



# WILD HOOF WARFARE

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

*Dal and Mary Baldwin seek strong stock—which leads Dal to strive for the conquest of the great King Stallion!*

**D**AL BALDWIN, first white settler in Sun Bear Valley, and his wife, Mary, paused in their stroll to the upper horse pasture. They paused just

outside a handsome peeled-log building—the first schoolhouse, recently erected by the menfolk under the direction of Doc Carson, Dal's first neighbor to arrive.

Dal respectfully removed his hat as, through the two small windows of the schoolhouse, there came the sweet sound of children's voices. They sang their morning hymn.

Mary smiled wistfully, squeezing her husband's arm. There was no greater sign of progress in the valley than this schoolhouse. Nancy Floen, niece of Jud Morrison who, with his family and married son's family had been the last settler to squat a claim at Sun Bear, was the teacher. Nancy was not much older than her two cousins, Martin and Maureen, Jud Morrison's twins. She had given up an eastern school to come here to pioneer, at her uncle's invitation.

Mary cocked her head on one side, as she thought she identified one of the young singing voices as that of her youngest son, Ten, a vigorous five-year-old. Dal had always said that Ten sang with just about as much music as a six months old bull frog with laryngitis. But Mary was inclined to think that Ten, this morning at any rate, either wasn't singing, or else doing as good a job as the Morrison twins, or Jack's two, Nell and Ollie, or Donna Bruce, the little seven-year-old daughter of Tom and Ella Bruce, the second family of settlers to arrive at Sun Bear and homestead south of the creek.

Dal waited until the hymn was done, then moved forward as though to enter the schoolhouse, but Mary caught up with him and laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Not yet, Dal dear," she said softly. "One day, when Nan has the youngsters more settled at their lessons, she is going to invite us all to visit them at their work. But you know how it is, starting in. Why even our young Jimmy thinks of little else than swapping a garter snake for a one-eyed lizard. These wilderness youngsters are just like the young colts and fillies we're on our way to visit. School, like the corral or pasture fence, is jail to them."

MARY spoke with some authority, for she, too, before her marriage, had been a school teacher in a pioneer settlement.

Dal nodded approval and together they moved on to the upper level.

Dal smiled proudly as he pointed to his irrigation flumes, made of whipsawed lumber by Doc Carson and himself the second season they were here. The flumes had been broken not so long ago, by raiding rustlers who had attempted to run the settlers of Sun Bear off their claims. Dal and the neighbor menfolk had fought and driven the raiders off—the flumes had

been repaired and now worked as effectively as ever, carrying adequate moisture down to Dal's oats and alfalfa acreage. One day he would run another flume to supply water to a cistern for house use.

Now they reached the pasture fence. A pair of young fillies reared and played with the same spirit and abandon as Tom Bruce's lambs across the creek.

"They look beautiful, Dal," Mary observed earnestly. "I don't know why you worry so much about them."

Dal shook his head.

"That's jus' the point, honey," he replied. "I don't just want purty-lookin' stock. I want strength, too. You know I tried to bring in a blood percheron colt from the outside, but couldn't pick one up. I've got to get new, strong blood in here and—there's on'y one way left."

Mary looked up questioningly.

"Yes, Dal dear. What have you in mind?" she asked.

"The King stallion himself Mary!"

"King? Why, Dal—" Mary broke off, her face clouding over.

Dal nodded, quick to note the change of expression Mary registered. On their first arrival at the valley they had glimpsed the handsome big gray wild band leader whom they had called King.

Dal had been able to tether out his little blooded mare Naieta for breeding by King, and out of such mating, with a cross through a small wild band mare Dal had captured, and one of the Naieta-King colts, had come the nucleus of Dal's horse band here at the pasture.

Dal now realized that he must get King's great strength back in the herd, but King was a problem. He was shy, and seemed to fear man creatures more than ever. None of the settlers had seen him of late, nor had Dal heard his shrilly bugled challenges.

"It means we got to go out an' hunt him up, Mary," Dal said with finality. "I'll have a chat with Doc about it. He usually has some ideas."

Mary smiled. She loved Doc and his wife, Marta Carson, and most certainly Doc never seemed stuck for an idea. He was, in spite of his "art'ritis," a most valuable acquisition here at Sun Bear Valley.

Dal and Mary moved on to a smaller pasture, not much larger than a large corral. They checked stock as they walked along. Naieta, their original little blooded mare, was with foal again. She was growing more and more mature, and Dal and Mary both realized that she could not go on for ever.

Suddenly Dal stopped. A smart, frisking little gray

filly whirled from her play to stare at them—her tail stretched out to pennant saucily in the breeze.

“Two, past, Mary,” Dal said. That’s the mate for King. If I can get her halter broke soon and can get the loan of Doc’s old team, I’d admire to take her up into the hills.” Mary quivered. She had sharp recollections of a former visit of Dal’s to the wild hinterland—in the days of Quirt Malotte, a half breed who had caused the Baldwins no end of trouble.

“If you’d care to go home, alone, honey,” Dal suggested, “I’ll mosey on down and chat with Doc. He—”

Dal was interrupted by the singing of a crosscut saw in the woods to the north. The Morrissions were hard at work cutting log lengths for a new barn.

The hearts of the Baldwins swelled and pulsed with pride. They had made it possible for these new settlers to come on down to Sun Bear. They had come here when there were no such sounds of development—no sounds save those they made with their own cutting and general labors, or the sounds of blizzard winds, or summer storms and the cries of the hunting owls, or cougars. The days when the wilderness in its utterly untamed state was even more glorious than now, or else more austere and, at times, foreboding. Theirs was a pardonable pride.

Dal kissed his wife affectionately and moved off, slyly making his way on toward the Carson place, down a recently cut survey line which would take him past the schoolhouse.

AT THE little log edifice he paused, checking up sharply, then almost exploded with laughter as he glimpsed little Doc Carson crowded against the schoolhouse door, listening—listening.

“Uh—Why, hello, Dal! I—uh—was just checkin’ the buildin’ over. Mebbe somethin’ might uh—well, y’never can tell with a new buildin’—”

But Dal wasn’t fooled. Doc had been there listening for the sound of the youngsters’ voices. Doc and Marta Carson were a childless couple, their hearts warm for every child in the valley. The schoolhouse had been Doc’s idea in the first place. He had selected, helped cut and haul, and had peeled the logs and score-hacked them. He had directed the building operations.

Dal laid a hand gently on Doc’s shoulder.

“It’s okay, Doc,” he said. “A good idea to check up every once in a while. I was just comin’ down to git you. Care to walk up to the hoss pasture with me? Got a problem.”

This sort of thing was right down Doc’s fence line.

He limped along at Dal’s side, pausing now and then to gaze over the lovely valley below.

“Eh-h-h-h—It was a right smart thing me an’ Marta did when we tied up here wit’ yuh, Dal,” he drawled. “I been around, from the Mex border, to the Canadian Line, an’ I ain’t seen nothin’ could touch this. It’s had its bad times, as we know right well—it’ll have more of ’em, but it’ll grow—progress. . . . Eh-h-h-h-h—Lookit the little schoolhouse there. Ever see anythin’ purtier?”

Dal smiled. Doc’s pride in the schoolhouse was by no means without justification.

“We’ll git us fruit trees shipped in, Dal—Apples, Plums, an’ mebbeso a peach or so. Filbert nuts should do all right too. Uh—say, where did that little gray filly come from? Don’t recollect havin’ seen her before. She’s—why, Dal, she’s a ringer for King, the wild leader hisse’f, huh?”

Dal explained his problem to Doc—the necessity for an infusion of new, strong blood in his herd, even though this spanking little filly was related to King.

“One more cross from King won’t hurt at all, Dal. Worked on a hoss outfit onct where they deliber’tly bred a son colt to a mare mother, That’s dost, though, and has to be watched. With this’n, Dal, ever’tthin’ ’ll be okay. Eh-h-h-h-h—boy, but yuh’re on the right track.”

There and then Doc and Dal formulated a plan.

“First thing is to halter-break the filly, Dal. Mebbeso saddle break her. How about tomorrow mornin’ for a start? I’ll lend a hand. How dost is it to her time?”

Dal made some mental calculations and gave Doc an approximate date.

“Good. Just give us time to tame her down some an’ git her into the hills. I’ll bring up my ol’ team to he’p steady her down—turn ’em into the pasture here with the kitten. Okay. Now I’d better be hightailin’ it. Got a message to deliver from Marta to Olga Morrison, an’ I promised Jud an’ Jack I’d score-hack their barn logs. So long.”

Dal watched his little neighbor move off on his limpy leg. They didn’t come much better than Doc—a queer little mixture who one time could preach a good Sunday message for the folk here at Sun Bear, then another time turn the air sulphurous with language not intended for the ears of the youngsters of the valley. . . .

A lass rope hissed through space. “Kitten,” the little gray filly reared as the loop settled over her neck, Dal had made a perfect cast, but was quickly dragged across the corral. From a perch near by, Doc Carson



roared with laughter, now and then bellowing some word of advice.

But now, as the filly whirled, Dal deftly dallied loose rope around a snubbing post, bringing the little one almost down to her nose.

The Kitten, her name coined by Doc Carson, quivered. Lather already showed on her neck and flanks. She suddenly pitched, struck, and lashed out. Dal talked softly to her, or whistled. When properly snubbed down, he left her to bring up Doc Carson's old mare from the cover of whose broad back he advanced a hand until it touched the Kitten's muzzle. She squealed, but Dal talked gently, softly . . . It wasn't long until he had slipped a halter over her head and buckled a short halter shank to the halter of the mare.

Dal unhitched the snubber, and led the mare off, but the Kitten lashed out in protest. She attempted to rear, but the oldster held her down now and then turning to nip the little one in the neck. Dal led them round and round the corral.

IN TIME, save that she attempted to shake her head angrily, the Kitten quieted down and minced along fairly satisfactorily.

Dal rehitched the mare to the snubbing post and was moving back to join Doc when he halted, gasping as he glimpsed a boy's face peering through the corral poles.

"Why, Mart, son!" Dal called. "Why ain't you over to the schoolhouse? Come on over here."

Looking sheepish, the gangling youngster joined Doc and Dal.

"I—well, Mister Baldwin, I allus admired to watch new stock bein' gentled. Allus rid some of ours an' dad promised me that when you started in to break the little feller here you'd mebbe let me ride her out for you. I ain't afraid, honest. Dad say's I'm good, because I'm light in weight an' my timin's good. An' I don't hurt up much if I git piled.

Doc roared with laughter, then turned to the boy again.

"Well, mebbeso yuh'd better hightail it on down to the schoolhouse an' on the way think up some good excuses for Miss Nancy, son," Doc advised. "Mebbbeso when we git the Kitten here gentle some, Dal'll let you ride her. Git along now an' don't start missin' school jus' when yuh feel like it."

"Yessir!" The boy broke into a gangling lope. Doc turned to Dal, smiling his full gold-toothed smile.

"Eh-h-h— A dead ringer for me when I was

his age, Dal," Doc reminisced. Smart lad that. Got ambition an' it's goin' to be hard to keep him at school. The wilderness an' its—uh—envir—uh, wal the call of the wilds, yuh might say, gits into a kid's blood. Yuh've had the experience; so have I—"

They left the filly snubbed to the old mare while they ate lunch, then unhitched them. Tomorrow evening Dal would give the Kitten a further lesson, and then—

"Ride 'im, Martie!" Jud Morrison bellowed encouragement to his boy forking the little wilding, Kitten. They had saddled Kitten with Jack's saddle rigging a day ago. Then in order to bring her along slowly, so as not to frighten her, had tied a loosely filled sack of oats to the saddle, to give her the feel of weight.

Now a man creature was riding her. Mart, so far, had not pulled leather. He made no attempt to scratch her, but rode her naturally, with great showing of timing. When suddenly she swapped ends like a whirling dervish, young Mart sailed out into space.

He fell heavily on to one shoulder.

Swiftly, despite the handicap of his crippled left knee, Doc had dropped from the fence top and rushed to Mart's side, leaving Dal to pick up the filly.

Jud hurried up, his face drawn and pale.

"Dislocated shoulder, Jud," Doc grunted in quick diagnosis. "Help me an' I'll soon have her back." Then to "the boy he said softly: "On'y hurt a mite for a minute—a sharp twinge like yuh'd been stung—uh—bit by a yeller jacket. Hoi' it now!"

With Jud holding the boy, Doc gritted his teeth, took a firm hold on Mart's right arm, swung it out and up, then jerked swiftly out and down. There was an audible click, a howl from Mart, but Doc was smiling his mute boast that his osteopathic skill was second only to his veterinarian accomplishments.

Dal strode up and lifted the heavy youngster into his arms.

"A grand ride Mart," he praised. "Doc'll sling your arm in a bandanna, then you can ride the top rail an' watch me git piled. I'm goin' to finish her off. I'm a mite heavy, but that's mebbeso all to the good. You watch now."

"Yip-e-e-e-e Ki-he-e-e-e-e! Ride 'im, cowboy!" Doc screeched as the Kitten sun-fished with Dal scarcely secure in the stirrups.

Face set grimly, Dal rode superbly. He showed no daylight, pulled no leather. He was watching the filly's every move, taking her jolts easily. He anticipated that terrific end swap at any moment, and was ready for it.

But when it came, it was so lightning-like, and came out of a sunfishing leap, that Dal was almost caught off balance. But he stuck, and now the kitten went pitching and crow-hopping across the corral with such savagery Dal was fearful she might crash and hurt herself.

When at last she whirled again, Dal raised his free arm high, in signal to Jud to let the gate poles down. The Kitten was ready to break into the last phase of her demonstration—the hard, climactic run. Dal heeled her, and sent her into the pell-mell gallop. With a squeal, she broke, made a few lunges, then resumed her run. Shortly, tired out, and broken, she walked back in with sagging head.

Dal dismounted, unsaddled and rubbed her steaming, quaking form with dry hay. He talked softly to her, scuffing up her ears, toying with her soft muzzle. When he was done, he cast her loose, patting her rump gently as she trotted off.

As he joined the menfolk, Dal received the plaudits of every one, even the drawn-faced youngster, Mart.

“As good a ride as I ever seen, Dal,” Jud Morrison observed. “I’d admire to have yuh teach young Mart here. How’s that, son? Yuh’d like that?” Jud turned to smile at his youngster.

“You mean I can re’lly ride more?” the boy asked, swallowing hard.

“Why shore, Mart,” Dal said kindly. “We’ll have a lot uh ridin’ to do here—lot uh fiery young stock like the Kitten.”

They dispersed, each returning to his respective homestead. Tomorrow, Dal would again ride out the Kitten and then they were ready, Dal, Doc and Jack Morrison, for their trek into the hinterland in quest of the wild band of King. Doc’s team would go along with the filly.

THE wild hills echoed the shrill cry of Manya, the bull elk leader as Dal and his party climbed up into the gorgeous rugged levels. They had brought rifles with them, hoping later to bag a mountain sheep or two, but there would be no use of firearms until after their mission was completed, unless forced to fire on marauding cougars at their new camp.

They made camp at sunset where a small waterfall cascaded raucously down to form a creek which fed a rich stretch of grassland. Dal had picked up fresh wild horse tracks in this vicinity.

They tethered out their stock in the grassland, but elected to stand guard by turns, throughout the night,

for this, too, was grizzly and cougar country. Each of the menfolk knew that a she-cougar, rearing young could, and might in a single attack wantonly kill the three horses. Dal was taking no chances.

His was the first watch—for two hours. He sat and watched the shadow shapes flit and gambol on the rugged rock faces beyond as a quarter moon’s rays flooded the zone for a time.

Suddenly he heard the filly stomp, then snort. Dal was alert. He moved silently down to the meadow. The kitten alone had started, which was a good sign. Suddenly Dal froze, swallowing hard as over on a rise beyond the grass flat he glimpsed the form of a handsome horse critter. His pulses beat wildly, though, for at a glance he could tell this was not King, the wild band leader. He was smaller, younger, with finer, more aristocratic lines.

The young stallion bugled shrilly. Kitten answered, whirling, to stand with head flung high, tail raised and stretched well out to pennant in the soft night breeze.

Dal tested for wind direction and shifted position. Now he stood for a long period of absolute immobility, but the colt on the hill top was just as immobile. No doubt he could tang a man scent mingled with the seductive scent of the horses in the flat. Kitten continued to call, but his wild instincts held him back.

Suddenly from beyond, at a higher level, came a stallion cry that sent the blood racing through Dal’s system. There was no mistaking the call of King. It was a majestic, challenging, warning cry. The colt spun, reared and gave answer to his sire’s challenge.

Now he whipped about and minced on down the decline nearer to the strange horse stock in the meadow.

Dal heard the drum of hoofs.

“I wonder—” he mused. “I wonder if I’m goin’ to be lucky enough to finish up here in a couple of days!”

After the many vicissitudes of his pioneer life at Sun Bear Valley, it would have been a good break for Dal if his plans bore fruit so quickly. But he was still skeptical. No creature is more wary than a wild stallion, no creature’s instincts are sharper. There was no reckless stampede down to the filly. These rival stallion creatures moved with great caution. This was their fundamental equipment of self preservation.

Dal moved back to waken his partners.

“Doin’s a’ready,” he said softly. “A mite too soon. We ain’t got our corral trap rigged, Doc. An’ listen, there’s a new, young stallion on the job. Mebbeso one of King’s get, but one we ain’t seen before. Reckon he’s by

King, out of some blooded mare critter that's strayed from some party to these wilds. "Listen!"

The stallion calls were now more frequent and more deathly in tone.

"They's trouble brewin', boys," Doc grunted. "I've seen it afore in wild horse country. We'll likely see the dangdest battle of wild hoofs ever. The colt could be kilt . . . We'd best stan' by an' watch the wind. If they ain't kilt each other afore daylight, they'll move back ag'in, then we must be quick with riggin' that trap. I—"

A wild cry cut Doc off.

"Lion!" he exclaimed huskily.

Dal glanced sharply across the meadow. The young stallion had vanished. There would be no further demonstration from him, or from King tonight. Acheeta, the cougar, and kindred were on the prowl.

The men settled back to sleep. Doc took over the watch, while Dal and Jack slept.

But nothing untoward happened during the remainder of the night. At dawn, the men shifted back to a draw where a shifting wind would carry the smoke of their breakfast fire clear of the meadow zone. Immediately after breakfast they set to work cutting poles for their trap, realizing it might be days before the wild stallions returned, but Dal felt certain they would return for the Kitten would grow daily a more seductive decoy.

IT REQUIRED a great deal of patience here in this wild hinterland. Dal and his companions realized that their grub supply could not be expected to last indefinitely and they might be forced to hit back up into the hills in search of a sheep.

Today, while Doc finished off the work at the trap, Dal and Jack climbed, to make a wide circle of the area, heading in a westerly direction scouting both for horse sign and sheep tracks. They discovered both, but what attracted Dal most was on topping a rise he discovered a magnificent valley beyond—a valley smaller, but indeed no less beautiful than Sun Bear. This was even more ideally situated. He stood on the cliff edge and gasped at the overwhelming magnificence of the scene.

"Close to two hundred and fifty acres of tillable land, with pasture range beyond," he said to Jack. "There's homestead country for young Mart and my Jimmy. Just what those buttons'll need—lots of scope for trappin' an' wild hoss huntin'. One day, when Jimmy gits a bit older, we'll bring 'em up here on a hunt. I—"

Dal broke off. The setting sun now bathed the valley

in a sea of rose mingled with pure gold—an awe-inspiring sight because of its overwhelming beauty.

"Mary'd quick have a name for it," Dal breathed softly. "She'd likely call it Rose-Gold Valley, or somethin' like that. She's great on those—"

Jack Morrison interrupted by clutching at Dal's arm. He was pointing off left. Standing, head erect, sniffing into wind sharply, was the handsome young stallion Dal had previously seen.

Suddenly the youngster whirled. His muzzle quivered and then he flung his head up and blasted the quiet of the wilds with a long staccato bugle call of challenge and defiance. Came the drum of hoofs. The young one broke for the lower levels as Dal swung to see the great King thunder on down a dim, wild game trail.

"It's come, Jack," Dal whispered huskily. "It'll be tonight, or never. There'll be a battle of the wild hoofs as Doc called it. Let's git back."

They backtrailed, and spotted a band of sheep—three smart young rams standing apart from a band of ewes and young stock.

Jack involuntarily raised his rifle, but Dal protested.

"We'll take 'em later, son, but not now. One rifle shot and we might as well pack up an' haid for home, same's we arrived here."

They rejoined Doc and gave him the news.

"I heerd 'em," Doc replied. "Corral's all set. I put the Kitten in back, my ol' geldin' in the main corral and the mare out front as a sort uh first lead in. The old hosses won't booger so easy when them rival stallions git to warrin'."

Save for the waterfall's brawl, there was no sound to mar the peace of the twilight's quiet. Dal and his companions quivered in the spell of this stillness. But they were tense, realizing that, in a flash, some swift dramatic action might break.

But it was close to midnight before a wild stallion scream startled them. In the light of the growing moon, they glimpsed the silhouetted form of the young wild one, now making his way down to the flat.

The Kitten whinnied. It seemed the cue for action for out of the shadows came King, trumpeting one challenge after another.

Doc chuckled softly, almost hysterically. Dal squeezed his arm for silence.

The stallions were trotting, plainly in view now. King closed warily on his young rival whose attention was attracted by the old mare. He circled her, snuffing, but in close, she whirled and lashed out savagely, scraping his nigh flank as he leaped clear.

Again the filly called and now King, in all his thundering magnificence stomped in for battle.

They met almost at the entrance to the trap.

Dal gasped as he saw them rear and strike. The youngster almost crumpled to his knees, and King whirled to deliver a smashing rear hoof attack, but the young one had speed. Like lightning he recovered and whirled, driving a smashing two-hoofed barrage which caught his big sire full on.

Dal's mouth and throat became parched with excitement. Doc almost swallowed his eating tobacco, while young Jack Morrison wiped sweat from his face from time to time.

NOW King squealed and lunged. The youngster rocked back under the terrific impact, and almost striking the old horse in the outer corral. He lashed out and struck the stallion, sending him hurtling against the south wall. But from that point, the youngster whipped up. Teeth flashing in the moonlight, he lunged to meet the King.

They met lashing, striking, biting, but the greater battering weight of the King was telling.

Dal admired the youngster's gameness, but he was fearful for him. Suddenly the King reared and in all his full, mad passionate fury lunged. His rival was rocked back. The Kitten squealed to lash out with lightning rear hoofs.

Came a sudden new sound, accompanied by a scream from King, who sunfished, whirled and lunged ahead as the gate poles crashed shut at his rear, trapping his young rival securely.

"Eh-h-h-h-h . . ." Doc Carson got to his feet. "By the horns of the great—uh—I, I couldn't have worked it better if I'd been perched on the top rail of that gate with a drawstring in my hand," he boasted.

Dal was speechless. The young stallion was caught! He now thundered smashing blows at the gate of the trap, while the Kitten screamed in alarm.

Slowly Dal moved on down and at his approach King, frustrated, but more glorious in his conquest leaped forward and quickly vanished into the shadows.

Dal spoke softly to the Kitten, quietening her down somewhat. He moved into the outer corral, and stroked the old gelding's muzzle.

"Too bad to bring so much excitement down on you, at your time uh life, feller," he murmured.

He strode on toward the trap. The colt reared and struck, smashing ineffectively the poles which held him captive. Doc and Jack joined Dal.

"He's bloodied up some, Dal," Doc observed. "That'll scare the Kitten. It'd be best if we could git her away for the night, but that's not possible. Best leave 'em . . ." He started to move off, then turned back. "This'd be as good a time an' place as any to thank A'mighty Gawd for the richness of his further blessin's"

Doc proceeded to do just that and concluded.

"An' I'm thankin' yuh, Lord, f'r havin' bestowed on me the ability to con—con—uh—fashion a trap that worked so well."

Dal nudged Jack in the ribs with an elbow. Seldom, even in his prayers, did Doc skip an opportunity to boast of his prowess.

Dal thanked him for his good work.

"Stay alive as long as you can, Doc," he said, chuckling. "Don't know what we Sun Bear folk'd do if'n anythin' happened to you. Now let's git some sleep. Got to take turns on watch, though. Startin' tomorrow, they's a big job ahead—gentlin' the—the—Prince, so's we can't git him home. He's ours, Doc—he'll become the property of Sun Bear Valley folk, community property. An' how does the name Prince fit him?"

"Prince? Leapin' catawumpuses, Dal! Yuh I'arn fast from Mary," Doc replied, recharging his mouth with fresh eating tobacco. "Honest to Betsy, what better name for the son of a King! But, Dal, don't ever let me ketch yuh tryin' to write poetry."

Doc chuckled at his own humor and started on up to the bedground.

Under Dal's direction, after time had been given the young stock for a consummation of their matehood, the primary gentling of the young stallion commenced. It was begun with great patience and gentleness.

When finally Dal roped the stallion and with help got him snubbed securely between Doc's old team, Jack Morrison led the Kitten out ahead as a decoy. But Prince, the wildling, almost wrecked all plans in a determined effort to free himself. Doc despaired for his gelding when all three critters crashed to the ground in one of Prince's infuriated demonstrations. But Dal, maintaining his great calm, brought them safely out of it.

For the next night, Prince was left snubbed to the old mare who seemed to hold him down whenever displays of reborn savagery prompted him to action.

FROM beyond the nearest rise of land, from time to time, there came the shrill cries of King who still challenged in the mad fury of angry frustration. His young captive rival occasionally replied.

Dal at last felt the time had come to hitch the



Prince alongside the filly. Thus they stood together overnight and for almost all the next day.

At dawn, Dal and Jack Morrison moved Out to hunt for sheep, leaving Doc to stand guard at camp.

They moved like Indians up into the rugged upper levels, circling the area in which they had spotted the sheep band, only to discover the sheep had moved off. They followed the tracks carefully, warily, hoping their scent would not betray their presence—hoping that it was just cougar threat which had caused the band to shift their feeding ground.

Then, just after a light lunch of the last of their grub, Dal spotted a lone ram guarding at the very brink of an outthrust cliff edge.

“We’ll git in around him, Jack,” Dal said softly. “If I was huntin’ a head to mount, I’d take him, but he’s old. They’s younger rams in back.”

They climbed up and around, bearing now to the east and south.

Shortly Dal froze. Almost directly beneath them they glimpsed the band. Two young and handsome rams stood apart, on an overhanging shelf of rock.

“Crack a twig now an’ we’re sunk,” Dal cautioned. “Two hundred yards, I reckon. Plenty far enough for sheep, with our sights. Don’t booger with buck fever, son. Take time. Line the one on the right. Don’t wait for a count. Fire when yuh’re ready.”

Jack got down on one knee and Dal waited for him to get set before he slowly raised his rifle. He waited for Jack to pull before he himself fired. His ram leaped high, to execute a backward arc—Dal swung. Jack’s ram had whirled and was lunging upward toward a higher shelf when Dal drew down. At his shot the ram toppled back, to roll on down stone dead not far from his companion in death.

Jack Morrison had nothing to say as they moved on to the kill. He was sadly disappointed.

But upon examination, it was found that one of the rams had two bullet holes in him.

“Y’see, son,” Dal said encouragingly, “you hit him and like as not he’d have died soon, but I was afeerd he might git into bad back country an’ give us some trouble gittin’ to him, an’ gittin’ him out.”

Together they skinned out the kills, and Jack moved back to camp to bring up one o Doc’s team to tote the mutton and hides back.

They sat around their camp fire, having eaten sparingly of the mutton, so freshly killed.

“I mind onct,” Doc Carson commenced to reminisce. “I was huntin’ rare blue sheep in the uh—”

Doc broke off, as Dal coughed sharply. Doc was, he knew, getting well out of his latitude of experience. Such sheep ranged in a north west area a couple of thousand miles beyond any point Doc had visited. Grinning slyly, Doc changed the subject.

At dawn, the following day, they moved off, the young stallion dragging between Doc’s team for some miles. But in time he became more reconciled and better time was made until Doc’s arthritic knee played out.

He was helped aboard the filly. The Kitten went into a brief chopping dance, but Dal quieted her down and Doc grinned wide as he headed the parade, Jack and Dal bringing up the rear.

They reached Sun Bear as the youngsters came tumbling out of school. Young Mart Morrison whirled and came to meet the cavalcade at a break-neck lope. He stood and stared in amazement at the handsome young stallion.

“Hully smokes! Hully jumpin’—Yip-eee!” He turned to go hurtling on home to tell his folks, but first paused breathlessly to give the news to Nancy Floen, the young teacher.

The time had come for a celebration at the home of the Baldwins. In this soft early summer night, the neighbors had gathered for a meal of good roast mutton, with whatever extras the womenfolk elected to bring. Then afterward, they all listened as Doc Carson recounted the story of the battle of the stallions and the capture of Prince, which critter they had all admired so long in daylight.

DOC went on to draw a picture of that valley of gold which, actually, he’d never seen. Dal slyly winked at Jack Morrison.

“Flat an’—uh—slightly rollin’ it is, folks, like somethin’ kids l’arned of in fairy books. Like a—uh—promised land the Children uh Isr’l would have been glad to locate on. All gold an’ rose-colored, with mebbeso five to six hundred acres of sweepin’—uh—”

“Dal said not more’n two hundred, two hundred an’ fifty acres,” Marta at last cut in. “You ol’ grumpus, I’ll bet odds yuh never even see the place.”

“Hunh!” Doc grunted and turned to reach for his fiddle, smiling at Nan Floen.

“I’d admire to hear yuh an’ Mary take parts in that little Scotch song I heard yuh l’arnin’ the kids one evenin’, honey,” he said. “Anna Lawrence, wasn’t it?”

Nancy’s face flushed prettily as she chuckled.

“Annie Laurie, Doc dear,” she replied softly. “Shall we, Mary?”



Mary nodded, a cue for Jud Morrison to grab for his banjo.

Between them, Jud and Doc struck a chord, but Nan asked for a change of key.

“E Flat is better,” she said to Doc.

Doc coughed sharply and turned to glare at Marta:

“It’ll be flat shore enough, honey,” Marta said. “But they’s no tellin’ how closet it’ll come to E.”

Doc played softly, cautiously, for he had only heard the melody a few times. Jud was careful with his thumping chords while the two young women sang sweetly, their soprano and alto blending almost perfectly.

Then Nancy sang a soft little number—a lullaby for the children:

*“Softly, the quiet shadows fall—  
Gone is the sun to rest;  
Birdsong is hushed as the night shades crawl,  
Slowly, from east to west—”*

Doc was at last able to follow, although he had never heard this one before.

Suddenly the song was interrupted.

Dal leaped to his feet. From beyond his acreage had come the long blasting cry of King. Dal slipped quietly out of doors, to be joined by Mary.

They stood side by side and saw him—the silhouette of grand majesty, as they had seen him on their first day here at Sun Bear Valley. The King had followed on along the back trail to blast out a final challenge to his rival son.

From the home corral, the Prince hurled back a defiant call. In his own realm now, he was King.

Dal squeezed Mary’s hand and stooped to kiss her.

“It’s a grand life, honey,” he said softly. “While such critters as King continue to roam the back hinterland, it’ll always have a lot of charm.”

They returned indoors where Nancy resumed her song. When it was over, she looked across to where Jimmy and Ten Baldwin slept.

Olga Morrison was dabbing at her eyes with an apron hem. Marta Carson’s eyes were batting.

Doc felt that such gentle sentiment was getting him, too. He nodded to Jud. They struck a wild chord and crashed into a swift pell-mell rendition of The Devil’s Reel. . . .

The soft night draped its mantle over Sun Bear Valley and its settlers, giving peace, with full darkness to all.

