



SPRING BORNING

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

New life visits Sun-Bear Valley, but not without bringing back an old terror for courageous Dal Baldwin to battle!

DAL BALDWIN and his young wife, Mary, watched the play of sunlight on their Sun-Bear Valley homestead and the splash of color to northward and

westward on the high peaks of the mountains. There was a suggestion of music in the near-by creek.

The new homesteaders held no delusions about

Spring being just around the corner. They were very close to the foothills. A few whorling winds out of the canyons could easily throw the valley into another month of winter.

Chickadees were busy in the willows along the creek. Down the meadow a spirited, little black mare reared and bit playfully at a shaggy buckskin companion.

Dal heaved a sigh and turned to his wife. His smile almost faded when he glimpsed Mary's features. Their first Winter had been fraught with many hardships. But that wasn't all. Mary was shortly to bring their first-born child into this rugged hinterland.

"Naieta is full of ginger this morning, honey," Dal said softly.

He was speaking of the blooded mare, one of the team which had pulled their wagon outfit down from Montana. The other horse, the buckskin mare Dal had captured from the wild band of the gray stallion in the hills.

"Naieta is set to help gentle the wild buckskin, Dal," Mary said. "Perhaps she'll be tamed down in time for your spring work." Mary's voice grew vibrant with meaning. "Dal, are you sure, honey, that the valley is suitable for agriculture?"

Dal swung sharply, his forehead wrinkling. He bit sharply at his underlip.

"We never planned on a big acreage, Mary. This here's Wyomin'. Like as not in this elevation we'll get our first grain froze. I can only hope to miss such a frost an' to git enough seed for next year. Some frost won't hurt oats for feed."

He paused to watch the effects of his words on Mary, whose face grew prettier as she twisted her mouth so whimsically, as if she were pondering the statement.

Soon she chuckled softly.

"That's all right with me, Dal," she said, squeezing his arm. "I just wanted to be sure we didn't harbor any illusions. We can grow some oats, alfalfa, some garden truck and fruit. What you're really interested in is developing your horse string from Naieta and the big stallion, King. Right?"

"Right. That an—" he took her chin in his hand and tilted it upward—"an' I want a place like this, so our young uns can git started in a country that's fresh an' clean. A land that'll teach 'em resourcefulness, initiative an' character. By the way, honey, how much longer before he comes along?" Mary blushed prettily.

"A month or less, dear. And I do hope the baby is a

he for your sake. You'd be terribly disappointed if our child turned out to be she, wouldn't you?"

Dal did not answer. He looked across his snow-covered acreage. He was thinking, planning.

Mary followed his gaze until the realization of her condition in this wilderness came to her.

"Dal," she whispered.

He turned quickly. Her lovely eyes were larger than he had ever seen them. "Honey, what is it? You look scairt."

"I was just thinking, Dal, what will we do if the Carsons fail to show up in the Spring? Have you thought of that?"

HOMESTEADER Dal Baldwin had thought of this contingency. But he had faith in the word of "Doc" Carson, the little man he had met earlier in the winter when he went to trade in his meager catch of furs for food supplies.

Doc had visited Sun-Bear Valley with Dal. Doc, too, was hunting for a homestead. Both Mary and Dal had taken a liking to the boastful, little man. He had left them promising to return with a wagon outfit and his wife. He boasted she was the best midwife from the Rio border to the Canadian line.

Doc had located in a valley west of Sun-Bear. He had helped Dal give the buckskin a bit of gentling. He had pronounced a blessing on the meals that he had eaten with them, and he had played his fiddle. Doc Carson wouldn't go back on his word.

But Mary had conjured up a shadow of a doubt in Dal's mind. If not doubt, then concern. Supposing Doc's wife did not arrive in time?

"I been thinkin' a lot about it, honey," Dal said. "Try not to worry. I aim to ride out when the snow settles a bit. I can mebbeso locate a squaw to be with you. The storekeeper will know of such a woman. So I reckon we'd better git some breakfast. I want to go out an' git us a buck deer. Food's mighty low. Cheer up. There'll be a good run of trout in the creek soon. It won't be long before the first green-wing teal come siftin' in."

Immediately after his frugal breakfast, Dal reached his rifle down from the antler rack.

"I've got a young buck all tied up to a birch tree, waitin' for me," he joshed. "In the woods, I'll pick up a few jay feathers an' some red feathers off'n a flicker. Goin' to make me some trout flies."

"Sounds great, pardner," Mary replied, smiling.

"But you'd better tote along a little lunch. Those bucks can sometimes untie themselves and light out for the woods far away."

Dal laughed and kissed her warmly. He was glad of her good humor. It sustained him always in times when doubts crept in, doubts which sometimes came in the teeth of a blizzard wind. Or at such a time as when he had lost Pete, the big gelding, in the sump of a sulphur spring near the creek. He recalled his old father's words:

"A brave pioneer wife brings a feller more'n four-thirds along the trail to success."

The woods were soft and still as Dal strode on, climbing up into what was called the "Canadian Life Zone." He had already picked up deer tracks.

It is in such surroundings that a homesteader falls prey to the atmosphere of the wilderness. It is in such an atmosphere that a whole year's work might be planned. Or there may swoop down on him a weakness, if he succumbs to the gloom of his troubles.

A squirrel chattered as if in complaint of Dal's intrusion. Dal picked up a piece of deadwood and tossed it at the tree-dweller, laughing softly. But suddenly he froze in his tracks. He heard a movement ahead.

Slowly looking down a cliff he glimpsed the fresh sign of more than one deer, a veritable network of tracks in a little willow-studded swale.

"Plumb fresh made," he told himself.

He took a seat on a fallen log. Wise to the ways of the wilderness creatures, he intended to bide his time. When a limb cracked off to his right it startled him.

Shortly his pulses began to leap, for he could distinctly hear the sound of moving creatures ahead. It would be great to get his buck so close to home.

Had he known what had caused the cracking sound almost behind him, he would have been filled with concern. A wild cranberry thicket parted slightly. The shrub screened the leering features of a half-breed.

The man was Quirt Malotte, who hated Dal venomously. This was the breed who last autumn had stolen Naieta for the purpose of capturing King, the big gray stallion. Dal had fetched up with his foe and had beaten him severely.

This was a lonely spot. Malotte had sworn to get even.

The half-breed cautiously withdrew to cover. He would take his time, wait for the homesteader to hunt deeper in the woods.

DAL moved on, curbing an impulse to hurry. He could tang the deer now. Deer exude a gland scent. He glimpsed a set of antlers.

He had sprung a handsome, four-point, young buck, which whipped sharply to the left. Dal smiled and backed slowly off, craftily easing around to his right. His dad had taught him how to hunt deer. He intended to sneak around and intercept the circling buck.

A pioneer life develops patience, a virtue especially necessary when hunting. Ears keened, Dal was able to follow the movement of the deer. Not more than eighty yards ahead, on the edge of a willow-fringed clearing, he glimpsed the four-pointer, head high, nostrils flared.

Slowly Dal raised his rifle and sighted. He took a bead on the base of the creature's neck. He put first squeeze on his trigger, and then—

As he pulled, there was a terrific report which startled him. He heard a bullet whine past his head. He leaped to cover and quickly reloaded. There was no time to observe the effect of his shot.

Someone had attempted to bushwhack him.

"I aim to locate that feller," Dal said softly.

Cautiously he began to sift through the thickets, his moccasined feet making little sound. From one thicket to another he moved with the stealth of a cougar. All at once he froze. A man creature was coming toward him.

"Quirt Malotte," Dal swore softly.

Dal stood his hand, watching the breed glance furtively from thicket to thicket. The foe started to swing to the right when, rifle ready, Dal stepped into the open.

"Stand your hand, Malotte!" Dal sang out. "Drop that rifle or I'll plug you. Drop it!"

Malotte let his rifle slide to the snow. He was shaking visibly as Dal strode up.

"Thought I warned you to move out uh my range," Dal said with meaning. "Do I have to tear you apart before you understand? You stole my foxes. You stole my mare. Right now I'm pretty sure you set out to drill me. I can't prove that, but I'm actin' on suspicion. Git out this time an' stay out, or I'll break every bone in your body."

Dal laid a hand on the man's shoulder and squeezed fiercely to give emphasis to his words.

"You understand, you polecat?" Dal continued. "You're shootin' a breech-loader. Give me your ca'tridges, every one."

Malotte emptied his pockets. Dal picked up the man's rifle and extracted the cartridge from its breech.

"I don't aim to take your rifle," he said. "Man's got to hunt his food, but from now on I'll be huntin' you."

If an' when I locate your tracks again, I'll fetch up with you, and it'll be bad for you. Real bad. Now vamose!"

"*Oui, m'sieu*. I go. No shoot at you. Shoot at young buck. Didn't see you."

Dal shoved him off.

Muttering thickly, Quirt Malotte floundered on into the screening thicket.

"Would have been dead within my rights if I'd plugged him," Dal told himself.

But he couldn't kill a man in cold blood. The incident had shaken him up pretty much. It was a moment or so before the homesteader turned and strode on. He fetched up at the dead buck. As he expected, he found only one bullet hole in the deer, his own, at the base of the neck.

Dal lost no time in skinning out the buck. He carefully tied three-quarters of the venison inside the hide, and cached it in a tree. He would take a hind quarter and the liver back with him, then return with Naieta for the cache.

Mary's smile was radiant when Dal arrived at the cabin.

"I heard shots, honey," she said. "Two shots, almost simultaneously."

"Echo, I reckon," Dal was quick to reply. "I was deep in a bowl in the woods, where sounds do queer things."

Mary watched him stride quickly away to bring in the little mare. She wondered. She was sure she had heard two distinct shots. But Dal would not mislead her.

Mary gradually forgot the incident of the two shots. There were other matters to give her concern. A child was coming. There were small garments to fashion, woolens to knit. Dal had gone up into the mountains to find small fire-killed pines with which to make a small crib. He intended to mount it on rockers.

Then came a night when Ah-Hoo, the great-horned owl, sat in the spruces at the back of the cabin, and kept Mary awake with his weird, staccato cries. They were like his other blood-curdling hunting cries. But now Ah-hoo was calling softly to his mate with her nestlings. His cries heralded the birth of Spring.

ALL at once, Mary started. From the eaves of the cabin's sod roof, water was dripping. A soft breeze was gossiping with the spruces. There was music in the wilderness, the first wild melody of Spring.

Dazzling sunlight greeted the Baldwins early the next morning. Under its skim of ice, the creek gurgled harmoniously with the general theme of the

wilderness song. Birds which hadn't been seen for months now fluttered timorously about the valley.

Dal brought his horses from the stable to the tether thongs in the meadow. Instantly, the little black mare, Naieta, shook out her mane, reared and sent out a long penetrating call toward the hills. The buckskin had ceased her sulking. She reared, and together the young stock played while the homesteaders watched with growing interest.

Dal felt his wife's hand close on his arm.

"I can understand your wanting horses, dear," she said. "They're beautiful creatures. It's going to be a pity when you start throwing old Pete's harness on the buckskin. She looks so pretty out there, as carefree as a child just released from school for vacation."

Dal smiled softly.

"As soon as the snow settles a bit, honey, I'm gonna snub the wild buckskin in close to Naieta, hitch them to the stone boat an' snake in the last uh those fence rails. That-a-way, the buckskin can't git tangled into too much trouble if'n she starts bunchin' an' rollin'."

From the stoop of the cabin several mornings later, Mary Baldwin watched her husband gently ease old Pete's harness onto the back of the quivering buckskin. Dal paused now and then to run a hand along her sleek neck. She shook her head savagely. Now and then she shied off to one side, only to find Naieta, her teammate, snubbed in close.

With great patience, Dal allowed the buckskin lots of time for her gymnastics. Then he untied the team from the fence rail. Dal called to Naieta. When the blooded mare started forward, the wild buckskin drew back.

Mary suddenly gasped. The lightning hind hoofs of the buckskin narrowly missed Dal's head. The homesteader turned and laughed.

"That really wasn't meant for me. She was just tryin' to kick loose from the harness."

Now the team moved together. Dal was forced to hold a tight line on Naieta's side, so as not to hurt the buckskin's tender mouth. Consequently, the team moved around and around in circles.

Dal tied the team to the snake fence and joined Mary.

"In a few minutes, you'll see her when she has something draggin', hon," he said. "I'll hitch 'em to the double-trees for a spell."

That day and each day following, Dal eased the wild one into the traces with the gentleness of a father teaching his child a fine art. Then came the day when Mary heard him singing triumphantly. She heard the

snorting of the fussy little team as it swung down from the woods with a load of rails on the stoneboat sled.

Dal Baldwin was happy as he followed a crude harrow over the first brown acres of cultivation. The ground pulsed with heat. In these latitudes weather changes are swift. Now and then Dal paused and sank his knuckles into the loam, earth that was too warm, he thought, for so early in the season. He wondered about rainfall here.

He might have to institute some scheme of irrigation. There were springs in the higher levels not far away. There were fire-killed spruce that he and Doc Carson could whipsaw for water-flume lumber. It would be crudely sawn, but it would do.

Blackbirds were strutting over the acreage now. Pretty early for them, Dal thought. In a near-by bottomland meadow, a lark whistled. Dal swung sharply as the first green-winged teal whirred over to light on the creek. There would soon be other birds on the wake of these first harbingers.

There should be a mess of trout in the creek. Dal was proud of the flies he had fashioned out of jay and flicker feathers.

When Mary called him in to lunch, he stood and watched her a long moment.

"If'n I ain't askin' too much," he breathed softly, "let us soon be hearin' the creakin' uh wagon wheels along the crick trail, bringin' Doc Carson an' his wife."

NAIETA was restless. She pawed at the meadow turf, lofting her sensitive muzzle into the wind. Now and then she poured out long calls to the far hills.

Dal sat on a log, mending harness. He watched Naieta, a whimsical smile playing about his mouth corners.

Just at early dusk, from the nearer foothills, there came the long, penetrating bugle of King, the wild stallion.

Dal's heart began to leap. He shot a swift glance at the hills, and in a flash he glimpsed the flashing silver mane of the big gray.

Naieta lunged at her halter rope.

Late that evening, Dal tethered the little, black mare out in a clearing among the junipers on a rise of land. He tested wind, then crept back to cover to watch.

After some time, he heard the wild cry of the big stallion, a call that caused Naieta to leap the full length of her tether. There came the stamp of heavy hoofs and a soft snuffling. Dal glimpsed the stallion in all his savage majesty.

Slowly the big one came in, now and then halting abruptly, his ears flicking back and forth, his nostrils flared, sniffing for danger sign.

Now King touched muzzles with the mare.

Dal got slowly to his feet. He must take the news to Mary.

They sat late that night making plans.

"Too early yet for the corn-plantin'," Dal said. "I'm hopin' Doc will bring in some potato seed and garden seed. He said he would, an' mebbeso a heifer. It'd be swell to have a dugout with spuds an' turnips in for next winter. Tomorrow I'm going to test out my trout flies."

Early next sunset, a trout broke water. Dal made a cast and played his new fly. One day, he told himself, he was going to make a mess of ground bait, as his dad had done. Ground bait of yellow-jacket grubs.

Suddenly his line jerked taut. A strike!

Dal smiled as he paid out line. He played the trout for several minutes, then beached it.

"All of a pound," he said. "Just right."

From the lower valley there came the sharp staccato yapping of a coyote, another and another, until shortly the arriving night was split by a yodling concerto. No homestead country, no frontier homeland would be right without its noisesome creek, the cries of creatures, and birdsong. It all sang of life in a melody that pleased Dal.

He picked up his mess of fish, seven splendid trout, and strode back to the cabin. Mary was asleep on a broad settle that Dal had made and upholstered with a fleece of wool they had brought with them. He had covered it with the flensed hide of a young mule-deer.

Dal watched Mary's breathing. His lips moved, but no sound came. He backed away.

The next day, Dal whistled as he sowed his oats from a sack at his side. Now and then he stooped to hurl a clod at a group of strutting cowbirds.

"Okay, if'n you fellers stick to the bugs," he said. "But lay off the seed. There ain't any more to be had."

When the acreage was sown, Dal skimmed lightly over it with the drag. It was a rough job at best, but all virgin-broken sod was that way the first year. Next year, after a season's weathering and further cultivation, it would begin to fine up like the soil back home.

"Pretty soon I'll send out an' git me some alfalfa seed," Dal told himself. "Got to be sure uh winter fodder when the horse spread builds up."

He strode to the end of his acreage, then, as if lured

by the play of lights and shadows on the far craglands. Dal continued to walk and to climb.

Now, from where he stood, he could con the south valley, which, he hoped, would soon be occupied by the Carsons.

Dusk slowly sifted its purple-gray ashes down on the wilds, until all became cloaked in a mantle of great overwhelming silence. Dal continued to watch.

He was at first only barely conscious of the clang of metal. All at once, he started.

That sound came from the gong at the cabin, the old plough share which Mary was striking with a bolt. Mary was calling him down. He broke into a long lope for the cabin.

DAL moved swiftly indoors and dropped to his knees. Mary was on the bed, twisted as if in pain.

"It's near time, Dal darlin'," Mary called in a whisper, and her eyes widened and an expression of fear came into her lovely face. "Quirt Malotte was here. I was bringing in some wood. He soft-footed up behind me, caught hold of me. He scared the very life nearly out of me."

"You mean he put his dirty hand on you!"

Dal got to his feet, quivering with white-hot anger.

"He stole off when I screamed and ran. I fell in a faint for a time. I managed to get up and sound the dinner gong."

Dal's eyes swam with tears, tears of anger and of great pity for Mary.

The Baldwins had not expected their child for at least another eight days. Now the time was at hand. Dal realized that he could not leave Mary to go for help. He must act himself. Alone!

He shuddered at the thought as he filled the stove's firebox with wood. There must be plenty of hot water. He had heard his grandfather tell of the birth of his dad in similar circumstances.

Mary was so lovely, so young. Fate had cheated on them.

As Dal strode to the creek for more water, he was startled by the cry of a night bird. He had become jumpy and nervous. Returning to the shack, he more than once paused, as if to catch the far-away rattle of wagon wheels.

Back at the house, he scrubbed his hands thoroughly and laid out clean sheeting that Mary had brought from her home.

He moved in close to the bed. Mary took one of his hands.

"You're good, darling," she said. "I haven't had to tell you a single thing to do. But it may be hours yet, honey. Better get some rest. I'll call you in plenty of time." Mary's voice trailed out until Dal was sure that she had slipped into a sleep.

He sat back, and more than once he awakened from a doze, swearing softly at his weakness. Tiptoeing to the door, he gently eased it open.

"Guess this sort uh thing gits a feller thinkin'," he breathed softly. "I could uh swore I heard wagon wheels. Wouldn't take much uh this to loco a feller real. Most likely the creak uh spruce timber out back in the night wind."

He took a drink of water and settled back again.

Then Dal sprang to the door and flung it open.

"Wheels!" he called excitedly. "Wagon wheels, honey! Listen! The Doc an' his fiddle!"

Above the creak of wagon and the rattle of wheels came the scrape of Doc's bow on fiddle strings.

Mary's eyes opened as she heard a woman's voice singing.

*I come from Alabamy
with the banjo on my knee;
I come from Louisiana,
my true love for to see.*

The melody and singing broke off abruptly. "Dad blast it to all hickory, I busted my D string!" Doc Carson roared.

"Doc!" Dal Baldwin rushed to meet the new neighbors.

Doc Carson, forgetting a bad leg, dropped onto it from a wagon wheel. Dal helped him to his feet, and the doctor quickly recovered as Dal's big arms held him up.

"Dal! Yuh ol' son, yuh. Doggone, but we're glad to git here. It was the cussed heifer held us up. Yep, we done drug yuh in a heifer. Dal, this is Marta, my wife."

Dal helped the angular woman to alight. He held her hand warmly, then nodded in the direction of the cabin.

"If'n you please, ma'am," he said. "She— Mary— The young un's most here."

Marta Carson thrust him from her. Turning, she hurried to the cabin, Dal loping along at her heels.

"Mary," Dal sang out as they entered the cabin. "Marta Carson has come like out uh heaven."

A soft smile glowed in the older woman's face as she knelt and slipped her arms under Mary's shoulders.

"Heavenly sailors, but I'm glad we're in time!"

Marta Carson cried. "Why, you ain't more'n a child. That ol' man of mine's been talkin' about you, but he didn't mention that you was expectin' right off. He must be guided from Above, because he would keep on tonight when I wanted to camp another night."

She got to her feet and cast a glance at the stove. Seeing that all was well, she confronted Dal.

"You go out to ol' Doc an' start some braggin' between you," she directed, taking off her coat. "Ever'thin's goin' to be all right here."

SHE closed the door behind Dal, who felt a bit miserable in spite of the surge of happiness at the timely arrival of the Carsons.

Doc chuckled at his discomfort.

"I been through it all, Dal," he boasted. "It ain't exactly romantic at a time such as this. But let's swap a yarn or two. I got the team an' the heifer tethered out. Snuck 'em a mite uh hay from yore stack. I brought you a supply of tobacco an' a corncob. Not the best tobacco, but a lot for the money."

In his wisdom and greater experience, Doc Carson got Dal away from the house. He moved off toward the hill beyond the sown acreage, and from the topland they conned what they could of Doc's valley.

Dal drew deeply on the corncob. It had been some time since he'd tasted tobacco.

"So it goes, son," Doc went on. "Life goes an' it comes, an'—uh—what am I talkin' about? You say the little black's bred to the big feller. Now that's only a start. I got a mare in my team. Notice the heifer I

brought? She'll be in fresh shortly. I was some scairt for her along the backtrail. Dal, yuh ain't listenin'?"

Dal started.

"I'm listenin', Doc. Honest I am. One ear for you an' the other for the clang uh that gong at the cabin. Thanks for comin', for the heifer an' for Marta. I'd uh been helpless tonight. Can't figure how I'm ever goin' to repay you for— The gong!"

Dal whirled and rushed headlong down the slope, Doc limping along in his dusty wake. Doc had to be leisurely in his movements, for his "art'ritis" bothered him after the long trip.

At the cabin, Doc peeked in and saw Dal down on his knees at the bedside, holding his flushed little wife in his arms. Marta was fussing with a little bundle in the rocker crib.

Doc smiled softly as Mary lifted her glance to him. Her face was a picture touched with the soft light of tender young motherhood.

Doc coughed to hide his embarrassment. But Mary put him at ease with her smile.

"An' if it ain't askin' too much of all uh yuh," Doc gruffed. "What in tarnation have we got? A boy or—uh—a—"

Dal turned to Marta, who lifted the child from the cot and handed the bundle to Dal.

"It's just like I told you," Dal boasted. "A son, Doc. Weighs all uh eight pound. Look at him smile a'ready."

Outside, the spruces gossiped softly with the passing night wind, as if to break the news of the spring borning and the happiness of the homestead.