

Wilful, spoiled coquette Lodora was, who had driven her four-in-hand of adorers since she had put on long skirts and looped up her curls; but she had found out her own heart at last, and it fluttered wildly at Jim's words. It warned her that she might lose this one lover for whom she really cared by pursuing the methods which had enslaved the others. But it was ever the last ditch with Lodora. The fear at her heart only lifted her proud little head.

"Well, Mr. Bradway, perhaps you'd like to make some doughnuts for Blue Lightning? I shall be pleased to give you the benefit of my advice, or my recipe—but cook for a horse I will not!"

This admirable arrangement would keep poor Jim in sight until she could eventually dictate her own terms of surrender. And he was nothing loath; he would have apologized, and with any degree of abjectness; but one cannot offer soft speeches over a sieve of Triple X flour, nor suggest sentimental arguments while spooning lard into a kettle. The cow-puncher was, like most men of his calling, a very fair cook, and the first doughnut which came out was crisp, brown and toothsome.

"I'll take that to Blue Lightning," said Lodora wickedly; and she hung it upon a small, pink-tipped forefinger and sallied out.

Jim looked after her almost smiling. Why would she torment him, when she could make him absolutely happy? He turned once more to the bubbling kettle upon the stove and the exacting business of dropping doughy rings into its molten contents, watching them sink, plump up, float, and turn brown, and fishing them out with a long fork. Suddenly something like lightning whisked past the one window, and an agonized voice screamed:

"Jim! Oh, Jim!"

Lodora had mounted Blue Lightning, and the pony had bolted with her! Bradway ran out with his doughnut fork in hand; but he was helpless and afoot! He cast the fork from him, and reached for a small pistol which luckily chanced to be carried in his hip pocket—an unusual thing for a cow-puncher.

He looked at the little weapon with a sort of sob. There was no other way!

Had he been mounted, there might have been a chance of heading the pony off, since it circled at no very frightful speed around toward the left. Jim ran in a straight line, to the left, also, moving in a sort of chord to the bolting horse's wide circle hoping to get near enough to Blue Lightning and his precious burden and risk a shot. "Kick your foot loose from the stirrup—be ready to fall free—I'm going to shoot him!" he shouted, hoarsely.

"Oh, don't! Oh, don't!" came back the startled cry.

Jim's hand shook as it went slowly up with the weapon. It was like shooting at a dear friend! But a soul wrought up to the sacrifice made firm the trembling hand and unsteady arm.

"You'll have to just understand, old man," he whispered. "You've got to die for her, same as I would, if 'twas me!"

Then the report rang out. The pony suddenly whirled, and came towards his master at a gentle trot, while a long curl, from Lodora's flying tresses, floated away and settled gently upon the grass. Instead of turning the pony away from danger, as she intended, the girl had wheeled him directly into its path.

Yes, the girl had turned him; for in spite of her pretended helplessness and terror, it was with Blue Lightning well in hand that Lodora came up to her lover.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried, precipitating herself into the arms outstretched to receive her. "I wanted to scare you a little; but I didn't think you'd believe that anything on four legs, even Blue Lightning, could run away with me!"

Jim stood pale and gasping, staring across to where the tell-tale curl fluttered upon the grass. But he found the presence of mind to take advan-

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tage of the situation. Lodora with a hysterical tendency to put her arms around his neck and beg his forgiveness, was a delicious novelty.

"You ought not to run such awful risks—I might have shot you!" he remonstrated.

"Jim, honey," urged the tearful and penitent Lodora, "I had no more idea that you'd shoot at Blue Lightning than anything in the world!"

"You don't know a thing about how much I love you," said Jim simply.

"And you'd have shot Blue Lightning for my sake!" she went on, as they moved back to the ranch-house, hand in hand, the astute pony following. "Well"—she paused long, looking down; then continued, as they once more stepped forward: "I said I wouldn't accept a divided heart—and that's why I—why I—"

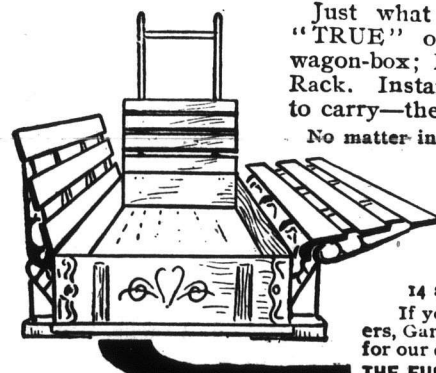
"Oh, is that why you've been tormenting me all this time?" exclaimed her lover. He turned suddenly, and the little derringer flashed in his hand. Jim had had a gleam of enlightenment. "Then I'll shoot him anyhow!" he said, affecting to aim at the pony.

"No you won't" cried his sweetheart, and closed a resolute hand over the weapon. "I just love Blue Lightning. I'm going to have him for my saddlehorse when we—when—"

Some moments later she plucked herself, rosy and disheveled from her lover's close-clasping arms, and with one look up into his glorified countenance, cried:

"My goodness, those doughnuts are burning to a cinder—just smell them!" And she fled like a deer toward the house.

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