

Natacha from the reserve out east. I reckon she'll prove mighty handy about the house."

Nellie Bartlett held out her hand in friendly greeting, and Natacha glanced from man to woman before her. At Dick's nod she bent slightly, and with a crude grace, took the white girl's outstretched hand, saying simply, "How?"

"Hello, Dick! You've got her, eh? Thank Heaven!" said old Tom, appearing in the doorway. "It seems to me if I'd had to keep up this here red-cross nursin' o' Nellie much longer, what with cookin' all the chuck and a scrubbin' all the wash, about the best thing for me to 'a' done would 'a' been to go right in fer aprons, curl papers, and a switch."

Natacha had wandered back to her pony's side where she stood in her wonted passivity. Dick availed himself of this opportunity to get a word in with Nellie.

"And now, Nellie, girl, it's a good canter every day for you. Roses in your cheeks, and the old sparkle in your eyes. You just let Natacha here wait on you and nurse you back to yourself again. I'm reckonin' on there bein' a weddin' here soon; don't you yourself calculate I've had about watin' enough?"

"You sure have, Dick," said Nellie, in the vernacular of the West. "I'm going to get better right quick, and not keep you waiting much longer. And oh! Dick, I love you so!"

He caught his kiss; then whirled to see if anyone was watching. Old Tom was indoors rattling dish pans, and Natacha was on the other side of her cayuse loosening a cinche girth.

Dick climbed into the saddle and began a fifteen mile ride to Fishburn, where he tumbled into one of the bunks at the Stewart ranch.

It was at breakfast next morning that a pony thumped up against the door of the dining room, and big Grate D'Alton strode his hefty person into their midst. "Smatter, Grate? You look like you had a rattler in yer shirt."

"Matter 'nough," growled Grate, "somebody's out doctorin' brands on this here range."

"Aw come off, Grate. There ain't been no rustlin' in these here parts since the two Brown boys were sent down to Stony Mountain three years ago."

"All right, have it your way," grunted Grate as he took a chair, "but I just come from a spot not ten miles back where a calf with a brand new scorch-mark I ain't never seen before hereabout—this here calf, I say, was a nestlin' up close and child-like to one of the Hatfield cows. That close it was that any of you coyutes here would hang a feller on the strength of said cow bein' the mother thereof. Savvy?"

There was a pause in the conversation as Grate sat down to refresh himself after his long night ride from the Hatfield ranch, where he was bronchotwister that year.

Finally Dick Crosby broke the silence of Big Grate's home thrust.

"Well, all the outfits on this here range knows their own brands and anyone as shows up to claim them calves at round-up time, we can spot them, can't we?"

"Yes," answered Grate, "but there's a lot o' outfits up north buyin' up cattle down here in the foothills and slapin' their own brands on 'em. Come round-up time you'll see 'em all down here a cuttin' out their cattle from among our'n."

"But what about the rustler?"

"Why, he just runs his new fangled mark on whatever calf he happens to fancy, or he gets a pal to do it for him; comes a struttin' round here big as life round-up time, and drives north with his outfit. Course he's got some windy-bellied Shorthorns of his own to make the thing look ship-shape. Tumble? Let's ride over and see the calf," continued the excited Grate, "taint ten miles up the Dry Fork."

The chairs grated back, but Dick Crosby sat still munching away at a flapjack.

"Ain't you comin', Crosby?"

"Like to, but I can't," answered Dick.

"Can't, eh?" grinned Grate, "something with peticats fifteen miles back, eh?"

Dick joined in the laugh and answered, "It's more in the line o' business, fellas. So long."

The discovery of four more calves with brands doctored similar to the one Big Grate discovered the morning of the excitement caused a rising and ill-boding wrath among the cattlemen.

Dick Crosby heard little of the uneasiness of the punchers in the weeks following. His mind was more occupied with thoughts of Nellie Bartlett, of her recovering health, and of the nearing date of his wedding to her. He did not know that the cattlemen of the Kootenay Range had decided that the best place for the fellow who was doctoring brands, if caught, would be a ropeless and treeless land.

Late one afternoon as Dick rode into the yard of the Bartlett ranch, Old Tom was just turning his pony into the corral. Glancing about the crude dwelling and seeing no sign of the servant he had brought to help the Bartlett's Dick asked, "Where's Natacha?"

"Oh, she's gone off on one of those jaunts of hers. You see, Dick, every once in a while she seems to get restless, the Indian blood I reckon, and it seemed best to me to let her have her run. She's got her own pony, you know, and she comes back lookin' better and happier. She's always back before dark, and I shouldn't be surprised if she returns any minute."

Tom had come to value the services of the Indian girl in his home, and continued: "That same Natacha's the only Injun I ever see worth a cartridge even; but she shore is plumb valuable to us. I really b'lieve that Nellie there owes a mighty heap of her betterment to her; and, as for takin' household off'n me, why—" and he left to silence the task of his incompleated sentence.

After an hour spent in a lover's usual inconsequent talk, Dick once more slung his long right leg over the cantel of his Mexican saddle, and again took the trail that led its fifteen miles to Fishburn.

The second mile was almost behind him when he topped a rise and made a sharp turn past a clump of bushes that clustered around a big cottonwood tree. Upon rounding this he almost collided, head on, with the mounted Indian girl.

After the first surprise of the meeting was over, Natacha looked at him with eyes that glistened with an excitement quite foreign to her usual stolid self. There was another look too, that flashed itself into her black eyes as she recognized Dick. Dick had not noticed this as he sang out:

"Hello, Natacha! You're travelling pretty fast. That's a thunderin' fine boss you've got there, ain't it?"

But she ignored his question with another:

"You been there with her again?"—she nodded back over the trail he had come.

Dick knew there was no rudeness intended so he answered simply:

"Yes."

"Man there yet?"

"You mean old man Bartlett? Yes, he rode up just as I got there. What's in the wind, Natacha? You're too worked up for an Indian. What's old Bartlett got to do with it anyway?"

She peered at him closely for a minute, then wheeled her horse and leaned over as though she feared she would miss a syllable:

"Bartlett, he the rustler. I see him 'self. I follow him, I hide, see him brand three calves. Iron hot, burn him, so."

Dick was struck dumb, but was aroused by the recollection that Old Tom Bartlett had often had a worried look of late. Could it be true? Tom Bartlett, jolly old Tom, father of the girl he was about to marry?

Quick to the belief that what she said, startling though it was, was true, came the question he shot at her:

"You've told no one else?"

"I just come back from Stewart camp. Tell 'em there. Man Bartlett thief. He her father. You no marry her now."

Then her expression changed as she said softer, "Natacha no thief."

Dick knew on the instant what that meant. He cast about him a wild look,



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