



WILDERNESS JUSTICE

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

A feared rustler returns to Sun-Bear Valley and threatens the happiness of Dal and Mary Baldwin in their new home!

DAL BALDWIN PROUDLY STRODE on through the new clearing to eastward of his home acreage. Thirty acres lay brushed out ready for burning. Sun-Bear Valley was

opening up. The rugged wilderness was beginning to show signs of partial taming—taming by Dal Baldwin, his lovely young wife, Mary, and their two neighbor families, to westward and to the south, respectively.

Dal and his wife had made a long trek down from Montana to this wild Wyoming valley, with hope and determination to carve a home for their future and the future of their children. There were two children.

Young James Dallas, "Jimmy", a husky four-year-old who was born in the valley, now trotted along at his father's heels. In Dal's arms, blinking up at the downy fleece clouds scudding across the blue sky main, lay the baby, Tenby Morris—"Tenby" after Mary's father; "Morris", after "Doc" Carson, the Baldwins' first neighbor to arrive at Sun-Bear.

Dal was showing the youngsters the first fruits of his and their mother's hard work and of their good neighbors' labors.

"Not that you little uns'll savvy right now," he went on. "All that concerns yuh both is clean britches and lots of grub. But one day yuh'll take holt yore own seifs. There'll be rich pasture land of timothy and alfalfa. Yore mother and I'll watch yuh fork and tame a string of blooded hoss stock—spankin' young fillies an' colts for which the moneyed hoss folk in the East'll pay well."

Mary smiled softly and dabbed at her lovely moist eyes. One day, the children would understand the price of development of Sun-Bear Valley—not only in calloused hands, and tired, worn bodies, but in heartbreaks, anxiety and grief. For the wilderness, beautiful as it was, threw many a stern challenge at these settlers.

"Like it, honey?" Dal asked.

"It's wonderful, Dal darling. You've worked miracles, but there's something lacking still. Neighbors, Dal—more neighbors, men, women and children. I just long each day to hear the welcome rattle of wagon wheels and the jangle of harness. But we want more folk here like Doc and Marta Carson, and Ella and Tom Bruce and their little Donna."

"Right, honey," Dal told her. "We menfolk often talk it over, and each time one of us goes out to the settlement for supplies, we advertise the valley. But we got to be careful about that. We've got to have clean-minded, hard-workin' folk in here, folk that'll raise kids to grow up with our'n, folk that understand the laws of God and man."

THEY reached the fringe of the berry patch where they would pick wild fruit for an hour or so, while the boys slept. The good Marta Carson had injured an ankle, and Mary Baldwin was determined to do Marta's share of picking and packing this fall. The

people of Sun-Bear Valley shared and shared alike. None went short—joys, sorrows, work and pleasure were all shared. Upon such spirit depended the success of any homestead district. Upon such spirit depended the future of a nation.

In the shade of the underbrush birds called and sang, squirrels chirped and chipmunks scurried back and forth in all their impudence.

Now and then, from high overhead, came the wild scream of Yeepek, the great bald eagle chieftain, warning the wilderness creatures that he was lord of the altitudes.

Snugly close to his brother, young Jimmy slept soundly, albeit he twitched and kicked in his sleep—a state which never completely released him from the adventures of the day in his boisterous young life here in the wilds. As the Baldwins picked, they talked and planned.

The sudden blast of two shots in quick succession startled Dal. It was the code signal of distress. With a word to Mary, Dal strode to his Winchester and fired two shots in answer. Quickly they gathered up the children and their equipment and moved back as hurriedly as possible. Either Doc Carson or Tom Bruce had fired those shots. There was trouble in Sun-Bear Valley!

Dal found plenty of trouble awaiting him. Ella Bruce was in the Baldwin yard in a state of great excitement. Little Doc Carson was missing and Tom Bruce had set out on his trail. But that was not all the bad news. Baldwin's horse pasture fence had been taken down, and his valuable horse stock rustled.

Dal quivered in every nerve fibre as he listened to Ella's story. She had hurriedly put up a lunch for Tom.

Mary led her to the cabin. Dal must have a quick snack before he left.

Dal looked off toward the north country. His one big hope for the future of his family at Sun-Bear Valley was related closely with the future of his horse raising. He had started with Naieta, a blooded filly, now a six-year-old matron and mother of three youngsters showing excellent promise.

They were the get of King, the handsome wild savage stallion leader of the far hills. One young colt, a two-year-old, was the pride of Dal's eye. He intended to breed an old mare of Doc Carson's to the colt—a mare with quite a strain of Percheron blood.

Dal was building to a fast, strong strain of saddlers which would command a handsome price. One day soon he had hoped to bring in some blooded Kentucky stock, financed from revenue from his trapping.

But now his entire spread was gone! Doc Carson, his close friend, was missing, and Doc was in no condition, arthritic cripple that he was, to travel far afoot in the rugged levels to the north and northwest. Dal was sure that Doc had immediately gone out on the widelooper's trail. . . .

Dal's conjecture was right. Though there was no way for him to know that, Doc had come over alone to the Baldwin homestead, with a report on Marta's condition. An old wrangler, a great lover of horses, he had limped along to the north pasture. He was shocked on arrival to see the switching tail of a horse ridden by someone just leaving the area. The pasture was empty—the fence down.

"Malotte!"

Doc had been sure this was the work of Quirt Malotte, a half-breed with whom Dal had had a heap of trouble. Malotte had chosen this moment to start meting out vengeance for the beating Dal had been forced to give him.

Dal joined the womenfolk and hurriedly ate the snack Mary had prepared.

Ella Bruce suggested that she had better hitch up the oxen, and go bring Marta Carson to the Baldwin home.

"That sound like sense to you, Dal?" she asked.

Dal nodded.

"Right, Ella. All gather here and stay till we menfolk get back. Doc's liable to twist hisself all out of joint in them canyons, or he's liable to get to fannin' that old forty-four if—"

"Dal!" exclaimed Mary. "You think—you think there's a man back of this? That the stock were rustled? By Quirt Malotte?"

"That stock of Naieta's, even if it was so minded, couldn't have kicked down a snake fence Tom and Doc and I built, honey," Dal told his wife. "That broken fence is man doin's. Malotte, I'm shore. If it is, and Doc gets to throwin' lead, even to scare the breed, there's no tellin' just what that critter might do. But don't mention none of this to Marta. Now I'm headin' out. Watch out for yoreselves and don't worry too much about us."

DAL kissed his wife and children and patted Ella's shoulder. He strode swiftly away, but soon he turned and waved at the watching women.

Then he was gone, and Mary sighed. Should Malotte be successful in getting clear away with the stock, all Dal's work would have been in vain, and he

would be forced to make a new start—from less than scratch. And then there was the thought of danger to the menfolk, especially to Doc Carson, crippled as he was.

"Had I better come over and help you hitch the bulls?" Mary asked Ella.

But Ella shook her head. "I can manage, Mary honey. Tom rigged a rack to hold the yoke. All I got to do is drive the bulls under it and pull out a couple of wooden pins and fix the bows. They're pretty quiet exceptin' when yore cow is bellerin', then Blue gets so's he has to be watched." Blue was the bull of the team.

Mary smiled and nodded. She watched Ella cross the creek bridge, and her eyes filled with tears. Theirs had been a severe four years here in the wilds. Together they had toiled fiercely against all challenges and threats—fire and snows, famine and the menace of Quirt Malotte who had once stolen Naieta and had robbed Dal's trapline.

They had begun to see a light ahead; promise which guided them to a greater hope for the future. Dal had built up the nucleus of a horse band. His little irrigation system, from the springs to the north, served his first grain acreage adequately, which acreage guaranteed Dal and his neighbors seed grain, provided that there was no early fall frost. But now fate had struck them more sharply than ever before, and Mary's heart was heavy with misgiving.

She coned the northwest—the forbidding mountain peaks—and tried to visualize the wild, rugged canyons and those plateaus where the wild creatures roamed, including King, the stallion leader and his band. She was afraid for the menfolk on the trail of Malotte.

Her lips parted, framing a gentle prayer for their safety.

Now Mary firmed her hands and returned to the cabin. The children required attention. There was plenty to occupy Mary's time, especially since Marta Carson, the scrupulous housekeeper, would shortly be along. Mary loved her neighbor, Marta. It was Marta who had brought both Mary's children into the world.

But as Mary worked, she wondered—wondered what was taking place in those upper levels, where cougar, grizzly, the wild horse band and Yat, the leader of the wild sheep band, roamed.

One thing that had happened was that Doc Carson had grimly held on to the trail of Dal's rustled stock. Now he was growing deadly weary.

"Sufferin' smoke of the seven-toed grampus!" he muttered as he lost his footing and slid down a steep

gulch wall. He firmed a grip on the butt of his old .44, got painfully to his feet and started to rip out another barrage of sulphurous implications. A sharp twinge of pain in his arthritic leg arrested him.

It was as well he did button his lips, for a piece of loose rock rolling down the opposite bank, warned him of the presence of someone, or some creature. Doc froze. He forgot the pain in his leg. Twice, as he trailed the rustled stock, he had come across man tracks, despite the fact that every so often the rustler had come along his back trail brushing out his sign.

Doc realized that he was trailing a skilful trail man. But on Doc's own admission, he had trailed such "varmints" as Malotte from the Mexican border to the Canadian line.

He swore softly under his breath at having sounded off at his fall. Slowly he melted back into the shadows of a small cave and, through narrowed eyes, conned the lip of the gulch wall opposite.

A hat suddenly caught his attention. Doc's lips grew taut and he toyed with the trigger guard of his gun. For Doc had wrangled stock and rustlers in districts where on such occasions as this men drew and threw lead and asked questions afterward.

"Carcajou critter should be plugged," he breathed softly.

He felt deeply for Dal Baldwin who had been a great friend and grand neighbor. But he realized that Dal himself would not have cut down any man in a drygulching. He would give even his worst enemy a chance to draw.

Now the man's face appeared momentarily.

"Malotte!" Doc muttered.

FROM Dal's description of the breed, and having on one occasion seen the breed, before he even knew Dal, Doc knew he was not mistaken. He slipped his trigger finger inside the guard.

"Jumpin' catfish!"

Surely it wouldn't be recorded as a crime against Doc if he plugged this critter who was less desirable at Sun-Bear Valley than the lowest carcajou. Doc mused on this subject as he trembled with the urge to cut loose. He had not forgotten Malotte's malefactions against Dal.

Now here this man creature had appeared, not more than forty feet from Doc's .44. He couldn't have missed him in the dark at that range, and yet Doc held his hand. Even though it was not impossible that Malotte might get clear away with all Dal's stock.

Sorely troubled, Doc continued to argue with himself until he suddenly heard the clatter of hoofs and realized that Malotte had mounted and was again on the trail of the rustled stock.

Doc flexed his limbs, groaning with pain. But he swore as he massaged his crippled leg. He had to get along, for soon the ashes of dusk would be sifted down on the wilds. The wild creatures would begin to call and prowl.

Stuffing fresh "eating tobacco" into his cheek, he replaced an old knife in his breeches pocket, gave his buckskins a hitch, and crawled up out of the gulch. He hit a rim-rock trail, but suddenly turned and moved back to the gulch.

Here, Indian fashion, he made sign with willows—trail sign which he knew Tom Bruce could read. Doc seemed to be sure that his former trail partner would be along the back trail somewhere, with Dal Baldwin.

But Doc was not psychic, and what he could not feel was that at this very moment Quirt Malotte was on his back trail, rubbing out sign. There would be no trail for anyone to follow.

The half-breed grinned. He had been the wise one, to send his cayuse clattering off along the rim-rock trail. The stolen horse band was already well-hidden in a grassy boxed-in meadow a few miles to the northeast, and now Malotte was intent on trapping his trailer. He fumbled with some green rawhide in his pocket, and scowled.

"D' leetle wan wit' d' bent knee," he told himself. "I mak' him weesh 'e never take my trail. Sapre tonnerre!"

The breed quivered with rage and hatred. He had always coveted the horse stock of Baldwin, the homesteader, especially the little blooded mare and her young stallion. These two alone would bring in much money, money which would give him security and ease for some time.

Cavalry officers would pay good prices for such stock. And Malotte promised himself a young squaw, one to do all camp work while he relaxed beyond reach of Baldwin, in a life of ease.

He crept forward, until he again picked up Carson's trail—an easy trail to follow—until it finally petered out in the hard rock trail.

Doc was moving with great caution now, realizing that he could not afford to make a misstep. He also realized that prying eyes might be watching.

Now and then he picked up sheep sign—tracks that were fairly fresh. He had always planned on a sheep

hunt. He and Marta contemplated packing a lot of wild mutton down for winter.

Doc suddenly halted, freezing to complete immobility as he caught the close-in ringing bugle of King, the wild stallion leader. Doc had never seen the wild one. But, an old wrangler, he had thrilled many a time to the stories Dal Baldwin had told him of the big, savage gray one.

This wild, ringing cry brought memories of other areas to the south, where he had hunted wild horse bands. Slowly he shifted his eating tobacco from one cheek to the other.

All at once his eyes opened wide. Poised on a plateau a few hundred yards distant, was the wild stallion, King, the most magnificent creature Doc had ever seen. Tail and mane pennanting in the breeze, the wild one posed in grandiose splendor.

It was obvious to Doc that the stallion was hurling a challenge at some creature in the area below. He watched King toss his head angrily, and stamp the ground sharply with his hoofs and instantly Doc realized that Dal Baldwin's horse band was not far off.

Cocking an ear, he half turned. He had caught a sound at his back, but the shadows were deepening now, and he could see no movement. He waited a long moment before again turning, and was in time only to see the silver tail of the wild king as the great one leaped from his line of vision.

DOC moved on. This new country, to eastward, intrigued him. It was gently rolling, and brush-covered. He coned with admiring eyes a belt of fire-killed spruce, stately and handsome log and lumber timber. He had visions of building the first schoolhouse in Sun-Bear Valley, with logs and whip-sawn lumber from this stand.

Now he reached the point at which the stallion had posed. A sharp gasp escaped him. Down in a grassy meadow, into which there seemed no inlet, and from which there was no outlet, save by a stiff climb of several feet, stood Dal's horses—Naieta, her young stock, and the little wild mare Dal had trapped in the hills.

But Doc suddenly started. Naieta's young stallion reared and lunged, screaming wildly as he caught the big wild king's scent.

"By the eye teeth of Sam Scratch!" Doc breathed. "The little feller's challengin' his pappy. If they meet, the King'll kill him shore as shootin'!"

Doc started to slide, recovered, then set himself for a well-timed leap to the grass below. He must get

down and quiet that little hellion of Naieta's before damage was done.

Just as Doc poised himself, some object whirred and caught him sharply between the shoulder blades, hurtling him crashing to the turf below. He was barely conscious as he landed in a twisted heap, but he did hear a thick, throaty chuckle, a man-made sound, before he faded out into unconsciousness. . . .

"So! D' leetle wan is awake, no!"

Doc started at the sound of the half-breed's voice. Dawn was breaking and Doc shivered with the cold. He had been tied up during the night and his limbs pained him, his back giving him especially severe pain.

He reached a hand down to his holster, but it was empty. The breed chuckled.

"Don't t'ink Malotte is a fool, m'sieu. I 'ave yo' gun." He drew closer to Carson and squatted down on his haunches, Indian fashion. "Eet is you who are a' foolish wan. Now Malotte mak you pay. Yo' frien's never fin' yo' trail. I back trail all tarn an' feex tracks. Now I tie you up wit' wet rawhide. Tonnerre! You ever hear of heem? When she shrink an' grow tight—" Malotte made a face. "I know you know all 'bout heem," he hissed sharply through his teeth. "Sapre! Wan day I get d' beeg feller, Bal'win."

Doc was too badly hurt to offer any form of resistance. He had heard of the wet, green rawhide torture used by old Indians, and some white men. He had once come across a victim of such means of torture.

But if there was no fight in Doc's body, there was fight in his tongue.

"Yuh're a dirty horntoad, Malotte!" he growled. "And don' sell them frien's uh mine too short. They'll get yuh if they have to track yuh clear to the Canadian line. Yuh're worse'n a skunk-bear, and smell mos' nigh as bad!"

Malotte chocked the heel of his right hand hard into Doc's windpipe—a cruel blow which almost sent Doc back into unconsciousness. While he fought for breath, he felt the wet rawhide being fixed as he was tied by the wrists and forehead to a sapling, in the glare of the sun. Its heat would shrink the thongs tighter, tighter.

Doc wondered about Dal and Tom.

The sun rose like a fiery ball as it scored through the dawn mists. Hatless, standing against his bonds, Doc already found it difficult to breathe. He could not turn his head an inch, nor move his arms. Malotte had moved into his line of vision and was eating a meal of jerked venison, washing it down with cool spring water which he drank from his black sombrero.

Doc Carson's throat and mouth were parched, his lips cracked, but he would die of thirst rather than appeal for water.

For an hour or more the half-breed slept, his head pillowed in his saddle. Doc, almost in a semi-coma, dozed, but every now and then awakened with a start, gasping as his bonds grew tighter. His temples throbbed fiercely and in his heart there was a deep, sorrowing thought for Marta.

The day dragged on. Doc's tongue was thickening. As the sun swung, the breed came and turned Doc toward it, readjusting the bonds.

"D' eyes begin to bulge, leetle wan," he jeered. "Soon dey bulge more an' more an' . . .!" He cracked Carson across the jaw with the side of his hand.

"Dir—ty sidewinder," Doc croaked. "He had no voice left.

Malotte left him like that and went off to where Dal's stolen stock was being held.

FILLED with conceit and confidence, Malotte skilfully flipped a lass rope over the neck of the young stallion. Doc Carson was suddenly startled by the young one's scream—a scream of rage and fear. Through half-dimmed eyes Doc watched the breed snub the colt down to a sapling.

"The nitchi's as quick as a cottonmouth," Doc told himself.

The breed then proceeded to whale the youngster with a bridle. A brutal attack this on the beautiful son of the wild king.

The method Malotte employed to tame the young one quickly caused Doc to groan with pity for the colt. Doc had wrangled many a wild one, but he had never resorted to any form of cruelty.

With a suddenness that startled Doc, the thong about his wrists loosened. In the change of position, Malotte must have hurried this tie. Doc's urge, impetuously, was to make an immediate attempt to free himself, but his better judgment prevailed. He watched the breed continue to slash the colt fore and aft with the bridle's bit. Blood was mixed with the white lather on the young one's flanks.

Now the breed toted over his saddle. Doc gasped as he watched the stallion leap back, then as quickly lunge forward. But he suddenly seemed to have expended his effort to fight back. He now hung his head like a jaded cowpony, and trembled as that strange thing was lofted to his back, and the cinch tightened.

Doc glared at his captor, and shook with pity for

Dal's handsome young colt—the finest, most spirited young stallion he had ever seen.

As Malotte completed his saddling, Doc attempted to untie the thongs at the back of his neck. The dry, shrunken knots could not be budged, but Doc could move his hands behind his back. All at once he thought of his old tobacco knife, one that Tom Bruce, the blacksmith, had made for him out of a piece of old sheep shear blade.

Panting with elation, Doc discovered the knife in his pants pocket. He almost broke his nails in opening it. As the blade slipped once, Doc swore bitterly beneath his breath.

He looked up sharply as there came a wild cry from Malotte. The breed had succeeded in forking the stallion and Doc was treated to as masterful an exhibition of busting as anything he had ever seen, though at times he suspected the breed of pulling leather.

The little stallion had come unwound, had found a new reserve of fighting spirit. He showed more tricks than many an old wild mustang Doc had seen in end-swapping, sunfishing maneuvers.

Malotte lashed and roweled him fiercely. Then he was riding him hard at a steep bank. Twice the colt lunged and almost fell to the ground, nearly piling his rider.

In his excitement, Doc all but pitched to his face on the ground. He was free, though terribly weak. Slowly he recovered his balance and glanced across at Malotte's rifle and equipment. Doc wondered if his own six-gun was there too.

Doc moved cautiously in. Malotte had turned the colt and was riding him hard again at the bank when Doc lunged forward and retrieved his .44.

"Now, yuh all-fired polecat," he growled, "there ain't no law of Gawd nor man could hang me for what I aim to do!"

Doc raised his gun with both hands, setting his sights just ahead of the man creature's head as he rode low on the stallion's neck. Naieta's son was driving madly at the high bank.

Suddenly the youngster reared in his lunge. His effort to clear the bank was gallant. Carson, taken off balance, pulled. His shot was wild, but it caused the young stallion to swerve in mid-leap, coming crashing over backward, pinning the breed beneath him.

Doc Carson trembled with excitement and fear—fear only for the stallion, which lay now on his off side. For a long moment Doc was unable to move. But

suddenly he found a reserve of strength. He started forward, but had scarcely taken a step when he heard a sharp bark at his back. He spun, to glimpse dimly the bounding form of Dandy, Tom Bruce's shepherd dog.

MALOTTE had not thought of the keen sense of smell of the dog, if he even knew there was a dog at Sun-Bear Valley.

Now Doc heard the booming voice of Tom Bruce, and a hail from Dal, who came tearing down to the bottomland.

"My good gosh!" the little man gasped weakly and slipped slowly down in a faint. The strain had been too great. . . .

Doc awakened at the feel of ice-cold spring water at the base of his neck. Faintly he heard voices, then slowly recognition came. "Yuh little old hellion, yuh!"

It was Tom Bruce's voice Doc first recognized. The big blacksmith-homesteader was holding up Doc's head, while Dal held a hatful of water to his mouth. Doc attempted to grin.

"Th-anks—Tom—Dal," he breathed. "Glory, but that water's—fine. But-but what about the—uh—the colt, Dal? Me'n him put up a real fight. I'd have had that wideloopin' breed cold in a few minutes. Reminds me uh the time I was—"

"The colt'll be all right, pardner," Dal cut in. "Shook up some, and slashed, but he's onto his legs ag'in. The man critter's done, though. Mightn't last out the night. We thought when we heard yore shot yuh mebbe plugged him, and we wasn't of a mind to call yuh for it. Yuh've been through a bad time, Doc. Tom claims it's Mayan, or Aztec torture yuh was put to. That right, Tom?"

"Yeah, but they can't kill off this old horn-toad that-a-way, Dal," Bruce chuckled, and unwrapped a package he had brought along. "Yuh'd be better for a mouthful of food, Doc," he advised. "Cold mutton san'wich, with cherry relish trimmin's. No coffee nor pie, though. Here, eat somethin', and take a few more swallers of water."

They made a bed for Doc, and one for the breed. Malotte was pretty badly pulped. They did not expect him to survive, but at dawn, he was still alive.

Tom and Dal worked with pole levers on some rocks at the easterly end of the grassy bottom land, clearing an easier way out. Dal caught up Naieta and saddled her with the breed's saddle, carefully hoisting Malotte aboard.

"Reckon you'll have to ride in bareback, Doc,"

Dal said with a grin. "Yuh can fork the little buckskin mare."

Slowly they left the boxed meadow, striking eastward first, before turning south to hit the dim home trail.

Along the new trail, they halted now and then to admire this new area of good land.

"It's a fine stock country, Dal," Tom Bruce suggested. "Could accommodate four-five families right easy, with lots of timber for buildin' and firewood. Little clearin' required for grain an' alfalfa acreage, and that grass bottomland we found Doc and the stock in—see the springs there? Man dear, a homesteader's paradise! Pity we didn't know of some good settlers, huh?"

"Eh-h-h-h-h?" Doc Carson suddenly come awake. "You-all don't know the half of it. What about that belt of dry spruce for our schoolhouse? Enough lumber there for roofin' for all of us, if we're a mind to whipsaw her up. If it wouldn't be such a tough job pullin' Marta away from her cabbage patch at the crick, I'd be a-minded to come up here my ownself."

Dal smiled. Doc's spirit was returning. The little man was a marvel.

Much as Dal had reason to hate the half-breed, he halted the train every now and then to see to Malotte.

"Yuh brought this down on yore own head, Malotte," he said. "I've warned yuh off the range more'n once. There ain't a thing we can do for yuh till we get to my place, and even there—well, I don't know. Mebbe it'd be the best thing for you if yuh started some prayin'."

Malotte's dimmed eyes stared wildly. "*Mon dieu!* I know—ver'—leettle 'bout dat. I been bad wan—mos'—my life. Mebbe—you say somethin'—the—beads or—" His voice trailed off, and Dal thought he had passed along. He half turned to call on Doc, but just then the dog, Dandy, from a rise of land near-by, barked sharply.

NAIETA up ahead raised her head, sniffed sharply into the wind, then whinnied shrilly. There came the long, though distant rumbling of wagon wheels. "Settlers!" Bruce exclaimed. "Homesteaders!" Doc breathed huskily. Dal Baldwin was silent. He listened intently until the wagon sound ceased. He wondered if the settlers would be real folk, like the Bruces and Carsons. . . .

When finally they reached the Baldwin homestead yard it was to find two wagon outfits there, the teams unhitched and feeding on Dal's alfalfa. Mary Baldwin rushed to greet her husband.

“Dal—Dal darling!” she breathed softly, as he caught her into his arms. “I—we thought you were . . . Oh, Dal!”

Dal held her closely, as Marta hobbled up on her crutch to shoot a swift glance at her husband.

“Why, yuh little old mountebank!” she cried, tears streaming down her homely face. “Yore head and face is swole up just like yuh’d fell into a wild bees’ nest.”

Doc slid painfully to the ground and Marta gathered him into her ample embrace. Ella Bruce, more hysterical than the others, wept copiously in Tom’s arms.

Two tall men, obviously father and son, strode toward the Sun-Bear Valley folk now. Womenfolk, their womenfolk, shyly watched from the cabin stoop.

“Dal—meet up with Mr. Morrison, and his son, Jack Morrison. They’ve got five children, Dal, mostly all of school age.” Mary Baldwin smiled warmly as she made the introductions.

“Pleased to know yuh both,” Dal said with warmth, and introduced Tom and Doc in turn.

“Yuh kind of caught up with us at a bad time, Morrison,” Dal added. “A rustlin’ varmint has been makin’ trouble ever since Mary and me first hit the valley. He caught up with hisse’f, though. Reckon he won’t last much longer.”

Dal excused himself and hurried back to Naieta. Shortly he called on Doc.

“Reckon he’s gone, Doc,” Dal said softly. “Yuh’d best give a look at him.”

They lowered Malotte to the ground and Doc took the man’s pulse. He turned to Mary.

“Yuh better fetch me a mirror, please,” he said.

When the little cracked mirror came, Doc assumed a professional air. But it was just like Doc. Dal whispered to the elder Morrison that he was quite sure Doc knew the man was dead before he asked for the mirror.

“A polecat if they ever was one,” Doc grunted, after he had pronounced Malotte dead. “We’d better get Tom’s bull outfit and tote the body up for a—uh—burial. The first at Sun-Bear Valley. But while you all do some diggin’, I aim to rustle me some coffee.”

At the newly dug, shallow grave, Doc took over and assumed the role of parson. The other men folk were lowering the body on harness lines.

Reverently Doc intoned parts of the funeral service.

“A’mighty Gawd,” he went on reverently, “we’re gathered here, the decent folks of Sun-Bear Valley, to perform the last rites for a human critter that weren’t fit to live. We’re handin’ him across to you for judgment,

for it ain’t for us to make such judgment. The wilderness has handed out its own form of justice.”

Doc paused and coughed as he looked about, rather proud of his effort so far.

“I now commit the body to the—uh—grave, which should have mebbe been a foot or so deeper. Ashes to ashes, dust to—”

Doc glared up at Tom Bruce, who was having trouble with the leather rein.

“Amen!” Doc concluded abruptly.

There were no tears for Malotte, but the settlers had given him a decent burial. Now the womenfolk retired to the cabin, to prepare a supper. Out of doors, the men talked as Dal showed the Morrisons about his homestead and pointed to Doc and Tom’s places in the distance.

“I’m aimin’ to make a start in poll’ Angus cattle, Baldwin,” the elder Morrison said. “Not many, so I’ll run yuh all out of range, but just breeder stock. Jack here has the same ideas. If there’s some ploughable land along with some stock pasture, that’ll suit us just right.”

DAL told the Morrisons of the land to the northeast.

“Yuh can all make your camp at my place for as long as yuh’ve a-mind to,” he added. “Welcome to all we got, Morrison.”

“Judson—Jud Morrison—to you, Dal,” the elder Morrison said warmly. “We’re ever-lastin’ obliged to yuh all. If the topland yuh speak of is all right, we’ll get to work pronto. Then if everything adds up right I aim, as I was tellin’ yore good woman, to bring a niece up—a school-marm niece.”

“Schoolmarm? Why, uh—that’s just what we want!” Doc Carson was all excitement. “Eh-h-h-h— I can show yuh the finest stand of timber for a schoolhouse yuh ever saw!”

“How many young ’uns you got, Doc?” Morrison asked pleasantly.

“Why—uh—well, that is, I . . . Ever young ’un in Sun-Bear Valley is my young ’un.” Doc Carson chuckled. “Ask Dal if that ain’t so.”

Mary Baldwin was calling the men to supper, by banging on an old plough share with a piece of iron. They filed up and washed.

At the table, Doc called on all of them to bow their heads. A blessing must be asked, and grace said.

“And A’mighty Gawd,” Doc concluded, “we first settlers of the Valley thank yuh for the blessin’s of these fine new settlers, new neighbors. Give us all the power

to keep on helpin' each other along. We thank thee, Gawd, for the young 'uns, especially—the new young 'uns that have come up to play with our'n, and when the time comes to work. A-men.”

Not so far had there been a meal enjoyed more by all in Sun-Bear Valley. The womenfolk, under Marta's efficient direction, and with victuals augmented by new supplies brought in by the Morrisons, had prepared a feast indeed. Corn on the cob, a baked haunch of venison, with some fried ham and honey, pickles and wild berries and rich cream, and flaky biscuits baked by the elder Mrs. Morrison.

Dal rode Naieta over for Doc's fiddle, and Jud Morrison asked if he might bring in a banjo from his wagon.

They tuned up the fiddle and banjo, and managed to strike nearly the same tone. Doc suddenly crashed into the chords of a foottickling reel—“The Flowers of Edinburgh.” From this he ripped expertly through his repertoire of jigs and reels, ably accompanied by Jud. Then Dal Baldwin called for a waltz.

Crude homestead furniture was scraped back. Dal, Tom Bruce and Jack Morrison took their wives for partners and with a grace that was pleasant to watch, despite the cramped space and rough flooring, they danced until Doc scraped out a final chord.

There was a supper, later, when the Morrison

children were introduced again. The elder Mrs. Morrison, who throughout the dancing had neighbored with Marta Carson, introduced her children—twins—a boy and girl of eleven.

“Martin and Maureen. Don't look like twins,” Mrs. Morrison said. “Mebbe because Jud's a Yankee an' I'm Norwegian. Olga's my name. Then, besides my children, there's Jack's three—little baby Jud, five months; Nell, four, and the scamp uh the outfit, Ollie, five. A whole schoolful of Morrisons if you ask me.”

Doc Carson, tears streaming down his face, played softly from a suite, a wilderness suite he had composed himself. Never had the little man of many parts been happier, and despite the pain in his body, he continued to play, as the night deepened and it was time to return to his homestead.

Night! Calm, and peaceful at Sun-Bear. Dal and Jud Morrison stood in silence. The stock were all bedded down and the wilderness had seemed to, mute all sounds, save the soft whisper of the breeze in the near-by spruces.

“I'm inclined to think the Morrisons are here to stay, Dal,” Jud breathed.

“Yeah, and I'm opinin' the same, Jud. Welcome.”

They turned and walked slowly back to the store shed where the menfolk would bed down for the night.

