



WILD KING SAVAGERY

by HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Dal Baldwin, first settler in Sun Bear Valley, meets the challenge of a renegade seeking to despoil his homestead!

DAL BALDWIN, first settler of Sun Bear Valley homestead country, had reason to smile with great pride as he ranged a lingering glance over the beautiful

valley along the creek.

It was the dawn of a fall day when frost had already painted up the foliage—aspens, birches, wild fruits and wild roses—in a multi-tinted color scheme that

ran riot. It was a color scheme which extended its magnificence into the rugged hills and mountains to westward and northwestward.

In the first burst of golden sunlight, at a nearby pasture, a beautiful golden palomino filly flung her creamy mane into the light breeze as if to flaunt her golden beauty in the face of the sunlight.

It was a morning when sound traveled far, and Dal was stirred by the sounds of his neighbors. He could hear the booming baritone voice of Tom Bruce, his neighbor to the south across the creek, as Tom went about his chores. The jangle of cowbells from the Morrisons' place to the north seemed to blend with mellow bird calls. Now and then the bawling of a calf cast all such sounds of beauty into discord.

Suddenly the golden filly sent out a long, shrill whinny. Dal spun to see the palomino standing, head high, facing the west. Dal's heart pounded sharply. The situation seemed to revive a poignant memory of the first day of his arrival, with Mary, his lovely wife, at this untamed hinterland, when King, the great silver-gray stallion, had called to Dal's blooded little filly, Naieta, since dead.

"King!" Dal breathed the name softly.

King, the wild savage, it was that had sired the first of Dal's handsome horse stock. But for some time now, no sign had been seen or heard of the great wild stallion leader. In a high pole corral near by, a magnificent gray stallion flung up his head and flung out challenges to the westerly hills.

He was Prince, a son of the King, captured by Dal. By the Prince's challenging screams Dal Baldwin knew that great King was still alive; that he had come back down to the lower valley levels. Dal quivered with excitement and was scarcely aware that Mary had drawn up alongside.

"What is it, Dal darling?" she asked softly.

Dal started, then turned to her, smiling.

"It is just the greatest experience we've had for some time, honey," he replied. "It's the—uh—King. He's back, and he's callin' to the little gold filly. Imagine! Just when we need him most. Yuh know I must breed Goldie to either a white or silver gray stud. Well, the King's that stallion. He's most a white gray and will give us a good get from Goldie."

BUT Dal Baldwin was checkmated. The King was a wild savage and it was going to be difficult to bring about a meeting between the gold filly and him without jeopardizing the life of the palomino.

Dal stood staring into space, his brow furrowed in a deep frown. Mary made no comment, but her firm young chest heaved sharply as she shyly watched her husband.

Suddenly, from the northwest, came the unmistakable wild challenging call of the King. Dal started. He swung to Mary, his lips parted with excitement.

"I'm goin' over to Doc's," he said. "He'll figger out some way."

Mary Baldwin smiled knowingly. Dal was right. Little Doc Carson who, with his large and homely good wife, Marta, had been the Baldwins' first neighbors, was a man of ideas. He thought fast and logically, though he retained the right to boast a while before presenting his quickly conceived findings.

He and Marta had come to the Baldwins whenever they needed them—especially Marta. They had become the staunchest of neighbors and friends, standing by through all the early vicissitudes of the frontier homestead life and subsequent development.

Doc, through joy and sorrow, handicapped as he was with an arthritic knee condition, talked and blasted many a tragic situation into a surmountable situation with his tongue. And on occasion he had fought with his old single-action Colt to help his neighbors retain the valley land against the depredations of claim jumpers.

Dal saddled a black colt and rode off, while Mary watched him until she lost sight of him at a bend in the creek trail. She turned and was still watching the actions of the golden filly when the clank of bit irons startled her. She swung, to see a buckskin-clad rider watching her every move, a stranger whose dark face bore the heavy cast of an Indian.

Mary clapped a hand to her throat as she recalled their first visitor here at Sun Bear. He had been an uncouth, thieving breed who had rustled Naieta, the little black filly, who had robbed Dal's fox traps, and who had come within an ace of bushwhacking Dal.

Mary breathed that man's name now.

"Malotte!"

But Malotte was dead. This rider was a total stranger. He kned his pinto pony up close to her, his thick lips parting as his eyes roved over her lovely figure in its trim gingham house dress.

"Good morning, stranger," Mary greeted. "You were looking for someone, or something?"

The man's dark eyes seemed to spill fire. Mary quivered, wondering.

"Yuh see five head hoss stock?" he asked thickly.

Suddenly the little palomino filly whinnied. The man straightened and shot a glance her way, a glance that lingered. Mary saw him draw his tongue over his thick lips and saw the light flash from his eyes, as his lips curled strangely.

"Where yuh get dat palomilla?" he asked gutturally.

Mary was instantly, intuitively, conscious that this man was here at Sun Bear for no good purpose. Renegade was stamped and branded all over him. Quickly she decided she must hold him until Dal's return. She especially wanted Dal to meet him.

Smiling, she forced herself to look up into his terrible eyes.

"The filly was a present to us from the settlers," she said. "Would you like to light and set in for some breakfast?" His heavy lips parted in a smile.

"Yeah. T'ink I will. Been ridin' since 'fore dawn."

He dismounted, and Mary advised him to hitch his horse and feed it some alfalfa hay while she heated up some food. She was afraid of this man, but she maintained her frontier stoicism, a stoicism developed in her years of homesteading. She must hold him until Dal's return.

Mary heated up cornmeal mush and fried some side meat for her visitor. She was conscious every moment that his red-rimmed black eyes were following her constantly.

In her girlhood Mary had listened to her mother's tales of the early frontier homestead days in Montana, tales when frontier women had the same inherent fear of such strangers as this buckskin-clad half-breed. Often, renegade Indians created a greater element of fear. Such recollections intensified Mary's fear. She was alone, for her young sons, Jimmy and Ten, were up in the far east pastures rounding up young horse stock before going to school.

As she poured coffee for the man, he closed a heavy hand over her wrist and half-rose from his chair. But Mary instantly seemed to find strength, and challenged him with flashing eyes which displayed her anger and resentment.

His meal finished, he rose.

"How moch?" he asked, moving toward Mary.

"Nothing, mister," she replied, coldly. "We at Sun Bear don't charge visitors for meals, nor do we stand for men who take liberties with the womenfolk. Smoke?"

SHE backed to a shelf where Dal kept his can of tobacco. She was reaching for this when a hand was

laid on her shoulder. The half-breed spun her about. She could feel his hot breath on her face, but she did not wilt.

"I wouldn't advise you to go any further, stranger!" she said sharply, then whisked herself from his grip to stand beneath the deer antlers where Dal racked his loaded Sharps rifle.

"We frontier women will kill, if we have to," she said bitterly. "If I tell my husband what has happened so far he will kill you anyhow!"

"*Tonnerre!*" the man exploded in French.

He made as if to lunge toward her, but quickly Mary snatched down the Sharps and cocked the hammer. The whinnying of horse stock out of doors caused the breed to swing, and to Mary's pale face there flitted a smile. Dal had returned.

"My husband is back!" she said. "You'd better come on out to meet him. He'll be pleased a heap to make your acquaintance."

His brows flickering up, the man moved out of doors, followed by Mary. She had watched the stranger's hand flash, to hover over the hasp of a bowie knife at the mention of Dal's return. But now she was waving to Dal, who dismounted and hurried along toward them. "Mornin', stranger," he said gruffly. "How!" The buckskin-clad man was curt with his greeting. "Yuh see stray hoss band, huh?"

Dal caught an eye signal from Mary. "No, stranger," he answered. "I didn't see any sign. New to this district, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah. Mebbeso. I catch wild hoss for army. T'ought yuh folks might have seen hoss sign. I go now."

Dal Baldwin, before he had caught Mary's flashed signal, had taken a complete dislike to the greasy visitor. Dal could tell by the expression on Mary's face that all was not well. Now he caught the man's glance trained on the beautiful little palomino. But as Dal started to make some remark, the man moved off to tighten up his saddle cinch. Mounted, he turned his pony toward the pasture and for a long moment gazed at the palomino, his lips twisted in a strange grin.

Dal turned to his wife, his brows drawn in a tight frown.

"Yuh had some trouble with that jasper, didn't yuh, honey?" he remarked.

"Oh, it was nothing serious, Dal," Mary said. "I'm sure I had him a bit frightened, if not of me, then of your Sharps. But I'm glad you are back. I held him purposely until you came, knowing that you'd like to check him over. He reminds me too much of Malotte

for any good. Now you've seen him, Dal, dear, you can be prepared more or less, for any trouble he might brew. How did you get along with Doc?"

Dal's lips were thinned out as he squared his broad shoulders and turned to cast a sharp glance in the direction of the retreating rider. Suddenly he shrugged and turned his little black colt loose in the pasture. Back with Mary, he flung an arm about her shoulders and strode with her to the house.

Later, indoors, as he sipped coffee, he felt that he had not seen the last of the man in buckskin. But now he turned to Mary who was anxious to hear of Doc's scheme of attracting the great silver-gray King stallion to a mating with the lovely golden filly.

"Doc's suggestion is that I ride up into the hills, leadin' Goldie. He figgers I should take young Phil Cody along from the Valley Beyond. Claims it'd do Phil a lot of good to get a trip of this sort. Doc told me of a scheme for buildin' an almost secret box trap corral. That little old coot's got more ideas in his head—" Dal broke off, chuckling.

A soft smile crossed Mary's lovely face, a smile which dispossessed a frown as Dal had told of his proposed excursion into the wild hinterland, the haunt of King and his shaggy wild horse band. But she knew Dal was quite capable of looking after himself, and now that he knew of the presence of the half-breed horse hunter in the valley country, he could always be on his guard.

"We'll leave at dawn tomorrow, Mary honey," Dal went on. "So if yuh'd fix up a trail sack of grub I'd be obliged." Mary nodded brightly, but was not without a lingering sense of misgiving as she turned to her household duties. . . .

AT THE pass, which led to the decline to the beautiful Valley Beyond, Dal Baldwin reined in his black colt. He wanted to catch the play of dawnlight filtering into the lush stretch of country which nestled in tree- and shrub-fringed serenity like a handsomely garnished platter, surrounded by the well-treed foot-hills.

Smoke curled from the roof of the splendid Cody log house. Dal smiled. Phil and Nan had been married a year, but had settled well to their homestead life. Their house was the best in all the valley country, a product of Doc Carson's skill in selection of logs and direction of building.

Nan still continued to teach school at Sun Bear. During Phil's absence, Dal had arranged for her to stay with Mary, if she so desired.

At the far end of the valley, to westward, the whiteface cattle of the neighboring Bar-D Ranch were still bedded down. Now and then Dal glimpsed a shadowy horse and rider, but the whole scene was one of peace. It was Dal who had been first to discover the valley and to claim it for his own and for the Morrison sons when they were old enough to take over homesteads alongside Phil Cody's.

On such a morning as this it was difficult for Dal to recall the bitter struggles of former years and recent years, the struggles to conquer, to tame the rugged hinterland and to carve out of its vastness homes for his own and other families. Yet in the back of his mind there lingered the thought that not yet had the hinterland valley country been utterly tamed.

The little palomino filly broke up Dal's mood, snorting as she leaped against her lead rope. Then all at once Dal started at the powerful call of King, the wild stallion.

The man's brows flicked sharply up on a small plateau to northward as he glimpsed the flashing, almost white mane of the great wild savage.

The King gave Dal only a fleeting glimpse of his magnificence before he suddenly bounded to cover as if startled by the scent of some alien force. Yet the glimpse Dal got was enough to start the blood racing through his system.

He moved on and shortly pulled up at the Cody house, where both Phil and Nan came to meet him at the stoop.

Phil expressed keen eagerness in the trip to the hills. His horse, already saddled, was standing by. He moved up, tightened up the cinch and made a trail sack of food fast, then turned and gathered Nan into his arms.

Soon the men were riding off. Nan walked along in their trail for a short distance to wave to Phil until at last he disappeared, swallowed in the thickets. Soon she would ride off herself, to her school teaching duties at the main valley schoolhouse, and as she thought of the school, she also thought that for not much longer would she be able to take the daily rides back and forth. Not yet had she or Phil told their secret to anyone in the valley but Marta Carson. Only Marta knew that before the dawn of another spring, Nan would give the first child to this beautiful Valley Beyond.

Nan was slowly walking back toward her house when suddenly, in the corral, her pony snorted and whirled. Nan wheeled sharply about to glimpse a buckskin-clad rider mounted on a pinto pony. The

man dismounted near-by at a willow thicket at which he secured his horse. Then he was striding toward the house, toward Nan, whose knees felt weak, for at a glance she could see this man was a stranger. He was uncouth, with long, matted hair and a stubbled face.

There were Bar D riders at the far end of the valley, but she knew they wore jeans and shorts, not fringed buckskin.

As the man drew near, Nan could see his face with its sharp black eyes, and leering mouth, a sensuous, thick-lipped mouth.

"A halfbreed," she told herself.

She spoke to the stranger, but he essayed no reply. As she backed indoors, he followed. He spoke as Nan clutched a table for support.

"Yuh scairt?" he said thickly.

Nan's lips moved, but no sound came. When he reached out a hand to pat her cheek, she felt her knees give. It was then he lurched forward to fling his arms about her, but Nan, to her own amazement, found a strength and courage she didn't realize she had in reserve. She whirled away from his embrace and, seizing a stove lifter as she rounded the stove, she struck out sharply. But the man shielded his face and caught her. Nan half-sobbed, for she knew she could no longer fight him. She felt his heavy lips crushing hers. His embrace hurt her, but she could not cry out.

THOUGH she did not hear it, it was the sharp call of a Bar D man outside, a waddy chasing a strayed steer, that startled the half-breed. He hurled himself out of doors, leaving Nan to crumple to the floor in a faint.

As the breed hurried to his horse, Bart Manning, the Bar D waddy, swung in his saddle. It was only a year ago that Bart himself had given the Codys and the other settlers of the valleys a great deal of trouble. But Bart had reformed. He had worked hard for Dal Baldwin to repay him for damage caused to his hay and stock.

Bart glimpsed the buckskin-clad breed vaulting to his saddle.

"He's spooked," Bart said sharply. "What in hickory is he scared of?" Suddenly he swung, and glimpsed the open door of the Cody house and realized that Nan was alone. He spurred his horse forward, as if to give chase to the man, then suddenly changed his mind. He rode swiftly up to the house and dismounted flying.

In a moment he was on his knees beside the prone form of Nan, the girl who in his wild way a year ago

he had loved. It was such love as Bart had displayed that had been the cause of his trouble with the settlers. But he had been accepted into the settlement now, and for some time had been one of the best friends of the Codys.

His eyes widened as he called Nan's name. In a moment he was bent close, listening for her breathing. Then he rose and wrung a towel out in cold water and applied it to her forehead.

When at last Nan's eyelids fluttered, Bart Manning heaved a deep sigh of relief. But she gasped and shrank back, until recognition came.

"Bart—Bart—Marta—Carson," she said weakly.

"You said—uh—Marta Carson, Nan?" Nan Cody nodded.

Bart helped her to her feet and she clung to him for a long moment, quivering until her strength returned. He then led her to her bed and covered her over with a blanket.

"That buckskin *nitchi* hurt yuh, Nan?" he asked sharply. "Don't be afraid to talk plain." The young waddy's eyes were spilling flame.

"He—he frightened me more than anything, Bart. I wish you would go for Marta Carson. Bart—don't look like that. The man didn't hurt me."

A wave of relief crossed Bart's features, yet in his eyes there still smoldered a mounting hatred of that half-breed stranger who had in any manner attacked Nan Cody.

"Right, Nan," he said softly. "I'll have one of the Bar D boys ride over and keep an eye on yuh, then I'll hightail over to Carsons. Reckon yuh won't be teachin' today, huh?"

"N-no, Bart. You might leave word for the children at the schoolhouse. And—thanks, Bart."

He patted her hand, then wheeled to hurry out to his horse. He asked a cowhand at the west valley to ride over to the Cody place, then streaked for Sun Bear Valley. . . .

Marta Carson's large, kindly face took on an expression of alarm at the news Bart brought her, but when she noted his agitation, she smiled.

"All right, Bart," she said, in her slow husky drawl. "You go back now, son, and don't look so scared. Doc'll drive me over right away, won't you, Doc?" Little Doc Carson had risen from the breakfast table. He shook with anger as he limped toward Bart.

"Not only get back and tell Nan we'll be over right off, son, but yuh'd better get onto the trail of that man. I seen Mary Baldwin and she told me about him. She

claimed he had an eye on the golden filly and if that's so, there's no tellin' how much trouble he could cook up for Phil and Dal. In any case, it'd be better if yuh had Phil ride home to Nan right now. Understand?"

"Uh—yeah, Doc, I think I—uh—understand," Bart replied.

And as he rode off a slow smile gathered at his lip corners. His heart seemed to pick up a beat as if suddenly he knew there could be only one reason for Nan's asking especially for Marta Carson.

Bart left word at the schoolhouse, then swung his bronc to the Valley Beyond.

IT WAS the savage call of King, the wild stallion, that gave Bart Manning his first clue to the whereabouts of Dal Baldwin and Phil Cody. Knowing their mission he realized that they would not be far from the sign of the great silver-gray stud.

Bart rode through a patch of stunted junipers, then suddenly halted. There were horse tracks here in the loose sand, the tracks of a jingle, ridden horse.

Dismounting, Bart groundhitched his roan and moved on through light underbrush. Suddenly he halted. Across the gulch, climbing, was the lean form of the buckskin-clad man he'd seen streaking through the brush at the Valley Beyond. Bart carried only his Colt six-gun and in the shifting light of sunset with the range extreme, he hesitated to throw down on the man, although impelled so to do.

A shrill whinny sounded, causing Bart to half-turn right. He started, gasping as he glimpsed the pretty head of Dal Baldwin's golden filly.

"So Mary was right," Bart told himself. "Yuh durned coyote, yuh're headed up to rustle the gold hoss!"

Sliding down the gulch bank, Bart struck off left to find an easy, quick climb to the upper level at which evidently Phil and Dal had constructed their trap corral designed by Doc Carson.

Again the silver-gray stallion called. Bart Manning quivered. He had never seen the big one, nor before had he ever heard his throaty cries, cries that manifested his terrible savagery.

All at once Bart froze. Brush had crackled off to his right. The young waddy swore softly, for he was left in a precarious position, hanging onto a flimsy root by his left hand.

Before he could do anything to save himself, a whistling club of dry scrub oak struck the side of his head. He had only dimly glimpsed his attacker before

he was struck from his hold to go hurtling down the loose rock slope to come to a hard chocking stop against a boulder, his wind gone.

Blood poured down Bart's face as he recovered. His head and neck ached fiercely, but he forced himself to a sitting position, searching for his six-gun. He found it near, none the worse save that it was scratched and dirtied.

Bart holstered his gun and with a swift thought for Dal and Phil he started off. He headed to westward in a wider circle now, in order to find an easier climb in his search for the two friends who were above, somewhere, without knowledge of the presence of the buckskin rustler.

Bleeding, Bart Manning finally staggered into Dal's camp.

Dal caught Bart as the waddy threatened to buckle in a faint. Quickly, with Phil's aid, Dal washed out the young man's wound and dressed it with material from a saddle-bag kit. Bart took a long drink of cold water, then sat up, his eyes brighter.

"Slip, or what, Bart?" Dal asked calmly.

"Both, Dal," Bart replied. "There's a buckskin varmint on yore trail, on the trail of the little gold filly. He's the jasper who called at yore place and—uh—" Bart shot a swift glance at Phil—"I—uh—yuh'd better ride on home, Phil. This lobo called on Nan. She's—well, Marta Carson's over there now and they said for yuh not to worry."

"Nan!"

Cody sprang to his feet, his hand slipping to the butt of his Colt. He moved in closed to Bart.

"Yuh told me everything, Bart?" he asked excitedly.

"Yeah. I told yuh all I know, Phil. I was hazin' a steer close to the house when I seen the jigger in the buckskin streakin' into the brush. It struck me he might have been thievin' at yore place, so—well, I called and found Nan. She'd fainted, I reckon. Told me to hightail for Marta Carson, which I did."

"Yuh'd better do as Bart suggests, Phil," Dal said.

"Nan might need yuh. Get along and leave this rustler to me and Bart. Run along now."

Phil hesitated a long moment, then turned to Dal.

"All right, Dal. You get him, eh? But be careful, both of yuh. And thanks, Bart."

He held out his hand which Bart Manning squeezed in warm friendliness.

When Phil had ridden off, Dal turned to Bart.

"Yuh didn't hold nothin' back from that boy, did yuh, Bart?" he asked.

SLOW smile gathered at Bart's lips. He shook his head.

"No, Dal, but I reckon yuh ain't familiar with the why of Nan's askin' me to go get Marta Carson, huh?"

"What!" Dal leaped to his feet, his eyes narrowed with concern. "Then that scare she had might be plumb serious! A baby, huh?"

Dal turned to stare off into space. He was thinking of the coming of the first child to the Valley Beyond.

But suddenly he heard the wild scream of the little palomino, then the stamp of hoofs and a crash of timber and in a flash Dal feared the worst for the gold filly. He knew there was trouble at the pole trap corral.

"Hang and rattle a while, Bart!" Dal said sharply. "You ain't fit for any action yet. I'm goin' to take a look-see." Jerking his old single-action gun from its holster Dal moved into the underbrush, headed for the trap area.

Dal's heart beat a sharp tattoo, for this situation reminded him of a similar adventure in the time of the fillyhood of Naieta, the little blooded black, rustled by the killer breed, Malotte.

He arrived at the trap site to find, not to his surprise, that the golden filly was gone. He examined the tracks leading off and could not form an immediate plan of action. He could have done with the quick-thinking mind of Doc Carson at the moment.

But Dal was thinking of Bart Manning, back at the camp, wounded. In any case, Dal needed his horse.

Returning to camp he found Bart up and about.

"What did yuh find, Dal?" the young waddy asked.

"She's gone, Bart! That curly wolf has rustled her, and I've got to take his trail, pronto. Mebbe yuh'd better get along back to the valley and have somebody check up on that head wound. I'll be careful. And there's no need for you to get mixed with any kind of trouble I might have with this rustlin' half-breed." Bart smiled significantly, then shook his head.

"I've had worse hurts than this, Dal," he said. "And I've rode out my job with 'em. If yuh can wait till I get my bronc, I'll be ridin' along with yuh."

Dal reached over and squeezed the young cowhand's shoulder. It didn't seem a far cry back to the time when Bart Manning had given him a lot of worry, but since that time the young man had measured up well to the standard required by the settlers of Sun Bear Valley. Wounded as he was, he was sticking by Dal, and Dal knew that there was no chance of dissuading him from his decision to lend a hand or a gun.

"Thanks, son," Dal said warmly. "I'll meet yuh at the juniper belt to the south of the trap. Don't hurry too much and get that wound to bleedin' ag'in. There's plenty of time, because I aim to foller that breed till I get him. . . ."

As they rested their horses the following noon in a small lush meadow, Dal redressed Bart's wound and applied further astringent solution—largely a concoction of turpentine manufactured by Doc Carson.

The tracks of the palomino and her captor's horse were fresh, but there were other tracks showing every now and then—the big, heavy tracks of King, the wild savage.

"Must be close to the little mare's time, Dal," Bart suggested, "or the big stallion wouldn't be taggin' along like this, knowin' there was man sign mixed up with that of the filly. How do you figger it?"

"Well, Bart, it was Doc who give me the light on the probable reason for the King comin' back to his old range from which the big cats had run him and his wild band. Doc figgers the ways of wild critters are unaccountable, deeper than man can penetrate. He claims the King's gettin' along in years and mebbe realizes he ain't so long for this life nohow. Then there may be a big rival, younger stud in the wild band that one day might challenge and best the King. So—uh—well, I reckon yuh can figger out what Doc's drivin' at, huh?"

Manning nodded his understanding.

Dal gave the sign to mount and together they rode on, but with great caution. They had to guard against startling the wild stallion.

The King could readily give their presence away to the rustler.

On through the afternoon into the sunset they rode, over a trail which was quite new to Dal. Then suddenly, as the plum-wine shades of swift twilight caused a wraithlike dance across the face of the jagged foot-hills beyond, Dal pulled his little black up sharply. Below them in a narrow meadow beyond a creek he glimpsed two horses. The one was Goldie, the palomino on a tether; the other the pinto of the half-breed rustler.

DAL motioned to Bart who kned his roan over. The waddy's mouth firmed as his eyes narrowed.

"Now what do we do, Dal?" he asked softly. "Do we go in an' smoke the sidewinder out?"

The wild ringing scream of King startled both men

by its suddenness and closeness. Both men froze in their saddles. Dal glimpsed the half breed emerge from a clump of brush where evidently he had decided to bed down for the night.

“Think he sees us, Dal?” Bart whispered.

“No,” Dal replied. “We’re backed by heavy blue-green spruce. But don’t move till he turns away.”

Again the stallion called and Dal saw the little palomino hurl herself forward until chocked up short by her tether rope. She reared and sent wild cries back in answer to the great king of her kind.

“Back now,” Dal said. “We’ll camp back in the spruce. There’ll be a halfmoon. When it rises, I’m goin’ in alone. You can trail me to guard against a surprise bushwhackin’ . . .”

Into the deepening dusk of the silent wilderness night Dal Baldwin weaved forward, parting the willow and wild fruit underbrush carefully.

The half-moon now hung lazily over the crest of a hill, to cast eerie shadows on the small valley zone. Dal’s thumping heart seemed to give out the only sound in all the wilds until suddenly a she-cougar cried. Her cry was like a signal to the creatures of the wilds. From some distant point a bull elk bugled and back toward Sun Bear Valley a coyote yapped and yodled.

Quivering, Dal moved on. When a twig cracked at his back he whirled, gun jerked forward. But it was Bart Manning who had caused the sound when a riding boot heel had caught in a piece of dry windfall juniper.

All at once Dal froze. He swallowed hard as he glimpsed his little filly, now stamping in a state of great agitation. She suddenly cried and whirled as from the nearby brush rushed the great silver-gray stallion.

For a moment, Dal was charged with a feeling of apprehension. He fingered his Colt’s trigger guard, realizing how quickly the savage wild King could kill the palomino if she resisted his advances. Dal wondered about the man, but concluded that the breed was lying low, hoping for a mating of the two handsome horses.

Suddenly Dal started, conscious that by next September, if all went well, the gold filly would mother a colt by the great savage silver-gray King. He watched the big stallion stamp and toss his head, to expose his strong, gleaming teeth in the moonlight.

But all at once the King whirled. From the brush a rope whirred out, its noose settling expertly over the neck of the big creature.

Dal could not help but admire such a cast. In the half-light, the rustler had made a perfect snap cast as the stallion reared. Like lightning he whirled about a willow clump to snub the loose end of the rope taut.

Dal heard the man’s thick chuckle at his conquest. He saw the King hurl himself back, until he coughed as the rope tightened over his windpipe. For some time, as the stallion recovered, Dal quivered at the demonstration of wild savagery as the stallion fought to free himself.

Bart Manning was at Dal’s side.

“What now, Dal?” he asked in a whisper. “Shall I sneak around back of the breed and pistol-whup him?”

There was no immediate reply from Dal. He was fascinated by the fury of the stallion. There was a time when he, too, had had the King trapped, but he had given the big one his freedom.

“Somehow, I’m goin’ to cut the stallion free,” he whispered to Bart. “You steal in and cover me, but watch out for gun play. He’s a killer, that hombre.”

Scarcely rustling a leaf. Dal moved on through the meadow, crossing the creek at a riffle. He screened himself in the tall grass now, but suddenly rose, at a fearful scream from the stallion.

Dal saw the King lunge, not backward, but forward. The breed gave out a cry as he attempted to lunge backward himself, but he was trapped by the willows. In the moonlight, as the King struck, Dal could see the foam fleck from his gaping mouth.

THE King reared and struck. Terrible pile-driving hoofs crashed down. A gun cracked and Dal gasped as he saw the big stallion topple back on his haunches, then flop to his side, blowing hard.

Bart was quickly at Dal’s side. But Dal started forward, bowie knife in hand. When within a rod of the stallion, the King snorted blood from his flared nostrils. Quickly Dal nipped in and slashed the noose clear of his bloodied neck.

The great silver-gray flung himself to all fours, seemed to hang unsteadily a long moment before whirling to go charging into the brush.

For some time, quivering in every limb. Dal listened to the heavy going of the stallion. Dal seemed convinced that King had been sharply hit, but if the bleeding stopped soon he might not be gravely, fatally wounded.

Dal turned to Bart who had touched his arm.

“It’s the breed, Dal,” the young waddy said. “He’s alive. Let’s go take a look-see, huh?”

They moved in on the pulped man whose glazing eyes were wide in the moonlight.

"I—I—go," he gurgled, "Always bad—liquor, Injuns . . . Tell—tell—little woman, I'm—sorry. I—"

His throat rattled and he passed out, leaving no name.

Dal was still down on a knee beside the dead man when from a point well across the creek, there came the deep, throaty call of King. A slow smile gathered at Dal's mouth.

"Reckon the big feller'll live, Bart," he said. "Now I'm goin' to quiet the filly down. We'll have some supper and bed down. At dawn we'll bury the half-breed under a rock cairn. . . ."

At dusk the following evening, Mary Baldwin met her husband as Dal and Bart rode up to the Cody house. Mary kissed Dal warmly and asked both men indoors. Her eyes were bright with the glistening tears of happiness.

Inside, Dal moved swiftly to Nan's side and took her hand. She smiled encouragingly, then beckoned to Bart. She drew him in close and kissed him warmly on the cheek, her eyes moist with tears of gratitude.

"Thank you, Bart," she said softly. "Everything's going to be all right and—and Phil and I have decided that—" she broke off, turning rosy, "if it's a boy, one of his first names will be Bart!"

Bart Manning coughed sharply and turned away, his face red under its whisker stubble. But suddenly a wide grin split his mouth wide and he nudged Dal sharply in the ribs.

"Did yuh hear that, Dal? My gosh! A year ago I was a renegade, and now I—"

He trapped his underlip in his teeth and hurtled on out of doors.

Then Marta Carson took over and shooed the settlers out.

"Better get along, folks," she said in her sharp, but kindly manner.

"And yeah," Doc cut in, "yuh'd better all give a little attention to thanks to Gawd A'mighty for deliverin' Nan out of danger."

Smiling, Dal led Mary out. They rode off together into the moonlight and the peaceful night which lay its warm mantle over the valley country once again.

