



STAMPEDE CONQUEST

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

*When trouble-makers invade the ranchlands of Sun Bear Valley,
Dal Baldwin and his friends are ready for them!*

THE HUMID NIGHT was oppressive at Sun Bear Valley, the pioneer homestead of Dal Baldwin, his lovely young wife Mary and their two sons.

Not a sound marred the great hush put upon the

hinterland with the coming of full night—not even the tinkle of a neighboring sheep or cow bell.

Dal Baldwin's face was deeply furrowed with concern as he turned up the wick of a stable lantern. He glanced down to his first little pioneer mare,

Naieta, a blooded creature which had formed one of the original team that had pulled him and Mary and their meager equipment into the valley. Dal lifted his gaze to the wide eyes of Mary, his wife, who had just entered the log stable.

“What do you think, Dal dear?” Mary asked tremulously. “Will she pull through?”

Dal’s mouth twisted. For a long moment he could make no reply. Naieta had been the nucleus of his breeding stock. Bred first in the open to King, the magnificent gray wild stallion leader, Naieta had mothered many a fine colt and filly. Tonight, her time had come again. Prince, the handsome son of King, had sired the foal Naieta would give borning to tonight. But Dal despaired for her life. A short time ago, in the breeder pasture, Naieta had gotten mixed up in a young brawl-tangle and had been severely battered by the rear hoofs of a strong young mare.

Dal smiled softly at Mary.

“We’d better get Doc Carson up, honey,” he breathed. “Could you ride over for him? I’d rather stand watch here with the kitten.”

Mary’s face brightened with hope. This was her chance to help. Doc Carson and his good-natured, homely wife, Marta, had been the first neighbors of the Baldwins. Marta had delivered Mary’s babies Jimmy and Ten.

Dal saddled a steady horse for Mary, and helped her mount.

“Tell Doc exactly how Naieta’s behavin’, honey,” he intoned. “He might want to bring in some special herb medicine for drenchin’.” Dal squeezed his wife’s warm hand and watched the dim outline of rider and horse until the shadows at the creek willows engulfed them.

Mary’s heart beat sharply as she rode away. A soft smile toyed with her mouth as she thought of Doc and his veterinary work. She was sure the Doc would pull Naieta through. The Baldwins loved loquacious Doc.

A SOFT wind stirred the spruces which framed the Baldwin homesite. A grumble of thunder reached Dal, deepening his frown. If a storm broke, it might excite the little mare.

Naieta groaned, and Dal dropped to his knees, gathering her pretty head into his arms. She snuffled softly and feebly flicked his face with her hot upper lip.

“It’s goin’ to be tough, kitten,” he intoned. “But keep snufflin’ and nuzzlin’—it shows you still got the spirit to live. Pull out of this, sugar, and for the rest of your life, you’ll have the run of the whole valley—a queen,

an ole lady queen, with nothin’ to do but boss every other critter on the range.” Dal laid her head gently down and turning, wrung out a cloth in a bucket of water. He bathed her muzzle and mouth and tongue.

Then followed a period of torture for Dal. He had other handsome horses in his pastures—young, vigorous stock, including Prince, the captured wild son of King. There was a band of young colts and fillies ready for shipping—good breeder stock for which Dal could command a high price. But all that mattered tonight was Naieta, the little pure-bred from which he had gotten his start of fine horse stock.

A sob racked him as Naieta seemed to grow limp, as if she could no longer continue to battle for her life.

Then suddenly Dal started at the sharp rattle of wagon wheels. Doc Carson was bringing his new team in at the lope.

“Whoa!” the voice of Doc sounded. Dal moved out of doors to welcome his valued little neighbor. Doc had a bent arthritic knee, which reduced his height even more. He was an odd little form in the gloom.

Mary dismounted and got the Doc’s crude box of veterinary medicaments and equipment from the wagon. Doc limped to the stable and cast a swift appraising glance down at the little mare.

“Eh-h-h—” he intoned, snicking off a corner of eating tobacco. “She shouldn’t ought to be down that-away, Dal. We got to h’ist her onto her feet.”

“But, Doc!” Dal protested. “She’s so weak, she couldn’t stand.”

A wide smile exposed Doc’s gold-capped teeth, slightly stained by tobacco juice. He spat from the corner of his mouth.

“Bring in yore block an’ tackle, an’ some broad buckskin,” he directed. “I’m goin’ to h’ist her up.”

As Dal hurried off, Doc got Mary to hold the lantern for him while he bent in low over Naieta, feeling her muzzle for temperature and pulse beat.

“High fever, Mary,” Doc muttered. He turned and glanced at Naieta’s hind quarter area. Then he jerked off his buckskin jacket.

“Yuh hustle a bucket of hot water with lots uh good soap, honey!” he called.

From his veterinary box, he fished out a drenching outfit and began to mix a potion from cans of herbal medicaments.

When Mary returned with the hot water, Doc added disinfectant to it. He worked now with speed and skill.

Using rope and the broad buckskin bands Dal had

brought, he fashioned two strong, wide slings and rigged up a block and tackle from the ridge log of the barn.

The little mare was raised, groaning, almost entirely off her feet. As he worked, Doc gave directions to both Dal and Mary. Now Naieta's hoofs just touched the floor.

Doc got his drench ready. Mary Baldwin gasped. It seemed to her that Doc's method of treatment was unnecessarily hard, but Dal reassured her with a smile.

DOC gave the little mare the entire dosage. She sagged, but Doc beckoned to Dal to tighten the pull on the tackle.

Shortly, to Mary Baldwin's amazement, Doc Carson got Naieta moving. She took a few faltering steps. Doc persisted, kept her moving, even to walking out of the stable for a few rods before being led back to her loose box. Doc nodded with satisfaction. He grinned at Mary.

"I'm most as hungry as a lobo, sugar," he said. "I hadn't eaten supper when you come along. Could yuh fix me up a mess uh vittles?"

Mary nodded and withdrew. Doc nudged Dal and winked.

"What happens from now wouldn't be purty for Mary to watch, Dal," Doc explained. "I got to take the little feller away from the kitten . . . I done added a mite uh strychnine to that drench. It'll give her strength to help me."

Naieta was down, groaning, and the loquacious little pioneer went to work with a proficiency that Dal Baldwin admired. He watched Doc work as a sharp crash of thunder blasted close by. All the time the Doc talked soothingly to the little mare.

The electrical storm was of short duration. Mary Baldwin breathed a prayer of thanksgiving as the thunder receded. The drum of rain on the roof was lighter. Mary had been fearful for her garden. This gentle rain was welcome.

She was getting sliced side meat into a pan for frying when she heard voices. She darted to the door and flung it open. Dal, his right arm across Doc's shoulders, entered the house.

"What—darling?" Mary asked.

Dal kissed her warmly.

"She'll live, honey."

"And the—the—foal, Dal?" Mary's moist eyes were wide now.

Dal shook his head, gathered Mary into his arms, but smiled as he looked into her frightened eyes.

"It's dead, Mary. Reckon the kickin' Naieta took from that black mare killed the colt. If'n it hadn't been for Doc, we'd have lost Naieta, too."

Mary turned from Dal and kissed the Doc warmly on the cheek.

"You're a darling, Doc," she murmured, stepping back. Old Doc's eyes batted sharply. He snorted and blew his nose vigorously on a large spotted bandana.

"Gosh a'mighty!" he exploded. "Here we're almost cryin', when we should be re-'j'icin'. Let's wash up and eat. Them baked biscuits smell plumb good."

"I think that talk about hunger was just a scheme to get me out of the way," Mary said as she moved back to her stove. . . .

The storm had freshened up the valley atmosphere. The two young sons were perched on the top rail of the peeler corral, as Dal Baldwin rode out a young string this evening. When a young dappled gray stallion piled Dal on an end-swap, Ten, the younger boy, let out a squeal, hoorawing his father who took it all good naturedly, albeit it fired him with a determination to ride the wildling into the ground.

Mounted again, Dal gave his boys a good exhibition ride, though the little gray taxed his ability more than once.

Finally Dal signaled to young Jim to open the corral gate and the lathered colt stretched for the open at a hard run.

WHEN a mile from the corral, Dal glimpsed a rider tearing up to meet him. He recognized Nancy Bartlett, the pretty school teacher, niece of Jud Morrison, Dal's neighbor to the north. She drew her paint horse to a halt close by and attempted to bring her rampant hair back to some semblance of behavior. But her face was pale.

"Somethin' wrong up to the Morrison place, Nan?" Dal asked.

She shook her head.

"It's—Phil, Dal. I was supposed to meet him. When he didn't come, I rode on and—Dal, the Valley Beyond is full of shorthorn cattle!"

"What!"

Nan Bartlett nodded.

"At least three hundred head of cattle are grazing there. I saw three cowhands riding herd. I hitched my pony and went in on foot. One of Phil's horses was gone, but I couldn't find any sign of Phil at all. Dal, what do you think has happened?"

Dal's nerves tightened. The veins in his forehead stood out. Nan's news was bad.

Phil Cody, the latest arrival at Sun Bear Valley, had been placed in a temporary shack camp at the upper Valley Beyond to take squatter's possession of the beautiful tract of land Dal Baldwin and Jud Morrison hoped to hold until their three sons were old enough, with Phil, to ranch the valley and its foothill range. Each settler at Sun Bear had contributed equipment and stock to help Phil get started. Shortly, there would be a building bee under Doc Carson's direction, and then, when all was ready, Nan Bartlett and Phil would be married.

From Nan's news, Dal concluded that a new rancher from Gray Bull had disregarded Cody's squatter's rights of possession and had jumped the Valley Beyond. Dal and his neighbors hadn't calculated on such an invasion.

After a brief moment Dal lifted his gaze to Nan.

"You better ride to Jud Morrison's, Nan," he said. "Ask him to saddle a horse and meet me at the school house. Soon as I change mounts, I'll be back. Don't tell anyone else, though."

"Do you think something has happened to Phil?" she asked anxiously.

"Nothin' too serious has happened, honey," he said reassuringly. "Now you hustle on over to Jud's."

They parted and Dal rode back to his corrals where he saddled an older, steadier horse, a roan gelding.

Mary packed Dal a light lunch and shortly Dal rode off to join Jud who was waiting for him at the school house.

Jud's face was clouded. Nan Bartlett was his niece and Jud had been instrumental in bringing her here to the frontier homestead country. Jud, too, had persuaded Phil Cody to settle in this district and later he hoped the young folk would fall in love and get married.

His hopes had promised materialization, but now—Jud snicked off a chaw of tobacco, stowed it comfortably inside a cheek, then turned sharply to Dal as they rode on.

"So what we got to find out is whether this cattle outfit is salty, or just a mite too ambitious, huh, Dal?" he questioned his friend.

Dal was always glad of Jud's good counsel and good judgment.

"That's right, Jud. We're goin' in friendly, unarmed. Good, reg'lar ranchers don't stir up trouble. We should be able to talk squatter's rights to any cattleman who ain't trigger-itchy."

They touched up their horses and rode on into the upper levels which were all alive with the glory of

approaching early summer. New life manifested itself in every copse of shrubbery, every tree belt where bird life and small ground creatures scuttled and fussed as if trying to crowd a whole lifetime of activity into these brief few weeks of nesting, mating and rearing.

IT WAS a grand sight the Valley Beyond offered as the two riders rode through the defile of the pass and pulled up their horses. The beautiful valley shimmered in the sunlight which in its lowering, flooded the magnificent wild terrain in a bath of purpled rose and gold.

Cattle grazed in a fairly compact herd—reddish bodies in bright and colorful contrast with the lush green grass.

Dal Baldwin heaved a long sigh as he glimpsed Phil Cody's temporary log shack nestling squat among the cottonwoods and wolf willows, almost at the very spot where Dal had faced death in the camp of the killer, Malotte.

Riders rode casually, easily around the shorthorn herd, a perfect pastoral picture which, in circumstances ordained by the folk of Sun Bear Valley, would have charged their hearts with deep satisfaction. But the whole scene was marred by the imminent threat of strife.

"We'd best ride in and get the meetin' over and done with, Jud," Dal advised. Jud nodded agreement and touched his mount lightly with a spur.

Shortly, they had pulled up as a handsome young waddy wheeled his mount about to meet them.

"How's!" Dal called in friendly greeting. The cowhand shot a swift glance down to the belts of the two visitors before replying.

"How's, grangers!" he drawled.

Dal started. Evidently these riders knew all about the Sun Bear Valley folk.

"You've met up with the squatter-settler of this valley—youngster by the name of Cody?" Dal asked.

"Right, suh. Salty young jigger. Nearly got hisself into a peck of trouble. Dale—that's our boss and owner of the Box D—had to talk some plain turkey to him. The young mossback was all ready to go for his gun."

The good-looking cowhand grinned and went to work to twist himself a smoke.

Both Baldwin and Morrison felt twinges of misgiving. Phil, evidently, had sounded off.

"So? Where can we find this feller, yore boss, Dale—Dale—"

"Rankin, suh—Dale Rankin," the cow-puncher

replied. "Yuh'll find him about seven mile north. Just follow the herd's tracks till yuh come to the temporary camp of the Box D. The young squatter's up there now. Reckon to pay Dale a visit?"

Dal was quick to catch the caustic smile of this confident ranny.

"Yeah, bud," he said. "This valley is ours "-ours by moral right and legal squatter's rights. It's a valley we picked out for young Cody an' our own sons. You done called us grangers, feller. Jud here's ranchin' Polled Angus pure-breds, better stock than your own here. I'm breedin' and ranchin' horse stock. We're ranchers, too, bud, and don't you forgit it!"

The waddy's smile broadened.

"You brag easy, mister," he retorted. "Any outfit that plows land, raises chickens and milks cows is grangers to us. Our cattle are here because the grass is good and there ain't no fence lines to keep us out. If'n Dale figgers to herd 'em out, it's okay by me. I'm only ramroddin' for him. If'n Dale says they stick, then boys, they stick, sabe?"

Dal Baldwin didn't want any trouble, but he'd have given a lot at this point to have cracked a fist into the cocky young ranny's face.

"Texan!" Dal told himself. He swung his horse and beckoned to Jud. Together they rode off to the cut-off trail plainly marked by twelve hundred or more hoofs. They struck up into the northerly hill country, along a tortuous trail which, just before dusk, brought them to the camp of the Box D.

They were met by a long-legged, broad-shouldered man of Jud's age, a man who glared at them from under shaggy eyebrows.

"Evenin', pilgrims," the big cattleman greeted gruffly. "Mebbeso lookin' for yore wanderin' boy, huh?"

"Him and a feller by the name uh Dale Rankin," Jud Morrison snapped back. "Yuh're Rankin?"

"Right! Light and visit."

They dismounted and Rankin called up a wrangler to take over their horses. Dal shot roving glances over the clutter of newly-arrived camping outfit. A set of buildings was in the process of erection.

"In time for grub, boys," Rankin said. "Had a hot ride by the look of yore hosses."

"Yeah, but what about young Cody?" Jud Morrison drawled.

"Uh—oh, the young banty? Wall, he's restin' peaceful now. My fault. I figgered to be sociable. Mebbeso I shouldn't have asked him to jine me in a drink of Bourbon. He passed out."

Baldwin started. While not opposed to a drink on occasion, when in town, he had no time for liquor in the wilds, at work. But there was something about this leatheryfaced rancher that prompted Dal to play him along. He had a strong-jawed face which denoted stubbornness, yet there was a not unfriendly twinkle in his eye for all his bluff and gruff mannerisms and speech.

RANKIN led them to a mess tent at which chuck was being served. "Perhaps yuh'd admire to wake up the button and make a medicine talk with him afore yuh eat," Rankin said, but Jud shook his head.

"He'll keep, Rankin." Jud intended to play his cards close to the chest against Dale Rankin. Jud had raised cattle in the Southwest himself. He figured he could match wits with the owner of the Box D, when the showdown came.

Immediately after supper, it was Dal who asked to see Phil Cody.

They found Phil sloshing cold spring water on his face at a watering trough. He shook the water from his hair and eyes, swinging sharply as he glimpsed his two friends.

"Uh—Dal—Jud," he gasped. "Reckon I handled this badly. Took my first red eye and it got me, but please don't let on to Nan. I thought I was being big matching up to Rankin's drinking. I figgered that way I'd be able to talk medicine with him. But— I'm sorry."

Dal clapped him between the shoulders. "You did well enough you didn't start somethin' that might have got you a six foot claim uh valley clay," he answered. "Come on in now. We've got to pow-wow with the boss of the Box D."

Rankin was hailing them. They joined him at his tent, where he turned a lantern wick up for better light. He poured drinks for Jud and Dal and offered one to Phil, grinning, but young Cody made a grimace of refusal.

"Reckon yuh boys have a chip on yore shoulders, huh?" the big rancher drawled. "I know all about yore homesteadin' at—uh—Sun Bear Valley. It's a tough life; I've done some. But I'm cattle ranchin', and I hunt up grass, in a free country, an' if'n there's no fences, I take over. Plumb natural, ain't it?"

"Not when yuh run yore herd in on land that's already possessed under squatter's rights, Rankin," Jud Morrison retorted.

Jud now looked to Dal to carry on. After all, Dal was the first settler of Sun Bear Valley and had the right to take over.

Dal's steel-gray eyes measured Rankin with steady gaze now. He set down his half empty glass and cleared his throat.

"We settlers of Sun Bear have bucked the toughest sort of life," he commenced. "We started homesteadin', and have steadily bucked our way up into the business of ranchin'. Small yet, we know, but ranchin's our aim. We've got young sons comin' along. Soon, they'll want to strike out for themselves—like young Phil here. That's why, when we discovered the Valley Beyond, where yore stock is grazin', we took possession under squatter's rights."

Dal paused a moment to take another sip of the hard liquor. Now he set his glass down again and turned to the boss of the Box D.

"But, Rankin, there are other rights in a man's life on the frontier—moral rights! The whole future of our boys depends on their possession of the valley where yore stock is feedin'. With us, it ain't just a matter of dollars and cents, but a matter of livin'; a future, marriage, an' home an' kids."

DAL broke off to drain his glass. He shook his head in friendly refusal of another drink.

"As regards young Phil, here," he resumed. "His was to be the first weddin' in our district. Somethin' we've all been lookin' forward to. We're givin' him his start at the Valley Beyond—stock an' equipment. What young cattle stock we give him is swallowed up by yore shorthorns. That's the picture, Rankin. Now make your own medicine talk, huh?"

Rankin took a pull at his liquor, drew the back of a hand across his mustached mouth, then shot sharp glances from one to the other of his visitors.

"A purty good speech, Baldwin," he drawled. "But I ain't overly impressed. I don't hold to such sentiment myownself. I'm in the cattle business for profit and I've got to dig hard and scratch to become established in this new range. What do I find but a valley with good grass right when I need it most, to help give me a chance to get organized here on the home spread. You boys will have to show me a augerment why I ain't actin' within my rights grazin' where my stock is. I don't want no trouble—no gun trouble, or anythin' like that. After all, I'm to be the nearest ranch neighbor yuh'll have. But I am goin' to hang on to that grass for as long as I need it. If'n yuh—all can persuade me different, can best me out of it lawful, I'll shift my herd out. 'Course if'n yuh don't see my p'int and don't reckon to keep yore powder in yore cartridges, then—"

His eyes narrowed under their bushy brows as he got to his feet, shrugging.

JUD accepted another drink, downed it at a gulp, then stood up also.

"We've got a lot at stake, Rankin," he said. "Not profit such as yuh harped on, but a long steady future for our sons. We aim to fight yuh, one way or another, as clean an' as fair as yuh want it. But—that valley is ours, by thunder!"

Jud smashed a ham-like hand against the crude table top.

"An' yuh'd better warn yore cowhands not to start smokin' their shootin'-irons, Rankin," he added. "When yuh hear from us next, it'll be when we come a-ridin' in to claim what is rightful ours."

Rankin nodded, a not unpleasant smile playing over his features.

"Okay, neighbors," he drawled. "That's how we'll leave it, then. Be seein' yuh around some more, I take it."

Dal returned the cattleman's smile as they shook hands.

"We'll be around, Rankin," Dal said softly. "I'm back of Jud's words to the limit. The Valley Beyond is ours! Think it over aplenty."

Rankin chuckled.

"If'n yuh boys win out," he chuckled, "I'll throw the biggest weddin' barbecue for yore young button friend and his wife yuh ever heerd tell about. So long, now, and—keep yore powder dry."

Outside, Jud, Dal and Phil got their horses and mounted without another word to or from Rankin.

A mile from camp, Dal called a halt.

"I got an idea Rankin's the biggest old horn-toad bluffer I ever saw," he intoned. "We'll best him. How, I don't know. But I think I do know who'll have a solution. Guess who?"

"Doc Carson!" Jud Morrison answered. They rode on into the deepening night, through shadowy canyons where they listened to the weird cries of Ah-Hoo, the great horned owl, and to the occasional childlike cries of Acheeta, the cougar on the prowl.

The following evening, all of the men of Sun Bear Valley gathered at the Baldwin home. Dal opened the conference.

"We want no bloodshed," he began. "But we must get the valley back. If we fail, we might as well pack up and hightail it. If the Box D wins out, other outfits'll crowd us."

Grim-faced, the men looked to Doc Carson, who sat steadily munching on his eating tobacco, his eyes shooting sharp, flinty lights. When at last he got to his feet and presented a suggestion for the solution to their problem, the men of Sun Bear were astonished. Doc's scheme was the most audacious counter move they had ever heard of, and they discussed it pro and con far into the night. Tom Bruce voiced the opinion that Doc's scheme might easily precipitate gun warfare.

"We got guns, too," Doc countered. "Remember this, all of you. This hombre, Dale Rankin, won't admire a gun fight showdown any more'n we want it. He's short-handed. He's come up close to our valley to establish this spread permanent. Now wouldn't it be all-fired short reasonin' for him to git too salty with a bunch of determined settlers—his closest neighbors?"

A vote was taken. Though reluctant, Tom Bruce raised his hand with the rest to carry Doc's suggestion unanimously.

The next morning, Phil Cody moved back to his shack at the Valley Beyond. . . .

Not long after sun-up, the circle riders of the Box D were amazed when a wagon outfit rattled down through the pass to the valley. Their cows were close-herded at the westerly end of the long grass stretch.

When a heavy four-horse breaking plow outfit started turning sod, the young ramrod of the Box D whirled his bronc and tore down on the settlers. His hand hovered over his gun butt as he bellowed to Dal Baldwin, driving the four-up, to stop. At the plow, Jud Morrison smiled. In a boot on the heavy plow beam a rifle was snugged. Slung at Jud's belt was a holstered single-action .45.

Dal Baldwin was similarly armed with belt gun.

"Better git back to herdin' yore critters, feller," Jud growled. "You'll be havin' a little more company later on."

"Hup!" Dal flicked a near beam horse with a line end and the team dug into the collars as a long ribbon of sod rolled steadily into a black marker line—the mark of the determination of the Sun Bear Valley settlers.

DAL and Jud watched the Box D foreman ride up and order one of his cowhands up along the north trail.

"Reckon Rankin'll start runnin' in circles when he finds we're callin' his bluff, Jud," Dal boomed back.

Jud grunted, and leaned hard on the near plow handle, the better to cut a shallow root system. . . .

At the shack area, Phil Cody was hard at work clearing out underbrush. Skidded, ready for the building bee, was stacked a set of well selected dry spruce logs.

Dal and Jud took their work slowly. They had no intention of attempting to break too much sod. Even half an acre would be sufficient. Theirs was token work, manifesting their intention to reclaim what was by all moral rights theirs.

At dusk, as they ate the supper Phil had cooked for them, they suddenly started at the pounding of hoofs.

Dal rose as Rankin rode down on them.

"So, yuh're takin' over, huh?" the rancher roared.

"That's right, Rankin," Dal replied softly. "Still figger you can stop us?"

"My cattle are still grazin', Baldwin, an' I aim to keep 'em grazin'. Don't crowd 'em, or me, too hard."

Dal's eyes met the challenge spilling from Rankin's.

"That a challenge or a—uh—threat?" he asked sharply.

"You figger it out, granger," the big man retorted.

"Set and eat a bite?" Jud Morrison invited.

"Uh, why, shore."

Rankin dismounted and Phil Cody brought a plate of stew and a tin mug of coffee.

"Could have ate with the boys at the west end of the valley," Rankin explained, "but I reckon it don't hurt none to be neighborly." His eyes twinkled sharply under his overhanging brows.

Dal Baldwin ate in silence. He'd never before encountered quite such a character as Rankin. He didn't know exactly which way this big man might jump.

Darkness closed in. Dale Rankin suddenly started, leaping to his feet.

"Could have swore I heard the blat of woolly-backs!" he rasped. Dal and Jud exchanged meaning glances, and then—a strange throat sound escaped the cattleman. He strode off a pace or two, his hand gripping the butt of his gun as he glimpsed, in the gloom, a band of sheep breaking through the pass defile, to scurry down the incline to the valley.

"Sheep!" he thundered. "By the hully sailfish! Uh—" He swung around to the settlers. "I—I didn't know yuh-all had woollies, too. Yuh'd better stop 'em, turn 'em, Baldwin!"

"You got any legal papers of restraint?" Dal asked. "You invited us to fight you, Rankin. Now you'd better talk medicine to your circle riders. If they start bloodying up the sheep, it'll mean we start bummin' powder, savvy?"

Champing his jaws like an irate grizzly, Rankin snorted. He mounted and rode off, as the whole of Tom Bruce's herd of sheep banded into the valley.

Young Jack Morrison loped his horse around the band and held them. Doc Carson and Bruce rode up.

Doc had figured his plan out carefully. He had decided to hold the sheep band at the easterly end of the valley until deep night, until the shorthorn herd of the Box D were all bedded down. The settlers knew that a herd of bedded cattle in wild open range could be spooked by a single shot or any sharp, strange noise into a hell-bent stampede. Doc felt reasonably sure no puncher would dare fire a shot.

Shortly, Tom Bruce and Jack Morrison would bell as many of the ewes as they had bells for. Then the woollies would be turned loose. The men of Sun Bear Valley were determined to play their hand out to the limit.

Dale Rankin had, in desperation, done some planning too. Bruce and Jack Morrison were busy belling ewes when a volley of shots crashed. Rankin had figured to beat the settlers to the plan of stampede. He planned, by his shots, to send the spooky sheep plunging back up into the pass.

Tom Bruce turned, jerking out his Colt and started shooting in the general direction of those dim cowhand silhouettes.

THE sheep band broke in wild stampede. In the pandemonium of blating, they tore at a dead run toward the west end of the valley.

Cattle bawled. Then came the booming drum of their hoofs. The hills caught and flung back in startling echoes the roll of pounding hoofs and the scary bawl and blat of hurricaning creatures.

"Might's well help things along a mite," Doc Carson rasped, chuckling. He drew his old sixgun and started fanning. Rankin had opened the fireworks.

Jud Morrison hoisted his heavy forty-five-ninety rifle and blasted shot after shot.

"Mebbeso we're goin' to have to go plumb to kingdom come afore we round up them woollies ag'in," Doc Carson observed. He limped over to catch up his horse. He wanted to take a look-see at the westerly end of the valley. This whole idea was his. Rankin, with his shooting, had helped solve the problem of the Sun Bear Valley settlers. . . .

At sun-up, Dale Rankin rode a lathered horse up into the settlers' camp. The big cattleman dismounted wearily. His face was grimed with dust and sweat which clung like mud to his stubbled face.

"Got a cup of coffee a feller could wash some extr' gravel from his t'roat with?" he asked.

Dal Baldwin turned to Phil Cody, who smiled and pushed a coffee pot nearer the center of the little four-holed stove.

"You're satisfied this valley belongs to us, Rankin?" Baldwin inquired.

The big man scowled. Then slowly his mouth parted in a wide grin. He rolled a ball of expended eating tobacco round inside his mouth, then spat it out testily.

"Reckon I should of played my cards a bit different, boys," he admitted. "Uh—thanks, Cody." He accepted a mug of coffee from Phil and slowly drank a few gulps.

"I'm a good loser, though," he went on. "All my life I've had the idea I could now and then bluff my way through. Never figgered a bunch of settlers could best me without drawin' blood. I—I hope I'll make yuh-all a good neighbor."

Dal Baldwin got to his feet, his eyes narrowed, a smile twisting the corners of his mouth, but not with any element of gloating.

"Okay, Rankin. Now I guess we can make you a proposition. We don't need the grass here in the valley for the balance of the season. You could have got it free gratis, if'n you'd come up peaceable and asked for it. There's a part of the valley grass we might not need even next year. Shoot square with us, and we can make arrangements for you to run cattle up here from time to time. That sound like good neighbor policy?"

"Sounds mighty swell of yuh boys," Rankin replied. "I've been licked fair an' square. I—uh—well, my herd is bad scattered, and I'd admire to pay special day wages if yuh boys would help us round up the critters. Then there's this, I'd like to add. If'n yuh boys ever run into trouble any time, and want help, send a rider. We'll come a'whoopin'!"

The settlers saddled up. Led by Dal Baldwin, they rode out of the valley to round up both sheep and cattle herds. Again the frontier had wildly challenged. Again, the Sun Bear Valley folk had smashed through to another conquest.