

36 Trails to Two Moons

hurried surely through the dark to the fireplace corner where the rifle stood, seized it and threw a shell into the chamber. After a minute spent with ear close to the outer door she pushed back the bar and let the heavy slab door swing inward. Rifle ready, Hilma peered out.

The many-starred night told nothing. Naught there but the dead black shoulders of the mountains, deeper shadows below, and on high a spangled vault which seemed to hum with the energy of its myriad lamps. Hilma went back to bed.

Near noon next day Christian, her father's horse, ambled head down to the corral bars and there stood, resting easily on three legs and patiently waiting to be uncinched. The saddle was empty.

Hilma threw herself on Christian's back and started him at a labored gallop down the road toward Two Moons. Her mood was not one of surprise or consternation; the night had left her expectant, and the return of the riderless horse was but part of fulfillment. So she rode, eyes scanning the hard road ahead and the little swales and buffalo wallows on either side.