



TERROR NEIGHBORS

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Dal and Mary Baldwin face the supreme test of their courage when four-footed death comes stealing into Sun-Bear Valley!

DAL BALDWIN froze as he caught the sound of some large wild creature in the nearby fruit thicket. Since his every sense was attuned to the presence

and movement of his wilderness neighbors, he instinctively felt that a huge grizzly bear had been disturbed at a feast in the berry shrubs.

Dal was without his old Winchester today, His

brow puckered in a deep frown, and his heart picked up its beat sharply as he looked down and forward and glimpsed the positive tracks of a big silvertip.

Ever since coming to this rugged, untamed wilderness with his wife almost two and a half years ago, Dal had hoped that his predatory wild neighbors, grizzlies and cougars, would keep to the higher craglands of the foothills and mountains. It was Dal's hope not only to carve out a home here but to establish and build up a horse ranch.

In the hills there roamed a magnificent wild stallion at the head of a mustang band. Already Dal's blooded little mare, Naieta, had dropped a foal from King, the wild leader. They were the nucleus of Dal's band. He had also captured a wild mare, which had dropped a foal.

Dal knew that to grizzly and cougar alike, there was no more succulent food in all the wilds than young horseflesh. In a night, either species of varmint could wipe out the whole of Dal's horse stock and his cow and her calf as well.

Dal was also disturbed because his wife, Mary, and their two-year-old son, Jimmy, who had already displayed a tendency to roam off in search of adventure. Jimmy had once gone as far as the creek, and into the creek. Only the timely action of Dandy, the shepherd dog belonging to Dal's neighbor to the south, Tom Bruce, had saved Jimmy from drowning.

It was not improbable that a she-grizzly with trailing cubs might attack a human creature surprising her.

Cautiously, Dal now moved out and coned the area in the clear. Suddenly he halted, taking in a sharp breath. On a hogback rise a few hundred yards away, he glimpsed a huge she-grizzly, which he judged to weigh in the neighborhood of seven hundred pounds. He swore softly for not having brought his rifle.

He now turned back. There was fencing to do on his pasture land to the north of his sown acreage—a snake-fence to be built with rails of poplar sapling and lodgepole pine. Below, there was alfalfa in full blue-purple bloom. He might not harvest more than one crop this year, but he would need all he could get for Winter feed. Unfenced, his stack would be at the mercy of mule deer.

FOR three hours Dal toiled at his fenceline, then called a halt to enjoy a smoke. His mind went back to the challenges thrown out by the wilderness since his and Mary's arrival in this beautiful sector of Wyoming, which they called Sun-Bear Valley. He recalled the night young Jimmy was born, and the fortuitous

arrival of Doc Carson and his wife Marta, neighbors to westward. It was Marta who delivered young Jimmy.

Dal thought back to the arrival of Tom Bruce and his wife, Ella, and their baby, Donna. Bruce had brought sheep to Sun-Bear Valley, although Dal had always loathed woollies. In a blinding storm, they had trodden down his first crop of oats.

Yet he had taken pity on the Bruces. He had housed them and helped them along with the Carsons to become established. When a sweeping fire struck with disastrous results, it was Dal who did more than anyone else to save Bruce's sheep across the creek.

A deep scowl furrowed Dal's face as he recalled his meetings with the half-breed, Quirt Malotte. Malotte had stolen Naieta, the little mare, in a successful attempt to capture King, the wild stallion. Dal had set the big gray King free, and had given Malotte a beating which the breed never forgot. Malotte had robbed Dal's winter traplines of valuable fur. He had made an attempt on Dal's life.

It was the half-breed, out of pure spite, who had guided Tom Bruce and his sheep up to the fringes of Sun-Bear.

The wilderness had hurled challenge after challenge, but Dal and his wife had met each one with courage. They needed more neighbors. Good-class, home folk who could get along as well as the present settlers of Sun-Bear, and exchange work and sympathies, sharing all.

Dal knew that some day Government surveyors would come through. He and his neighbors would be obliged to file on their homesteads in legal manner to comply with regulations.

Dal dreamed on. He thought of Mary's coming child, their second. He hoped it would be another boy. There could be daughters later, but first he wanted sons—sons to whom to hand over his horses and rich range. He visualized a schoolhouse and a place for gatherings in true pioneer community spirit.

He had a lot to hope for, and a great deal to work for.

He got to his feet, grinned determinedly at the weather-gorged mountains to westward and north, as if hurling back the challenges of those grim peaks.

Until sundown, Dal worked at his fence. Then he strolled slowly back to the bottom land where his cabin, storehouse and stable nestled prettily between the spruce-and-cottonwood belt and the creek.

Mary Baldwin met her husband with a soft smile. He kissed her warmly. She looked tired.

"Been workin' too hard in the garden, honey," he said. "Or has young Jim fallen into the crick ag'in?"

"Yes and no, Dal." Mary shrugged. "We'll have to start tethering that young man out. If it hadn't been for Dandy, Jimmy would have fallen into the creek."

Dandy was Tom Bruce's dog, a faithful creature which had performed so valiantly the night of the fire in its efforts to save the sheep band. Badly burned, the dog had been cared for by Dal and Mary, and now it spent most of its time at their place, allowing young Jim to rough him up.

"Something's bothering you, Dal dear," Mary said sharply. "What is it? Water running short in the irrigation flumes, or is it something more serious than that?"

Dal plucked at a hard dry callous in the palm of his right hand and forced a smile, which, however, quickly faded.

"You read my mind like a book, hon," he drawled. "I hadn't meant to tell you this, but you might as well know, because you'll have to be on the lookout. I come across big silvertip sign. I saw the critter. Most scairt me out of my buckskins."

Mary's face blanched. She thought instantly of Jimmy, already beginning to wander in search of adventures.

"We'll have to be careful until the neighbors an' I can mebbe-so hunt him down, Mary," Dal went on. "You keep an eye on young Jim. I'll have to watch the stock."

At a sharp whinny from the nearby corral, Dal swung to glimpse a yearling filly rear and playfully strike at a handsome young colt. The colt was the get of Naieta and King, the big wild stallion—young wild stock for which Dal had the highest hopes.

Near-by, fanging each other in the withers, stood Naieta, sleek and trim, and the shaggy little buckskin mare Dal had captured from King's wild band.

A soft breeze riffled through the alfalfa and oats. The lowering sun's light began to frolic with the shadowy crags in the north hills.

Sun-Bear Valley was bathed in peace and gentle beauty. At the moment it was impossible for the Baldwins to visualize their homestead in any other mood.

Mary touched Dal's arm.

"Supper's on, dear," she said softly. "Tom and Ella and perhaps the Carsons will be along later for some singing. I reckon you almost forgot today is Sunday."

"Reckon I did, honey. But I don't think the Lord will hold it ag'in me, when there is so much work to be done. I think he figgers like I do. In a pioneer life, no day should be figgered more sacred than another."

Dal Baldwin sat down to his meal of sowbelly side pork and corn bread and wild honey, but before he took a bite, he offered up thanks, with a grace Doc Carson had taught him.

DOC CARSON'S fiddle wailed a gospel song. Led by Mary Baldwin's sweet voice, the neighbors of Sun-Bear Valley held their service. Mary it was who read a scripture passage from the old Bible.

Then Doc, the little old-timer who—according to his own word—had done everything there was to do from the Mexican Border to the Canadian Line, raised his hand and quaintly said a prayer.

"An' dear Lord," he went on, "give us good reason never to doubt Thy word. Keep us an' watch over our kids an' our stock against the attack of our terror neighbors—critters which even right now might be lurkin' within strikin' distance. May there be more an' more young uns to come to us here at Sun-Bear Valley from time to time. Reckon I won't be askin' for any more this time. Amen."

Marta Carson sniffed. Then her eyes began to twinkle. She had heard Doc in his sulphurous outbursts. She had heard and listened with reverence to his preachments. Now she turned and winked at Mary and Ella Bruce.

"Want to let you hear a little wilderness tune I done figgered out myself?" Doc asked. "First we have the sounds at dawn of the birds, green-winged teal pipin', a sage thrasher havin' an argyment with a meadowlark. Then there's sounds you don't rightly hear but feel."

Doc's good friends listened to one of the sweetest pieces they had ever heard. It had no theme, no beginning, no middle, no end. But it had a melodic beauty that touched them all. Then suddenly, as if to snap them all back into a more realistic mood, Doc scraped his bow savagely across the strings in a terrific chording of the favorite old hoe-down, "Smash the Window."

He was scarcely finished when Dal swiftly leaped to his feet and reached for his Winchester. Doc laid his bow and fiddle down, and he snatched at his gun belt hanging over the back of a chair.

The men moved out of doors, leaving the women folk to exchange glances.

Dal whispered to his friends. There was trouble at the horse corral.

A half moon cast an eerie light on the homestead. Many shadowy forms seemed to emerge from the deeps. Dal waved Doc to the south, while he hugged the fringe of cottonwoods and spruces to the north. Tom Bruce moved up between them.

The stock were huddled against the farther end of the horse corral.

All at once, Dal froze. Naieta screamed. Dal suddenly leaped forward as he glimpsed Naieta rear and come crashing down with her forehoofs at the shadowy form of a big cougar, which whirled clear.

A snarling creature whisked by Dal. It was Dandy, Tom Bruce's dog, which had tanged cat scent. Dandy hurled himself over the top rail, but almost instantly the men heard the dog yelp with pain as the cougar clawed him along a flank.

Two shots blasted. Doc Carson was triggering his old .44, aiming through the corral poles. Dal yelled to him. His rifle was at the ready.

As the big cat cleared the top rail, Dal triggered. The creature screamed as it buckled and smashed to the ground outside the corral, quickly stiffening in death.

The men entered the corral and took swift stock.

"Look, Dal, over in that corner," Bruce sang out.

Dal whirled and hurried forward. The filly from the buckskin mare was down. Dal groaned and dropped to his knees beside her. Doc came up to make a more professional examination.

"She alive?" Tom Bruce asked.

"Alive, but cut bad, Tom," Dal replied. "Yore dawg's hurt. How about you takin' Dandy to the house an' bringin' back the sewin' kit and salve."

Tom moved swiftly off, carrying the dog, which, fortunately, was not hurt very badly.

Doc Carson finished his examination of the filly.

"It do beat all," he said, "why good folks has to be pested by critters an' fire an' flood. The filly's not too bad, Dal. But from now on we got to keep our ears an' eyes open. That grizzly's goin' to be the worst. I remember once when me an' Tom was maverick-huntin' for a outfit—why you ain't listenin' Dal. But never mind. Don't let this get yuh."

Tom Bruce had returned. He and Dal watched the proficient little Doc at his veterinary work. They watched him with a deep sense of pride. Near-by, the filly's mother snorted and stomped her protests, but she was too frightened to come in closer.

At last, Doc was finished.

"Tar an' creosote an' b'ar grease mebbe-so ain't mentioned in no vet's books, Dal," he said. "But yore dad an' mine saved many a good critter with it."

Between them they lifted the filly and propped her against the corral fence for support. Then they withdrew.

Back at the storehouse by the cabin, Dal skinned

the big marauder, a she-cougar, which, but for the timely arrival of the men, might have cut down the bulk of the stock, including Naieta.

Doc Carson attended to the dog, which had only superficial talon cuts.

MARY served coffee. Again Doc took up his fiddle and accompanied Marta, who, in a thin voice that now and then resembled some of the wolf notes Doc scraped from his fiddle, sang an old Southern refrain. Doc's music had more than once won the settlers of Sun-Bear Valley from an atmosphere of stark tragedy or threatened misfortune.

When the neighbors moved off, Dal and Mary stood listening to the last dim sounds of creaking wheels. The moon hung lazily on its back, bathing the now peaceful wilds with gentle silver.

Dal turned and hugged his wife gently.

"I must check up on the filly at daybreak. I should by right stay up all night, but Doc's done a good job. He's smeared so much tar an' creosote around that every critter in the wilds will be scairt to come within a mile of the corral. I think it's safe to turn in for a spell."

As the moon was slowly engulfed by the deepening foothills, leaving the night to its own moods and plots, Dal Baldwin closed his eyes with a feeling that for the remainder of the night he, his family, the neighbors, and Sun-Bear Valley could rest well in the lap of the gods.

The next day, heat visited Sun-Bear Valley and remained for days. The men, continuing to exchange work, kept busy during the cool of the evenings.

They enlarged the source of water supply at the springs to the north. They helped Doc Carson dam up the creek at his place in order to build a reservoir.

In the daytime, they rested in the shade, but Dal was restless. All his life he had been an all-time worker. He would watch his wilting crops while his neighbors slept, or he would stroll slowly around their acreage, now and then pausing to con the far hills.

One day, it was hotter than usual, with an oppressive heat suggesting thunder. Dal disliked electrical storms, especially at this season of the year. He knew hail could wipe out his entire year's work. On nearly every occasion that near or actual tragedy had struck at the settlers of the valley, thunder and lightning had heralded the disasters.

Dal was walking up an incline to the higher valley. He was returning from the Carson place by the highland route, hoping to catch some sign of mountain sheep.

He was still a few miles from home when, with scarcely any warning, the first flash of lightning and the fury of attendant thunder almost rocked him off his feet.

He made for the shelter of an over-hang in the wall of a gulch. There, he calculated, he could weather the coming storm. Inwardly, he groaned with misgiving.

The sky became more and more ominous. Lowering thunderheads crowded one another across the grim mountain faces, as if in a stampede of terror, each fearing the wrath of the other.

Dal stretched himself under the over-hang. Beyond, stood a lone, lightning-scarred pine. He was glad of that tree, realizing that lightning would strike it and ground, without endangering him.

The clammy heat was stifling, carrying with it the fumes of sulphur from a hot spring to the northwest. Dal found difficulty in keeping awake. At last, he dozed off.

Rain now beat hard on the over-hang above. The sudden, mad crash of hail added its drumfire to the storm's concerto.

Suddenly, a terrific blast of lightning struck, and a terrifying barrage of thunder jerked Dal sharply from his sleep. Again the lightning flashed.

He sat up with a start. His eyes seemed to bulge from their sockets. Almost too late he heard a moan, then the snarl of a big silvertip not more than twenty-five feet off to his right.

"Hallelujah!" Dal gasped. "The old she-bear."

He was without his rifle. For the moment he was frozen with sheer terror. The grizzly, in a frenzy of anger, was pawing and clawing at her scalp. She was half blind.

"Must have been hit by a flyin' rock or heavy limb when the lightnin' struck," Dal thought.

Quickly he coned the outside tree, which had again been struck. He was a good forty feet from it. It was his only means of escape. Should the half-blinded old silvertip catch his scent, she would, without further provocation, charge him, thinking that Dal had caused her the slash on her massive scalp.

Slowly, with great caution, Dal raised himself to his haunches and balanced himself on the soles of his feet. He craftily picked up a rock. Measuring his distance to the tree, he suddenly heaved the rock beyond the bear and leaped.

He had hoped that the crash of the rock might divert the old she's attention momentarily, but the respite was all too brief. She whirled, dropping to all fours, and charged.

DAL struck the tree bole hard and reached for a limb. He made the first rise and was digging in hard for the next upward stretch, when his left leg slipped.

He had caught at a higher broken limb and was pulling hard when the grizzly caught him going away. Her massive right forepaw struck his leg. Dal almost fainted with pain as the great claws slashed him and the force of the glancing blow smashed the leg hard against the tree bole.

By supreme effort and will power, he dragged himself to the clear above. Now, at a stout fork about twelve feet up, he wrapped his arms securely around the bole and hung on, breathing hard against the pain which threatened to send him into unconsciousness.

Below, snarling furiously, the old she-devil of the hinterland, rolled about, smashing at the tree and at loose rocks with terrific blows from her forepaws.

To Dal, this period was a horrible nightmare. Drenched by rain and battered by hail, he hung on for some time before he dare attempt to take stock of his hurt.

The storm broke in the peak of its full fury, and for some time the wrath of the gods was made manifest in blinding flashes of lightning and artillery-like barrages of thunder.

At last there came the dull grumble of receding thunder. It was no longer trapped in the mountain bowl. Dal looked down.

The silvertip stood defiant of all things—immobile, ponderous, though somewhat bedraggled. Now and then she whined, a ludicrous note from one so huge, but Dal knew the danger signal of that whine. It was a whine of self-pity and bubbling anger and hatred.

Shortly, she shook herself. She tossed her torn head high and opened her massive jaws. Twice, she rolled around the tree, sniffing sharply for mansign, but a shifting wind was carrying Dal's scent away.

Grumbling, she at last moved on down the gulch.

Dal's lips framed a prayer of Thanksgiving.

But for upwards of half an hour, he still clung to his haven, not daring to venture down.

During the long wait, he thought of his wife and the neighbors. They would be terribly worried. He realized that he must not attempt to go back to Mary in his condition but must try to crawl back to the Carson place.

At last, he lowered himself and rendered what first aid he could by slitting strings from his buckskin pants leg and tying up his wounds. Then he started the long painful crawl back to the Carsons. Each foot was a

torture, and it seemed an age before he reached the Carson flats, almost exhausted beyond caring.

It was Marta who first glimpsed him crawling in. She was out making a survey of hail damage to her garden. At once she screamed for Doc, who came running despite his crippled, arthritic leg.

Between them, they half-carried, half-dragged Dal to the cabin, where Doc made his examination. Doc had Marta running in almost every direction at once, but Dal had slipped into soothing unconsciousness. He knew nothing of Doc's first-aid ministrations.

Sweating, filled with concern for his friend, Doc continued to rap out instructions to the faithful Marta, who took his directions with tolerance and patience, knowing that it was all for Dal's good.

Doc suddenly looked up. His work was done.

"Mebbe-so you'd better git over to Mary's and break this gentle to her, Marta," he said softly. "I'll hitch the team while you git ready. You know how to handle this kind of a situation better'n most folk." He squeezed her arm gently. "Tell the little gal not to worry too much, Dal will be okay if poisonin' don't set in. I don't figger it will."

He saw Marta off, then turned and sat down to watch Dal.

Dal awakened to the plaintive strains of an old pioneer folk tune played by Doc. A soft cool breeze fanned in through the door of the cabin. Birds in the trees by the creek added their lilting contribution to the evensong melody.

Dal's leg was stiff. He tried to move it, but it seemed to be in a cast from hip to ankle.

"Doc," he called softly. "Thanks for everything."

Doc spun, almost dropping his bow.

"Wal, I'll be! Never figgered you'd come out of it so spry. Gosh! I never done so much prayin' and fussin' in my life, an' I ain't seen Marta fret an' cry so much since she lost a pet hound dawg ten years back. She's over to gentle the news for Mary. Hang tight now. I got some coffee bubblin'. Don't try to shift that laig none. I got her tied up in a bark splint. She's all clean an' salved, an' a few stitches in her here and there. Don't seem like no bones are broke, but I strapped her that-a-way to make sure."

Doc's face cracked in a smile as he helped Dal to sit up in the bed. He was plainly moved with delight to see his friend back to consciousness—back with an appetite.

"Take hold an' start drinkin' son," Doc advised. "I've got some biscuits an' wild honey for you, an' if you

can't eat 'em all, make a lot of crumbs because Marta says you was to eat aplenty."

Dal almost found a smile. He was indeed grateful for the stimulating coffee, black and sweetened with corn syrup. He became more and more conscious of the richness of the friendship of Doc Carson and Marta who, though having no children themselves, would become the foster parents of all the children ever to come to Sun-Bear Valley.

MARTA CARSON stayed with young Jimmy Baldwin and Donna Bruce to allow Mary to ride to see Dal with the Bruces. A youngster under each arm, Marta flung out a last word of caution to Mary.

"Don't go to frettin' and upsettin' yore-self," she called. "His busted laig will come around all right."

Mary smiled wanly and nodded.

It didn't take long to make the drive.

At the Carson home, Mary patted Dal's cheek gently.

"You know, Dal dear, you're the grandest person I've ever known. Who else would have dragged himself all this way, so that I wouldn't be too badly shocked?"

"Tom Bruce and Doc would, honey," Dal replied.

"Don't go blowin' my horn too hard. How's the alfalfa an' oats? Any bad hail damage?"

Mary shook her head. She had been out inspecting the crops.

"It's down a bit, Dal, but not from hail. That was streaky. It missed us by a hundred yards. Mowed a swath through the cottonwoods and wild fruit, and nicked a corner off my garden. But no more damage than some good sunshine can repair easily."

They both smiled. Dal squeezed her hand warmly.

"Good gal," Dal whispered. "Doc says the laig won't be long healin'. He's got me hog-tied, so I can't even wiggle a toe. For a time, you'll have two kids on your hands. As soon as I'm all mended, we men folk will have to hunt that big bear down an' kill her off. She's got to be caught."

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!" so the good book tells us, Dal," Doc cut in, chuckling. "But I don't reckon the Lord will frown down on us for savin' our own lives at the expense of an ol' she-hellion like that silvertip. But now, everybody, you got to git this grizzly bait back to his own home in Tom's wagon. Got to git him off my hands."

Between them, they carried Dal out to the wagon box and stowed him on a bed of hay. But he suffered intense pain on the trip to his homestead. The dim trail was rough.

He could smell the fragrance of his own oats and alfalfa as he neared home. The birchwood smoke from his roof-jack lent its not unpleasant pungency. Suddenly the pain in his leg eased.

In the twilight, the cabin looked beautiful as it nestled against a background of spruces.

They lifted Dal indoors and made him comfortable. Marta patted his face.

"I'll tote Doc over tomorrow mornm' an' let him check you, Dal," she said. "Meantime, you an' Mary git yore heads together an' thank the starts that the silvertip didn't hit you at the other end of the valley."

Marta hitched her team and moved off. The Bruces collected their sleeping child and boarded their own wagon.

Mary and Dal were alone. Mary pressed herself close to her husband, and he felt her form quiver against him. Her hot tears splashed to his face.

The following morning, Tom Bruce came over to do chores. Doc Carson came along for the medical check-up and then both neighbors set to work, quite naturally, on Dal's pasture fence. It was the way of pioneer folk. As they worked, they chaffed each other with barbed, though friendly, banter. Now and then they went into serious contemplation of plans for the destruction of "Mishe," the she-grizzly.

Autumn. Three scythes hissed rhythmically through Dal Baldwin's oats. The alfalfa was in the stack.

Marta Carson was at the Baldwin place, cooking for the harvesters. Ella Bruce took over the canning for Mary.

Late rains had swelled the creek, and to the north the pasture land was still green. Now completely fenced, it took care of all Dal's stock.

It seemed to the settlers of Sun-Bear Valley that fortune had finally begun to favor them. There had been no Fall frost, and Dal had allowed his oats to stand till fully ripened. Next Spring there would be plenty of good seed for Doc and Tom.

Young stock frolicked in the pasture. Dal's cow was to freshen any time now. He had fenced her off by herself, while her young heifer made out with the horse stock.

Now and then the men paused to run stones over their scythe blades. They talked, swapping a yarn or two, or Doc was chaffed because of his habit of packing along his old .44 Colt wherever he went.

TO RECENT mention had been made of the silvertip. It was Doc who now broached the subject.

"A thing to realize about a grizzly," he rambled on, "is that this time of the year, when they seem to be at peace with all the wilds, is the most dangerous time.

"How come?" Tom Bruce asked.

Doc squirted a stream of tobacco juice expertly close to the toe of Tom's right boot.

"A grizzly hibernates," he snapped back. "Or mebbe-so you didn't know that. It's a fact. All bears den up in the late Fall, but before they do, they store a batch of taller—fat, up in the hump under their hides, to tide 'em over the big sleep. It takes a lot to feed 'em from now to den time. So watch out!"

Doc paused, but Dal was interested. He urged him to continue.

"This is the time of year that cattlemen, hoss ranchers, an' sheepmen keep a close s watch on their stock. I mind a time I was wranglin' on a spread, the Rafter-T, in Arizona. An ol' she-grizzly killed off five head of young beef stock on one visit. She dragged a young an' husky white-face nigh three miles before she covered it up with leaves an' rubble. She was comin' in for a second when the dawgs tanged her scent an' we managed to—waal, it was me who brought her down with a shoulder shot."

Tom Bruce chuckled shortly. Doc gave him a baleful glance.

"So it was, Tom. I dropped her. The boss finished her off. But let's git harvestin' some more, or purty soon Marta will be out yellin' at us for loafin'. She already claims that if there was only two of us out here, we'd git three times as much done."

Doc lowered his back and set the pace. The oats went down, swishing protest against the attack of the blades.

The sun had set into the bowl of the hills, and all the wilderness flaunted its Autumn finery in the afterglow.

All at once Tom Bruce's dog was heard giving tongue from the north. Doc Carson spun sharply.

"That's pasture direction, Dal," he jerked. "Ol' Dandy's bayin' some critter. Better git yore Winchester an' come runnin'. We'll go take a look-see."

Although Dal still limped slightly, he made good time to and from the house.

Together, the men moved up to the higher level, Dal's heart pounding fiercely as the dog's voice became more and more frenzied.

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Old Mishe, the she-devil grizzly queen of the wild range, had not fared so well since her injury during the

electrical storm. Her scalp had been opened and had never properly healed. Flies had pestered her, causing her to lose weight. She had been prevented from proper hunting and feeding.

This evening, there had come to her a most tantalizing scent. It was the tang of a borning. Her nose wrinkled and her chops dripped saliva as she rolled on down toward the green pasture from which there wafted stronger and more seductive scents of young veal and horse.

But the pasture was fenced. Its creatures, her prey, were behind a barricade of poplar and lodgepole pine. Whining softly, she stood sniffing the tang of the cow creature and her newly born calf.

Now Mishe raised her paw and, in a whirling motion, brought it down in smashing impact with the top rail. It gave, splintering. Her massive chest struck the next rail, crashing it inward.

She hopped lightly into the pasture, and with a swift rush dispatched the little bull calf, whose mother bawled and stampeded to the open range.

Mishe chortled deep in her throat as she licked her chops, but all at once she swapped ends as a snarling dog creature attacked, nipping at a hamstring.

Dandy, Tom Bruce's dog, had been taught from puppyhood that the stock about his home range was his responsibility. He darted his lithe body out of range of Mishe's powerful paws and claws. He came in again and again to slash at the part of her huge form nearest to his teeth. With drumming hoofs, the stock in the adjoining pasture broke and stampeded.

The old silvertip frothed in anger and exasperation. This dog creature was defying her—she who had brooked no defiance from any creature in the wilds for over ten years or more. She knew all the arts and wiles of battle. She stood with head hung low, whining piteously, as if bested in her efforts to reclaim the veal.

Suddenly, she flung herself forward, catching the dog momentarily off-guard and off-balance. Dandy had no chance to escape the attack fully. The tips of the bear's claws struck him and bowled him over. Before he could recover, Mishe towered snarling above him.

IT WAS at this point the men folk hurried forward. Doc Carson yelled as he jerked his .44 free. He yelled to Dal and Tom Bruce, who had drawn his bowie knife and, fearful for the safety of his dog, was lunging for the broken fence.

The silvertip scented Tom. She whirled. Jaws agape,

she lunged. Dal Baldwin had no opportunity to trigger his rifle for fear of hitting Tom.

Two shots crashed. Doc Carson, now astride the broken fence, had taken a chance. He had fired, knowing that the best he could do was to hit and divert the maddened grizzly.

With a frightful roar of pain and anger, the silvertip dropped to her knees. Then, with prodigious strength, she recovered and charged Doc.

Because of the handicap of his arthritic leg, Doc had difficulty getting away. The best he could do was to drop behind the remainder of the fence rails at the break. The great wild creature rose to full height.

Dandy, the dog, rushed her, aiming at her hamstring. But Dal Baldwin now was taking steady aim. He pulled and a slug crashed into the bear's broad back, near the spinal cord between the shoulder blades.

With a gurgling cough, she subsided, threshing madly in her death throes as Doc raised himself and sent a shot into her heart sector.

Almost before his slug had entered Mishe's body, Doc commenced to claim the kill for himself.

"Reckon I can cut another grizzly notch in this old smoke-pole. If I hadn't fired just then, she'd have—"

"Tie a piggin' string on yore tongue," Tom Bruce cut in. "It was Dal's spine-shot that got her. Yore shot was just like you'd fire into a dead hawk."

Doc flared up, but suddenly his good nature prevailed. He started his eating tobacco to his mouth, but lowered his hand again.

"Okay, boys," Doc murmured. "We just better thank the Lord for our deliverance. Bow your heads."

And in the gathering dusk, the little man gave thanks.

Dal and Tom replaced their hats. Dal strode over to examine the dead calf. He shook his head. The loss was sad, but quickly he realized that the price for the extermination of the silvertip was, after all, quite small.

"Got to go roundup the cow now, boys," Dal said. "Thanks for ever'thin'. See you all at supper. You'd better be ready to whang that fiddle, Doc, because we'll have us a pre-Thanksgivin' rehearsal."

Whistling, Dal moved off into the scrub country to hunt up his cow. As he strolled on, he hoped that with the coming of another year, more good neighbors would come to Sun-Bear Valley to help crowd back such interlopers as Mishe, the grizzly, and Acheeta, the cougar.