WESTERN (v15n3) NOVEMBER 1946

IN THE MAD, PELTING STORM, Dal Baldwin, first homestead settler at Sun Bear Valley, suffered the sharp battering of hail as he struggled to get a new-born foal under the roof of a pole shelter in the little pasture to the east of the home yard.

Naieta, Dal's original blooded mare, mother of the foal, almost panicked as she stamped beside Dal, almost trampling him as he struggled with the young one.

The homesteader swore softly. There is no more awkward "critter" to handle than a foal or calf of this type—all legs and no brains, no equilibrium. The footing was slippery and Dal was taking a savage beating from the jagged ice barrage.

At last Dal succeeded in pushing the little one under the shelter roof. He stepped back to a corner to wipe his forehead with a large bandanna. There was no sense in trying to run the gauntlet of the mad storm to the house. Mary, his lovely young wife, knew where he was.

He sat hunkered down, while the foal nursed, his mind whirling in a storm of thought and conjecture. His first thought was of possible damage to his oats and alfalfa. The oats would shortly have been ready for harvesting, the second crop alfalfa ready for cutting.

This one storm could wipe his crops out, pounding them into churned-up mud, including Mary's garden on which she had toiled so hard, especially in the recent dry spell.

Dal wondered about his stock in the main pasture to north and westward of the house. Prince, the four-year-old stallion Dal had captured and tamed, would likely herd his stock to the shelter there.

Dal was worried about a wagon outfit he had heard before the storm broke. He expected the Morrison outfit in from the settlement, where they had gone to guide in a new young settler, a young friend named Phil Cody. Cody had elected to come to Sun Bear with a view to squatting at the new valley Dal had discovered to westward through the pass.

The "Valley Beyond," Doc Carson, Dal's first neighbor, had christened this beautiful stretch of country. The Sun Bear folk had planned on settling this valley with their boys—the Morrison and Baldwin boys. Cody was just the man they wanted. He would hold the valley under squatters' rights until it could be divided between the Sun Bear boys and Cody himself.

Dal was sure Cody, a stranger, would not have driven on through to the Valley Beyond himself. But

what other wagon outfit was there? Doc Carson would have no call to drive up into the upper levels, nor was it likely the Morrisons would move Cody to the valley before first calling on Dal, introducing Cody and making plans for his settlement.

FOR thirty minutes Dal sat in the steamy sweat of conjecture, and when the storm had in increasing fortissimo reached its peak and rolled on to eastward, its roar still drummed in Dal's ears.

Suddenly he started. Someone had hailed him. At first he thought the call was the cry of a coyote, but now he heard it again, attended by the pound of hoofs. A rider was coming up through the pasture. Dal called back, and shortly Jack Morrison pulled pulled a little black mare to a halt.

"My gosh, Jack," Dal greeted him. "Yuh must have trouble in yore craw to have ridden through that storm."

"Trouble aplenty, Dal," the young man answered, dismounting. "We got visitors ag'in."

"Visit—Yuh don't mean to tell me some other salty outfit has made rustlin' attempts!" Dal caught at one of the young man's wrists.

"Right! We was jumped by an owlhoot outfit last night. Forced to camp by a sudden storm, we bedded down in the caves at Canyon Crick, but another outfit was close by—a rundown outfit of three jaspers we'd run into at the settlement. Yuh'll be surprised when I tell yuh the name of the boss of the gang."

"Yeah?" Dal gulped. "Who?"

"Malotte!"

"Mal—otte! Uh—Jack! Yuh don't mean to tell me Quirt Malotte's half-brother has broke jail!"

"Must be him, Dal. Half breed. Well, he'd been listenin' in at the settlement when I talked to Phil Cody about the west valley. He come up and asked me if'n it was close in to the Baldwin place. Must have heard of yuh through Quirt, before Quirt was killed, Dal. Anyhow—" Jack Morrison drew in a long, broken breath.

"Take it easy, son," Dal said softly. "But go on, steady-like. What happened?"

"I'd ridden out to guide Cody in. He had his own light wagon outfit. While we slept, after the storm, the hosses was cut loose. Before we could round 'em up, the Malotte outfit had done hitched up their own broncs and hightailed it, with all Cody's supplies and some he was bringing' in for Dad."

Dal made some inarticulate throat sound. This was the worst news he had heard in some time. But

he had another shock coming. As he moved back to the homestead with Jack, then on to inspect his stock at the far pasture, he discovered the west fence down. Prince, the stallion, pride of the Sun Bear Valley, was gone, and with him, a few head of the young stock.

“No wonder I heard a wagon in so close,” Dal breathed, his big frame shuddering with bitter anger. “This fence has been took down, and my stock rustled. Malotte’s started to strike back at me for the beatin’s I gave his carcajou brother.”

Dal swore softly as his mind busily fomulated a plan. He strode back to his homestead, wondering what best should be done. He knew the Valley Beyond and the district better than anyone at Sun Bear. He decided to ride out alone, to reconnoiter.

Later, joint action by all the menfolk of Sun Bear would be necessary. They would have no legal right or any right to jump the squatted claims of Malotte and his gang, but they most certainly had every right to reclaim rustled stock and stolen supplies and equipment?

In any case, there would be no safety or peace for the Sun Bear settlers while a nest of human rattlers holed up in the Valley Beyond.

Back at his house, Dal prepared to leave. Seldom had he ever kept anything from Mary, who had shared all the vicissitudes of their rugged homestead life. She had, ever since the day of their arrival some years ago—two youngsters who had fallen in love with Sun Bear Valley and who had hurled back its grim challenges with courageous hearts and grim determination to make here a home for themselves and their children.

Quirt Malotte, a slinking half-breed thief, had been their first worry, causing them near tragedy indeed. He had been killed in one of his thieving expeditions. He had begun to bring slow, torturesome death to little Doc Carson on that occasion.

Now Quirt’s owlhoot brother had broken jail and had come to carry on where his sneaking half-brother had left off.

Dal realized that this Malotte brother would be looking for him, Dal, personally. He had already begun to manifest his schemes to exact vengeance for his brother’s beatings and death.

No, Dal would not tell Mary all.

“I’ve got to ride out at dawn and see if’n I can locate the hosses, honey,” he told her. “Prince’ll likely head ’em back into the hill country, mebbe into the valley itself. But don’t worry. I’ll ride the gray filly, Queen. We’ll find ’em.”

AT DAWN Dal kissed his wife and was mounting his bronc when Doc Carson rode in, astride one of his old horses. Dal frowned. He had better not tell Doc what had happened. He knew if he did, the little man would insist on joining him.

But Doc’s face twisted in a strange grimace as Dal called to the Queen. Doc had ridden by Dal’s fence line. Those wagon tracks had not escaped his notice. . . .

Dal took his time climbing into the hill country. At dusk he had reached the piñons in the last plateau before the trail narrowed into the climb to the height of land—the narrow defile just wide enough for a wagon to steal through.

He tethered the filly out where there was grass and spring water, deciding to bed down here for the night.

Dal munched on a supper of cold fried partridge and bannock. He had, this morning, seen the damage done by the battering hail. A third of his alfalfa crop was churned beyond all hope of recovery, and nearly half his oat crop was flat. Mary’s garden was almost completely wiped out.

Dal concluded, from what he had seen as he rode out, that Tom Bruce, the blacksmith homesteader to the south of the Sun Bear creek, might have lost heavily of his sheep band. The hail had struck heaviest across the creek.

In the night, after Dal had bedded down, he listened to the cries of wild animal life. He listened particularly for the stallion calls of Prince, or the ringing screams of King, the great sire of Prince. This was King’s range.

A hunting cougar cried from close in, sending the little gray filly into near panic. Dal got to his feet and moved over to her, talking softly, rubbing her muzzle. She followed him as he turned, as far as her tether rope would permit.

Hunkered against a tree, his long-barreled Winchester across his thighs, Dal at last dozed and slipped into a sound sleep.

At dawn, the filly awakened him, snorting. Dal quieted her down, and commenced his breakfast, a repetition of his supper.

He turned to the filly, smiling softly.

“Yuh’ll have to hang and rattle a spell alone, kitten,” he said. “No danger yuh’ll be attacked durin’ daylight. I expect to be back before dusk. Yuh got plenty to eat and drink here.”

Dal moved off and crossed a canyon, climbing up the far side. He suddenly halted on the next level as, higher up, he glimpsed a small band of bighorn sheep.

Under other circumstances, Dal would have been thrilled at the sight of the bighorns. Today, he must pass them by.

He was crawling along the rimrock now, headed for the narrow defile through which a wagon had recently made tracks. Shortly he would fetch up at the point from which again he would glimpse the magnificent valley he had planned to develop for his sons.

The blast of a rifle shot suddenly startled Dal. He froze, flattening to the rock, where he lay as still as death. At last he exhaled a long breath, satisfied that he had not been shot at. He had not heard the crash of a bullet. Slowly he inched his way forward to the cover of a large boulder at the rim of the defile where the trail began its descent.

Behind this cover, he mopped his forehead. Now, his hat removed, he ventured a glance at the levels below. He drew in a sharp breath as he glimpsed a man almost directly below, off left. The man was jerking the lever of a Winchester. Dal saw him half-turn, to motion with the barrel of the rifle to another man striding from a belt of cottonwoods at the valley bottom.

"Malotte!" Dal muttered.

The man at the cottonwoods was a ringer for Quirt Malotte. There could be no mistaking the kinship.

Dal had learned from Jack Morrison that there were three outlaws in the Malotte gang. He figured the third member was likely back in the timber, at the camp, probably making breakfast.

All at once. Dal started. Too late he realized he had miscalculated. A heavy voice rasped at his back trail.

"Stand yore hand, feller! Don't make a play for that cannon of yore'n. I come up here after a sheep and I find a spyin' man critter."

The man's boots crunched gravel as he strode up closer.

Dal heard him bellow to his companions below.

Those men had a stiff climb up to this level on which Dal lay. This gave Dal a hope.

He felt a boot graze his side. The owl-hooter was bending forward, reaching for Dal's rifle. Like a flash, Dal rolled and struck savagely upward, booting the man full in the stomach.

THE fellow grunted, flattening in a spreadeagle to Dal, rocking him back, as he attempted to rise. Dal worked fast. For a moment he lost his wind at the impact of the other man's heavy form. Now he slowly squirmed his way from under, pressing close to the wall of the cliff as the outlaw recovered.

Dal bounded to his feet, hoping to retrieve a rifle. But the outlaw came up roaring. They locked in a bearlike wrestling hold and swayed back and forth, each trying for an opening to break and swing.

Suddenly Dal felt his face scrubbed by rasplike whisker stubble, and then teeth fastened in the lobe of his left ear.

He jerked his head back smartly. Realizing that time was working against his chances for escape, Dal decided on a risky plan to break his antagonist's hold. He measured distance to the rocky cliff face with his feet. Satisfied that he had room for his venturesome maneuver, he broke at the knees and toppled backward, straining his chin forward so that the back of his skull would not strike the rock as he fell. He toppled back, the other man crashing with him.

As he struck, his legs were ready. They bunched and he struck sharply upward with both feet, driving them soggly to the man's midriff. The outlaw grunted and spilled limply, but Dal had shifted to one side. He got to his feet, turned, with a foot raised to smash down at the back of the prone man's neck, but a thick voice boomed from the neck of the defile:

"Hold it, mister!"

Dal spun around. His lower jaw sagged as he glimpsed a man who might easily have been Quirt Malotte himself.

"Malotte!" he barked.

"Yeah, and if'n yuh know me that ready, yuh must be that coyote Baldwin!" the owl-hoot boss growled. "Yuh're the granger Quirt done told me beat the tar out of him. Mebbe yuh shot him later, huh?"

Dal's eyes blazed with anger, frustration and bitterness.

"Was there ever a Malotte who was decent and law-abidin'?" he asked. "Yuh won't—"

Crack! The heavy man lunged and struck Dal across the temple with the barrel of his pistol. Dal fell against the cliff wall, and slowly sagged into unconsciousness. . . .

Dal Baldwin awakened at the bite of buckskin thongs which secured his wrists and ankles. He blinked up at the treetops, slowly recovering, returning to full sensibility with the realization that he had been dragged down to the owlhoot camp in the valley.

He listened to the raucous voices of the men who evidently were finishing breakfast. Dal could scent the tang of bacon and coffee.

He was suddenly startled by the sharp, close-in call of a stallion.

"Prince!" he choked. "They got yuh roped, pardner!"

Now a man creature was striding toward Dal who was stretched out helplessly on the leaf mold. He was

Malotte, who hunkered down a few feet away, to leer with ugly grimace at Dal.

“So yuh’re Baldwin, huh? Heard yore stallion scream, didn’t yuh?” Malotte chuckled drunkenly. “Reckon yuh’re wonderin’ about me and my gentleman friends, ain’t yuh? Never saw such a salty outfit. I’m bettin’.”

When Dal essayed no reply, Malotte’s thick stubbled face seemed to grow more evil.

“Well, Baldwin, this is the payoff,” he growled. “I got plans for yuh—plans to clean out yore whole nest of sod-busters. We need this valley here as a hideout—a hole-in-the wall. That’s me and my regular gang on the outside. These two jaspers is a couple of extrys I picked up when I busted out of this Cheyenne calaboose.” Malotte got to his feet and lurched toward Dal. He booted Dal’s left rib sector heavily.

“Don’t grin at me, blast yore hide!” he snarled. “I ain’t soundin’ off comic. Did yuh hear what I said about the cleanup at the other valley?”

Dal groaned inwardly. He hoped his ribs were not cracked or broken. They might be a handicap if ever he contrived an escape.

“I heard yuh, Malotte,” he said. “But yuh’ll not get far with yore plans. Quirt tried it, and he got hisself killed. There’s a deputy marshal up to Cody who’d admire to pay yuh a visit here.”

“Shut up! Yuh mean Frank Simes, huh? Well, if’n he knows what’s best for him, he’ll stay where he is. Anyhow, you won’t be around to see what happens.”

“I figger not,” Dal replied. “But it won’t help yuh much to kill me. And I might as well tell yuh you ain’t boogerin’ me at all with talk of my killin’. A feller can only die once.”

MALOTTE chuckled thickly.

“Not the way you’re goin’ out, mister,” he growled. “Wait till I get me a drink of likker, and I’ll tell yuh what we’ve got planned for yuh.”

Dal stared up at a small patch of fleece cloud scudding by, as Malotte lumbered on to camp, to return with a whisky bottle. He helped himself to a long drink before he again spoke to Dal.

“Like I was sayin’, Baldwin,” the owlhoot boss resumed then. “They’s times when a man can die a hundred deaths. That’s how it’ll be with you. It was the stallion give me the idea. He’s not long been gentled. Right now he’s half-ways back to his old wild spirit. We aim to tease him along, beat the devil out of him if necessary, till he’s red r’arin’ to lunge for the wild

canyons. When that time comes, we’ll lead him up into some pretty bad country, and you, Baldwin, will be hogtied to his back, flat out, so yuh can’t move a hair.”

Dal winced sharply. He had heard Doc Carson tell of a young lad who once was tied down to the back of a wild bull buffalo and the bull turned loose. Dal was convinced that Malotte was killer-minded enough to carry out the dastardly plan he contemplated.

“All right, Malotte,” he replied. “But I’m still givin’ odds yuh’ll never get out of the valley alive, unless it is with handcuffs around yore wrists. Yuh’ll finally wind up jerkin’ from the end of a hangrope.”

Malotte had been busying emptying his whisky bottle. With a snarl he aimed the empty at Dal’s head and threw. The bottle smashed just inches from Dal’s left check, some of the fragments cutting his face. He could taste his blood, mingled with salty sweat as it trickled into the corner of his mouth.

“Take care of yore tongue, feller,” Malotte boomed. “Could be when the stallion is all ready for the ride yuh might be mussed up some for the ride if’n yuh sound off much more.” He paused a moment, then went on, swaying back and forth, almost fully drunk now. “We expect some of yore neighborin’ mossbacks’ll be out lookin’ for yuh. Well, that’s just what we’re a-hopin’. They’ll be picked off, bushwhacked, as soon as they show a head. Good spot, this valley—with only one narrow pass trail in.”

Chuckling, Malotte lurched off to join his companions.

Dal heard their raucous laughter, then shortly there was quiet.

“Drunken sleep,” Dal told himself.

He listened to their snores until Prince suddenly grew restive again. Then from the middle distance came a wild cry which caused the short hairs on Dal Baldwin’s neck to prickle. It was the call of King, the wild stallion leader.

Prince, the young stallion, commenced to thresh about on his tie ropes, squealing with rage at his captivity. Now he poured out a long scream of counter challenge to his wild sire.

Dal heard a man growl. He half-rolled on to his right side and glimpsed one of the Malotte gang lurch toward the stallion. Shortly, Dal heard the Prince bawl as the man clubbed his side terrifically.

Dal had spent weeks with great patience gentling the wildling gray stallion. This man creature was undoing it all, transforming the Prince into his native state of passionate wild fury.

When all was quiet again, Dal dozed off . . .

He awakened with a start. Part of the broken bottle was digging into his side, onto which he'd rolled in his sleep. His mouth seemed swollen, his tongue thick and cracked.

"Need water badly," he breathed.

Dal wanted to live. He was firmly resolved to make an attempt to escape. But up until this awakening, his head had ached terrifically, numbing all possibility of clear thinking.

He realized that if these desperadoes carried out their plan to destroy him, and later were successful in bushwhacking his neighbors, the young women at Sun Bear Valley would be at the mercy of the unscrupulous Malotte and the others.

Dal squirmed, working his wrists, but the thongs bit deeper as he moved. Suddenly a hand touched a sharp fragment of the bottle's broken base. Dal's brows lifted sharply.

This glass gave him his only chance of freeing himself. He bridged his back and felt cautiously about until his wrists contacted the sharp edge again. Carefully he steered his secured hands until he no longer felt the prick of the glass.

SLOWLY he commenced to rock, gradually lowering the weight of his body on to his arms. A thong parted. But the pain of his effort was too much for Dal. He was obliged to rest. His body was swathed in cold sweat. He realized that he could easily sever an artery on that bottle's broken edge.

Desperate, he made another attempt later, but save that some of the biting tension was eased, he could tell that it was dangerous to proceed with his endeavor. If only his arms had not been secured beneath his body!

The men were stirring. Dal heard Malotte giving gruff orders to the others. One of the outlaws came over to Dal and leered down at him.

"Yuh'd give a heap for a pint of spring water right now," the man mocked.

Chuckling, he moved off. Malotte was calling to him.

"You, Dolin, better ride out along the back trail and keep yore eyes peeled. Pete, climb up to the neck of the pass and stand guard there. There'll be no need to bring in any more of them sodbusters on the hoof—if yuh get what I mean."

Malotte chuckled at his grim joke. It was plain to Dal that the half-breed intended to kill on sight anyone who approached the valley.

Now Malotte strode up alongside Dal. "Well, had a nice rest, Baldwin?" he growled. "We got to get movin'

along with our plans. Couple of nights from now I figger we can ride down on yore valley and do a bit of smokin'. Nothin' spooks women and kids so much as a little old fire."

He built and lit a smoke for himself, leering down at Dal.

"Reckon yore mouth's just about like the inside of a Dutch oven, huh?" he jeered. "But it don't matter so much. Purty soon yuh'll be headin' out where yuh won't need a drink."

Still chuckling throatily, Malotte moved off and soon Dal heard the wild squeals of Prince, indicating that the stallion was being prodded to a frenzy.

Dal tugged at his wrist thongs. A horse snorted as the owlhoot called Dolin rode him out of camp.

Realizing that Malotte was setting his grim machinery for death in motion, Dal squirmed at the thongs which secured him.

Dusk settled on the valley and hills. Quiet also settled. Malotte had moved away, for there were no more sounds from Prince, save now and then a normal restive stamping.

Dal made another attempt to cut the last remaining thong about his wrists with the broken glass. He writhed in pain until bathed in sweat, but at last gave up his attempt and rolled clear of the broken glass altogether just in case, in sheer desperation, he might force the effort to free himself and cut his wrists badly.

An owl hooted in the nearby cottonwoods. Dal envied the bird its freedom. He recalled the night he and Doc Carson had, for the benefit of the Sun Bear children, given imitations of the wild bird and animal calls. It was hard not to smile as Dale recalled Marta Carson's caustic comments as her husband imitated old Ah-hoo, the great horned owl.

Sleep almost possessed Dal again. Fate would have been kind had Dal been allowed to sleep heavily. For he lay in a torture of physical and mental pain.

Suddenly he was startled from a doze, but it was only an owl calling from the woods near the springs, at the bottom of the cliffs off left.

"*Croo—hoo—hoo. Croo—hoo—hoo—*"

"Old Ah-hoo hisownself," Dal muttered.

"*Croo—hoo—hoo—*"

Dal started. No longer was that cry coming from the timber. It was a ground sound. Dal heard a stirring. He attempted to excite his glands to the production of sufficient moisture to send out a call, a test call.

"I hope I'm not goin' loco when I think Doc's sendin' them calls!" he breathed.

At last, after many croaked unsuccessful attempts to reply to that owl cry, Dal's cracked mouth managed a call.

A moment's quiet and then:—

"Croo—croo—hoo—"

Dal started, noting the slight variation from the regular horned owl cry.

"Doc!" he gasped.

SHORTLY, little Doc Carson had fetched up with Dal.

"Don't speak," Doc whispered. "I caught a glimpse of yuh before sundown. Leastwise I figured it was you since I come up on the little filly in the piñons. Eh-h-h-h—"

Doc's knife slit through Dal's thong ties. A sound came from the underbrush off right.

"Malotte comin' back, Doc. We'd better get out of here."

"Right, I'll help yuh, Dal."

Doc helped his friend get to his knees. Dal reeled a moment or so and when he placed his hands to the turf, his wrists buckled. The pain was excruciating. He tried to flex the wrists, but they pained him as the blood started back in normal flow.

But he persevered and slowly, painfully, he trailed Doc's crawling form to the spring.

Dal stuck both arms under the bubbling water which gushed from a rock fissure. He held his head under, allowing a little of the water to splash into his open mouth, but not until his tongue seemed normal did he start to drink.

Doc Carson went to work on Dal's wrists, massaging at first gently, then vigorously, which brought tears to Dal's eyes.

"Now stick 'em under the water ag'in," Doc advised, "and purty soon you'll be able to tear a bull elk apart with 'em."

Suddenly both froze at the sound of Malotte's roaring voice. He had discovered Dal's breakaway.

A soft chuckle escaped Doc Carson.

Dal Baldwin got to his feet. In the cover of the willow brakes, he flexed his arm and leg muscles. Save for occasional sharp pain, his wrists seemed to have recovered their normal circulation. He rejoined Doc and in whispers asked for information.

"How in tarnation did you happen along, Doc?" was Dal's first question.

"That's easy, Dal. Gehenna and all hickory! When I seen yore fence down and strange wagon tracks, then come up on you ridin' out thisaway alone, lookin' like

yuh was plumb spooked, I knowed trouble was on the prod. Then I run into Jack Morrison and got the story of Malotte and the owlhoots. As soon as he mentioned Malotte I hightailed it over to Tom Bruce. Tom's somewhere up in the—"

The sharp crack of a rifle cut Doc short. It came from the upper levels, to eastward.

"That's likely Tom now," Doc whispered. "He has the new lad, Cody, with him."

There came a fierce scream from the stallion, Prince.

Dal turned and took a sharp step toward the owlhoot camp, but Doc clutched at his arm.

"Don't worry about that critter now, Dal. We got to hightail it. No tellin', one of our boys might have been shot, up top there. Let's go!"

Doc had found an old game trail by which he had been able to avoid the rimrock wagon trail. It was a sharp climb back up, though.

As they struck the crags, halfway up to the first level above, Doc's bent, arthritic leg gave on him. He stumbled and rolled down, creating a miniature slide of rock and rubble.

A rifle blasted a bullet in their direction, followed by two more shots from above.

Voices! Dal froze.

"That you, Pete!" Malotte boomed. "The cussed sodbuster's gone! Hightailed it. Watch for him over there below yuh!"

"Give me your gun, Doc," Dal whispered in Doc's ear.

Doc started to protest, but Dal insisted. He fisted the single action .44, and stepped into the willows.

Dal quivered as he heard the sound of footfalls. He rose from a crouch as he heard heavy breathing. Suddenly, at a sharp yell from Doc, he jerked a willow branch apart and thrust his gun forward. Flame gushed almost in his face, but a bullet whined on by as Dal squeezed his trigger.

Malotte dropped to his knees, and Dale moved cautiously to one side, catfooting it through the brakes to come in around the outlaw.

In the open, Dal darted to a willow clump. Malotte must have heard. He whirled from behind another clump, just as Doc again yelled.

Dal felt the nick of a bullet along his left side, but Malotte was silhouetted as big as a grizzly. Dal pulled, and the half-breed slumped headlong to the grass.

FOR a long moment Dal watched the prone form. Then, gun ready for any emergency, he inched forward. But Malotte had fired his last shot.

Dal and Doc Carson held a sharp conference. They decided to change their plans now. One of Malotte's men was up above them, and they didn't know just where.

"We'll return to the owlhoot camp and lie low," Dal suggested.

They crept back to the camp, where they took turns standing watch as night closed fully on the wild valley.

Dal figured that either or the other of the two owlhooters, if alive, would come back to the camp. If pressed, they would have to pick up supplies here, and possibly horses.

Doc was sleeping heavily when the showdown came. A sharp rattle of gunfire came from the upper rimrock trail. Shortly a rider drew his horse to a sharp halt at the cottonwoods. The man buckled as he dismounted.

Dal Baldwin was alert. He rose gun forward at the ready. The outlaw heard him and whirled.

"Hold it, or I'll blow yuh apart!" Dal yelled.

The man's right arm shot over his head. The other was injured, hanging limply at his side.

Dal bellowed to Doc, who woke up snorting. He came limping up to Dal's side.

"Tie the jigger up, Doc.," Dal said softly. "Got a busted wing yuh'll mebbe have to fix, too."

Doc secured the man's ankles with pigging strings from the fellow's own saddle. He spat as he washed and bandaged the crippled arm.

"Had ought to of shot yuh and throwed yuh out in the open for the buzzards," the little man growled. "Eh-h-h—but if'n yuh've killed one of our boys, I'll fix the noose that'll hang yuh from the nearest cottonwood to his dead body."

"Ain't nobody but Pete killed," the man replied, wincing as Doc splashed turpentine into his arm wound from a bottle taken from the man's saddle-bag.

Doc tied the captive securely to a wagon wheel.

"Yuh'll be watched, too, feller," he cautioned. "Us settlers is tired of wideloopin' raiders spookin' us. Malotte's over ag'in the spring, and it's a safe guess his soul's been passed on down to where it belongs."

Doc moved over to join Dal. They decided to bed down here for the night, realizing that Bruce and Cody would come in at daylight.

Dal was up at dawn, cooking breakfast, while Doc still slept. Suddenly, from up in the defile, came two shots in quick succession. Doc came awake with a start, reaching around to his empty holster.

Dal smiled, realizing that those were signal shots.

He had recovered his old Winchester and now, muzzle high, he blasted out a reply to the signal.

Shortly, Tom Bruce and Phil Cody rode on down to join Dal and Doc at the camp. Tom Bruce had his left arm in a sling.

"Bullet nick—flesh wound," he told them. "But gor! It was a great fight, Dal!" He swung, noticing the lone owlhooter secured to the wagon. A wide smile twisted Tom's big mouth.

"Howdy!" he called.

Bruce and Cody sat down to breakfast, some of which was given the man called Dolin.

"There'll be a deputy marshal in to take yuh over, feller," Doc Carson informed him. "Nice big lad named Frank Simes. Know him?"

The man's jaw sagged.

"Thought so," Doc clipped. "Eh-h-h— If'n yuh busted jail with Malotte, yuh'll be busted back in ag'in, for another ten year or so. Eat up now."

Rested by sundown, the men gathered up Dal's stock. They hitched Cody's recovered team and with Prince, the stallion, hitched to the rear of the wagon, alongside one of Dal's fillies, they moved the cavalcade up into the rimrock country on the trail to Sun Bear Valley.

Phil Cody had been enchanted by his introduction to the Valley Beyond. . . .

THE following day they entered Sun Bear Valley, where the womenfolk greeted them with no attempt to hide their emotions.

Frank Simes, the deputy marshal, making his second call on the valley folk, rode in and halted before Dolin.

"Well, if it ain't Dolin hisownself," he chuckled. "Too bad I was cheated out of gettin' yuh myself. Now yuh'll shore do a stretch, feller."

Mary Baldwin strode up, and Dal gathered her into his arms.

"Dal, darling," she cried brokenly. "I was so worried!" He kissed her warmly.

Jack Morrison and Jud took over the stock, leaving the men free to go on to the Baldwin house.

Doc Carson had had the presence of mind to bring back two-thirds of the sheep the outlaws had killed. Marta, and Olga Morrison undertook to barbecue it for supper. This was a time for celebration.

While the men talked together, the womenfolk went hurriedly to work on a real harvest home banquet.

Before they gathered about the big table in Dal's

living room section of the log house, Doc called on them all to bow their heads. He rasped out a blessing and concluded: "For a change please send us a mite of peace and happiness here below. Mebbe it might be, could be a weddin'. Amen."

Doc chuckled as he glanced up, his eyes twinkling as he called attention to Nan Bartlet the school teacher and Phil Cody who had quickly renewed an acquaintanceship begun at college. They sat over in a corner, hand in hand. Both blushed.

Supper over, and the dishes cleared, it was Deputy Marshal Simes who suggested music. The floor was cleared. Doc took down his fiddle, and Jud Morrison reached for his banjo.

Doc scraped out a wailing two-toned introduction, then blasted out "Smash the Window," to Jud's thumped banjo accompaniment.

Until almost dawn, the settlers and Deputy Marshal Simes danced, or sang.

It was Marta Carson who broke it all up. Chuckling, she asked for Nan and Cody. The young couple had stolen out.

The settlers got ready to move off, leaving Mary and Dal alone, their children long since asleep. Simes and his prisoner rode off with the Morrisons.

Nan and Cody were the last to leave. Dal and Mary watched Phil help Nan to the spring seat of his wagon.

"Looks much like Doc's prayer was going to be answered sooner than we figured, Dal darling," Mary said softly.

"Shore does, Mary, but he's a fine boy, and we don't need to worry. If'n there isn't a baby right off, we don't have to worry about bringin' in another schoolma'am. Nan won't desert us."

Mary squeezed her husband's arm and turned her warm loving eyes to his.

"So everything turned out all right after all, Dal," she breathed. "I've never been so frightened!"

He gathered her into his strong arms, hugging her firmly.

"Nor I, honey," he said. "It was touch and go up there for a time. Lucky we got such good neighbors, like little Doc. Shorely now, though, we'll be allowed to live in peace. But if'n we have to fight to live, I reckon we'll fight. This land and the Valley Beyond belongs to us. We'll hold it for always."

Mary kissed him and together they moved back to the house, where Dal went quickly to sleep, while Mary sat and watched his broad chest heave steadily in sound restful sleep he so badly needed.

