

Rowdy Rides to Glory

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Chapter 1

For Want of a Horse.

Rowdy Horn stared gloomily at Cub's right hind leg and shook his head with regret.

"No use even thinkin' about it, Jenny," he admitted ruefully to the girl he wanted to marry. "Cub won't work at the Stockman's Show this year. Not with that leg!"

Jenny Welman nodded, faintly irritated. Something was always going wrong. "No," she agreed, "you can't ride him, and without a good roping horse you wouldn't have a chance at first money, and without five thousand dollars—"

"I know! Without it we can't get married!" Rowdy ran his fingers through his dark, curly hair. "Jenny, does that money make so much difference? Lots of folks I know started with a darned sight less, and if I get a good calf crop this year we would be all set."

"We've talked of this before," Jenny replied quietly. "If you want to marry me, you've got to provide a home for me. I won't start like my mother did."

"She was pretty happy," Horn insisted stubbornly, "and your mother was a mighty fine woman."

"True, but just the same, I want to be comfortable! I don't want to slave my youth away trying to get ahead like she did." Suddenly, and excitedly, Jenny caught his arm. "Rowdy! I just happened to think. Why don't you see Bart Luby?"

"Luby?" Horn's mouth tightened. "What would I see him for?"

"Maybe he would let you borrow Tanglefoot to ride! He's going to ride Royboy, I know, so why don't you ride over and ask him?"

"Ask a favor of Bart Luby?" Rowdy's eyes smoldered. "I will not! I'll let the rodeo go to kingdom come, and the ranch, too, before I'll go to him for help! Anyway, he'd turn me down flat. He knows well enough that with Cub and me out of the running he is a cinch to win."

"Will it do any harm to ask?" Jenny insisted impatiently. "Why you imagine he holds anything against you, I can't guess. He's the wealthiest man in the whole South Rim country, and has the biggest ranch, so why he should worry about you, I wouldn't know."

There was an undercurrent in Jenny's voice that stirred Rowdy's resentment. He glanced up, studying her carefully. He had been in love with Jenny Welman for a long time, and had been going around with her for almost a year, yet somehow of late he had been experiencing vague doubts. Nothing he could put his

finger on, but little things led him to believe that she placed more emphasis upon whether a man had money than how he got it.

"If you'd like," she suggested, her eyes brightening, "I could see him for you."

"No." Horn shook his head stubbornly. "I won't ask him, and I don't want you asking him. He knows exactly how I feel about him, and he knows I think there was something wrong about that Bar O deal."

"But Rowdy!" she protested, almost angry. "How can you be so foolish? After three years I was hoping you'd forgotten that silly resentment you had because you didn't get that ranch."

"Well, I haven't!" Rowdy told her firmly. "If there was one man I knew, it was old Tom Slater, and I know what he thought of Bart. There was a time when he thought of leaving that ranch to both of us together, but after Bart Luby left and went to cattle buying, Slater never felt the same about him. Something happened then that old Tom didn't like. Why, three times he told me he didn't even want Luby on the place, and that he was leaving it to me. It doesn't make sense that he would change his mind at the last minute!"

"It was not at the last minute!" Jenny protested. "He had given Bart a deed to the ranch—over a year before his death. Why, with that deed he didn't even need the will, but all the same, the will left everything to him. You heard it read yourself."

Jenny's chin lifted, and in her eyes Rowdy Horn could see the storm signals flying. This old argument always irritated Jenny. She was just like nearly everybody in the South Rim: admired Luby's cash and show as well as his business ability. And of course, the man had made money.

It was easy to admire Bart Luby if you accepted him from the surface appearance. He had a dashing way, and he was a powerful man physically, handsome and smooth-talking. He was the one who had the Stockman's Show organized, and for three years now had been featured in it for his fine riding, roping, and bulldogging. He was the local champion, because for those three years he had won all the major events.

But that will—that was something else.

Rowdy Horn was usually reasonable, but on the subject of that will he ceased being reasonable. It was flatly contradictory to everything he knew of Tom Slater, who had been almost a father to him.

Besides that, nobody could work with a man as Rowdy had worked with Bart Luby without knowing something of him, and Bart had always been unscrupulous in little things. He had left the Bar O to become a rodeo contest rider and a cattle buyer, and there had been vague rumors, never substantiated and never investigated, that his success as a buyer was due to his association—suspected only—with Jack Rollick.

Rollick was a known rustler who haunted the broken canyon country beyond the Rim, and did his rustling carefully and with skill among the brakes south of the Rim. It was hard to get proof of his depredations—nobody had, as yet—for he never drove off large numbers of cattle and never rustled any stock with unusual markings. He weeded cattle from the herds, or the lone steers that haunted the thick brush, and it was generally believed he gathered them in some interior valley

to hold until he had enough to drive to market. Such shortages as his rustling caused would not show up until the roundup.

“Well, I’m riding back into Aragon, then, if you won’t listen to a thing I say,” Jenny said, swinging into her saddle. “But I do wish you’d change your mind and let me see Bart for you.”

Rowdy shook his head, grinning up at her. Looking at him, Jenny thought for the thousandth time that he was easily the handsomest cowboy, the best-looking man afoot or in the saddle in the whole South Rim country. It was too bad he was so stubborn and such a poor manager.

“Don’t worry,” he said, smiling. “One way or another I’ll be in that rodeo, and I’ll win first money. Then we can be married.”

She gave him her hand. “I know you will, dear. Luck.”

With a wave of her hand, she wheeled the paint and rode off at a snappy trot. He watched her go, uncertain again. Cub nickered plaintively, as if unaware of the disaster his misfortune had brought upon them.

Rowdy ran his hand under Cub’s mane and scratched the horse’s neck.

“Too bad, old boy. We worked mighty hard, trainin’ you for that rodeo, and all for nothing. That hole you stepped into was sure in the wrong place.”

Gravely, he studied the situation, but could see no way out, no escape. His Slash Bar was a small ranch, the place upon which Tom Slater had made his start. Rowdy had bought the ranch from the bank, making the down payment with his savings and the reward for the capture of Beenk Danek, a bank robber.

There had been a few good months after the ranch was his, then the roundup—and he had been missing more than two hundred head of cattle, more than any other one rancher, even those with much larger herds. His was small.

Then there had been fence trouble with Luby’s men, although never with Luby himself, and more than once it had almost led to shooting. Despite Luby’s smooth excuses, he was sure the cattleman was deliberately instigating trouble. To top it all, water shortages had developed, and he had fallen behind in his payments to the bank. So it had been the Stockman’s Show and Rodeo that had offered him the best chance to make a substantial payment on the ranch as well as to provide the things on which Jenny insisted. Until Cub’s injury, he had been certain he had at least an even chance with Bart Luby, and Bart had been aware of it, too.

Now still another worry had developed. One of his two hands, Mike McNulty, had ridden in a couple of days before to tell him the water hole at Point of Rocks was shrinking—the only water supply for miles of range. It had been considered inexhaustible. That was a matter which Rowdy must look into himself—and now.

Mounting a steeldust he used for rough riding, he started off for the dim and lonely land under the gigantic wall of the Rim. There, at the end of a trailing point of rocks, lay the water hole.

It was an hour’s ride from the home ranch, and when he drew rein near the water hole the sun was still almost an hour high. His fears were realized the instant his eyes fell upon what always had been a wide, clear pool, for around it lay a rim, at least six feet wide, of gray mud, indicating the shrinkage. This was the last straw.

A hoof struck stone, and surprised, he glanced up. Lonely as this place was, other riders than the two men who worked for him hardly ever came to this water hole. But here was one—and a girl.

She was tall, slender, yet beautifully built. He wondered instantly who she was. He had never seen her before. Her dark hair was drawn to a loose knot at the nape of her neck, and her eyes were big and dark. She was riding a splendid palomino mare, with an old-fashioned Spanish-type saddle.

He swept off his hat and she flashed a quick smile at him.

“You are Rowdy Horn?” she inquired.

“That’s right, ma’am, but you’ve sure got the best of me. I thought I knew every girl in this country, and especially all of the pretty ones, but I see I don’t.”

She laughed. “You wouldn’t know me,” she said sharply. “I’m Vaho Rainey.”

His interest quickened. The whole South Rim country knew about this girl, but she had never been seen around Aragon. The daughter of French and Irish parents, she had been left an orphan when little more than a baby, and brought up by old Cleetus, a wealthy Navaho chieftain. When she was fourteen she had been sent to a convent in New Orleans, and after that had spent some time in New York and Boston before returning to the great old stone house where Cleetus lived.

“Welcome to the Slash Bar,” Rowdy said, smiling. “I met old Cleetus once. He’s quite a character.” He grinned ruefully. “He sure made a fool out of me, one time.”

He told her how the old Indian had come to his cabin one miserable wintry night, half frozen and with a broken wrist. His horse had fallen on the ice. Rowdy had not known who he was—just any old buck, he had thought—but he had put Cleetus to bed, set the broken bone, and nursed the old man through the blizzard. Returning to the cabin one day after the storm, he had found the old man gone, and with him a buckskin horse. While the old man was still sick, Rowdy had offered him a blanket and food when he left. These Cleetus had taken.

Over a year later, Rowdy Horn had discovered, quite by accident, the identity of the old man he had befriended. And he had learned that Cleetus was one of the wealthiest sheepmen among the Navahos, and one of the first to introduce Angora goats into the lonely desert land where he lived.

Vaho laughed merrily when she heard the story.

“That’s like him. So like him. Did he ever return the horse?”

“No,” Rowdy said dryly, “he didn’t. That was a good horse, too.”

“He’s a strange man, Rowdy,” she said. He was glad, somehow, that Vaho did not stand on ceremony. He liked hearing her call him by his first name.

“Maybe he could use a good man with his flocks,” Rowdy suggested, a little bitterly. “I’m sure going to be hunting a job soon.”

She looked at him quickly. “But you have this ranch? Is that not enough?”

Rowdy did not know just why he had an impulse to tell this girl, a stranger, his trouble—but he did.

Chapter 2

Jilted – and lad of it.

Shrugging, Rowdy explained, and Vaho Rainey listened attentively, watching him with her wide dark eyes. She frowned thoughtfully at the receding water.

“There must be a reason for this,” she said. “There has always been water here. Never in the memory of the Navaho has this water hole been so low.”

“Sure, there’s a reason,” Rowdy said glumly, “but what is it? Maybe there’s somebody takin’ water before it gets to this pool, but who and where? I always figured this water came off the Rim, somewhere.”

“Or from under it,” Vaho said thoughtfully.

That remark made no impression on Rowdy at the moment, although he did recall it later, and wondered what she had meant. Right now, his interest in this tall, dark girl was quickening. There was warmth in her, understanding, and sympathy for his problems—all the things that he had missed in Jenny.

He glanced up suddenly. The sun had slid behind the mountains, and it was growing dark.

“You’d better be getting home!” he warned Vaho. “Riding in the mountains at night is no good.”

“Not when you know them as I do,” she said, smiling. “Anyway, I’ve not far to go. Some of our people are camped only a few miles from here. I shall go to them.”

When he had watched her ride away into the dusk that lay thick among the dark pines, he swung into the saddle and turned the steeldust down the road home. But he was conscious of a strange excitement, and the memory of that tall, dark girl was like a bright fire in his thoughts. He was remembering the curves of her lips and the way she had moved, how her laughter had sounded an echo in his heart. With a quick start of guilt he realized that in his mind he was being a little disloyal to Jenny. Despite his guilty feeling, though, he would not forget that girl from the canyons, or the strange warmth she had left with him.

He had ridden home and had stripped the saddle from the steeldust, when he heard a man’s voice inside the stable. For an instant he hesitated. It was dark inside and he could see nothing. Then he saw a subdued glow, and stepped quickly to the door. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

A man who had been kneeling to examine Cub’s leg got to his feet. As he stepped out of the door Rowdy Horn could see him plainly—a tall, thin man in a battered hat not of western vintage, and a shabby suit of store clothes.

“How are you?” he said. “I hope you won’t think I’m butting in. I stopped to ask for something to eat and a place to sleep, but finding nobody at home, I walked around a little. Then I found your horse with the bad leg. What happened to him?”

“Stepped into a gopher hole. My roping horse. I’d figured on riding him in the rodeo.”

“Too bad.” The man hesitated. “How about that grub?”

“Sure. Come on up to the house. I haven’t eaten myself. You passin’ through?”

“Uh-huh. I’m a tramp printer, Neil Rice by name. My doctor told me if I expected to live I’d better get west. I’m not really sick, but he told me that any more of that city air and I would be, so I packed up and started west.”

“Broke?”

"I am now. I ran into a poker game back in Dodge, and I'd played a lot of poker with other printers. Those Dodge people played too fast a game for me."

Rowdy chuckled. "All right, Rice. I know how that is. I'm Rowdy Horn. You hunting a job?"

"Any kind of a job. I know a little about horses, but not much about cattle. And I can cook."

"There's what you need," Rowdy said cheerfully. "Let's see what you can do. I am probably the worst cook who ever died of slow poisoning from his own cookin'. I'd hesitate to ask a stranger to eat it."

Two hours later, with a good dinner behind their belts and pipes lighted, they sat back and stared thoughtfully at the fire. Rowdy by that time knew most of Rice's troubles, and the printer was aware of the precarious situation on the Slash Bar.

"This fellow Luby," Rice said thoughtfully. "Has he always lived around this country?"

"Here, Texas, New Mexico, and California, as far as I know. He seems to know a good bit, though."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Rice hesitated. "Is there any way in which I could get my hands on that deed? And the will? I know a little about such things."

Horn shrugged. "Not that I know of. Maybe I can figure out a way. Why? Are you a lawyer?"

Rice chuckled. "Just a printer, but I know a little about documents. I wouldn't promise anything, but it might be that if the deed was faked and if the will was forged, I could tell. How, I don't know, and I couldn't promise anything. I'd have to examine them, and preferably have them for a while."

"That's tough. Luby wouldn't turn loose of them. We'll see, though, for it's sure an idea." He scowled. "You can't forge a deed, can you? This one's got a big seal on it. I gave up when I saw that."

"Well," Rice said, "that might be the very reason it's on there. Did you have a good lawyer look at it?"

"Lawyer?" Horn exclaimed. "Man, there's no lawyer in Aragon but old Hemingway, and he's drunk most of the time. I don't think he knows much law, anyway."

The following day, Rowdy worked hard, roping and tying calves, roping horses, and attempting to improve his own speed and skill, though the steeldust wasn't nearly the horse Cub was. Neil Rice had taken right hold, had cleaned out the house and organized the cooking situation. Then he had handed Horn a list of supplies. Rowdy had grinned at it.

"All right, Rice," he had said, "I reckon we might as well eat and leave this place on full stomachs anyway. I'll head into Aragon and pick up this stuff."

With a packhorse Rowdy Horn headed for Aragon. All the way to town he was studying ways and means of getting the documents into his hands once more. There must be some way. During their talk at breakfast Rice had told him that it was often possible to move a seal from one document to another, that such a thing had been done in more than one place.

Aragon was crowded when Rowdy rode down the main one of the town's three streets. Banners were hanging across the street, and the town was bright with posters heralding the coming Stockman's Show and Rodeo. News had got around about the injury to Cub's leg, however, and everywhere he went he found the odds of his winning first money had dropped. He was no longer given an even chance to win, for everyone had known how much trust he placed in Cub, and all had seen the horse perform at one time or another.

He called at the house for Jenny, but she was out. Her mother smiled at him, but her eyes looked as if she were disturbed.

"I'm sorry, Rowdy," Mrs. Welman told him, "Jenny's gone out. You may see her downtown."

He walked back down the street, telling himself that he was foolish to feel irritated. Jenny had had no idea he would be coming in, and there was no reason why she should be at home. He laughed at himself, then strode back downtown and went to the Emporium, where he began buying groceries. He was packing them on his lead horse when he heard a familiar voice and, glancing up, saw Bart Luby. Clinging to his arm was Jenny Welman!

Rowdy's face flushed, and he looked away, but not before Luby had seen him.

"How are you, Horn?" Bart said, making no effort to conceal his triumph. "Sorry to hear about Cub! I was looking forward to the chance of beating him."

Jenny looked at Rowdy, paling slightly. His eyes met hers for an instant and then he looked away.

"Think nothing of it, Luby," he said, "but don't count me out. I'll be there yet."

"A man can't do much good on just a fair horse," Luby said, "but come along in. Be glad to have you."

Jenny hesitated. "I didn't know you were coming to town," she said.

"I see you didn't," he said, a little wryly.

Her chin lifted and her eyes blazed. "Well, what do you expect me to do? Stay home all the time? Anyway," she added suddenly, "I'd been planning to ride out and see you. I don't think—well, we'd better call this off. Our engagement, I mean."

He had a queer sinking feeling, but when he lifted his eyes, they revealed nothing. "All right," was all he said, calmly.

Her blue eyes hardened slightly. "You certainly don't seem much upset!" she flared.

"Should I be?" he asked. "When a girl tosses a man over the first time he gets in a tight spot, she's small loss."

"Well!" she flared. "I—!"

"Come on, Jenny," Bart said. "You told me you were comin' out to my place to look at the sorrel mare." He grinned at Horn. "Out to the Bar O."

Stung, Rowdy glared at Luby.

"Better enjoy the Bar O while you can, Bart," he said.

Bart Luby froze in midstride and for a second stood stock-still. Then slowly he turned, his face livid. "What do you mean by that?" he barked.

"Nothing"—Rowdy grinned—"nothing at all! Only—" He hesitated, then shrugged. "You'll know all about it soon."

“Oh”—Jenny tugged at Bart’s arm—“don’t pay any attention to him. He’s always fussing about that ranch.”

The remark was intended to appease Bart and get him away. It had the effect of adding fuel to the man’s uncertainty after Rowdy’s veiled comment. Bart Luby stared down at Rowdy as he stood in the street, and watched him finish his diamond hitch.

“If you’re smart, you’ll leave well enough alone!” Bart said then, carefully and coldly.

Rowdy smiled, but he felt warm with triumph. Luby was worried, and if that deal had been straight, why should he worry? His sudden remark had brought a greater reaction than he had expected, yet suddenly he was aware of something else. That had been a dangerous thing for him to say, for now Luby knew that the loss of the ranch was not a closed matter to Rowdy Horn.

In the saddle on the way back to the Slash Bar, Horn began to feel the letdown. Despite his immediate reaction to Jenny’s sudden breaking off of their engagement, and despite the fact that he realized she was small loss, he felt sick and empty inside. He felt so low that he took no notice of the ride he had always loved. The great wall of the Rim did not draw his eyes, nor did the towering mass of cumulus that lifted above it, nor the darkening fringe of the pines against the distant sky.

When he got back home none of his problems were any nearer a solution either. Cub’s leg was but little better, and there was absolutely no chance of his recovering before the rodeo date. And more than ever now, Rowdy wanted to win that first place.

Again and again he studied the situation, comparing his own ability with that of Luby, who would be the main competitor. Each time, it all came down to the roping event. A lot would depend, of course, on the kind of mounts each of them drew in the bucking events, but there was little to choose between the two men. To give the devil his due, Bart Luby was a hand.

Chapter 3

Girl of the Wilds.

At daylight Rowdy Horn was out looking at Cub’s leg. When he had done that, he saddled a powerful black for a ride out to the Point of Rocks. Today he must try to find out what was wrong with his water supply. He could delay no longer. He was just cinching the saddle tight when he heard a rattle of hoofs and looked up to see Vaho Rainey sweep into the yard.

His face broke into a smile. This morning the girl was riding a blood bay, a splendid horse. She reined in, swung down, and walked over to him with a free-swinging stride that he liked.

“Rowdy,” she asked excitedly, “did you ever hear of Silverside?”

“Silver-side?” He looked at her curiously. “Who hasn’t? The greatest roping horse this country ever saw, I reckon. Buck Gordon rode him and trained him, and Buck was a roper. There will never be a greater horse.”

“Could you win that rodeo on him?”

He laughed. “Could I? On *that* horse? Vaho, I could win anything on that horse. He had the speed of a deer and was smarter than most men. I saw him once, several years ago, before he was killed. He was the finest roping horse I ever saw, and Buck the greatest hand.”

“He’s not dead, Rowdy. He’s alive, and I know where he is.”

Rowdy Horn’s heart missed a beat. “You aren’t foolin’? This isn’t a joke?” He shook his head. “It couldn’t be Silver-side,” he protested, “and if you’ve heard it is, somebody is mistaken. Buck Gordon was riding Silver-side when the Apaches got him down near Animas—in one of their last raids over the border. They killed Silver-side at the same time. A long time after that somebody found his skeleton, some of the hide, and Buck’s saddle.”

“He’s alive, Rowdy!” Vaho repeated earnestly. “I know where he is, I tell you! Some Mexican picked up Buck’s saddle, and when he was killed later, riding a paint, it was that horse that was found, or it must have been. Silver-side was taken by the Apaches and they have him now.”

Horn shook his head. “It couldn’t be, Vaho. The Apaches are at least pretendin’ to be friendly now, and have been for a long time. If they had that horse, somebody would have seen him.” His eyes sparkled. “Man, I wish they had! With that horse I could sure make Luby back up! There never was a great roper without a great horse, and don’t you forget it!”

“You said the Apaches were friendly,” said Vaho. “All of them are not.”

“Oh? You mean old Cochino? No, he sure isn’t. But if that horse was alive and old Cochino had him, I’d still be out of luck. In the first place, nobody knows where he and his renegades hang out, and in the second place, it would be like committing suicide to look for him—if you found him.”

“You wouldn’t try it?” she persisted. “Not even for Silver-side?”

“You bet I would!” Rowdy stated emphatically. “I’d ride through perdition in a celluloid collar for that horse!”

Vaho laughed, and her eyes were bright. “All right, put on your celluloid collar! I know where Cochino is, and I *know* he has Silver-side!”

“If you mean that—”

Rowdy hesitated, thinking rapidly. She was positive, and after all, there had long been rumors of a friendship between old Cochino and Cleetus. The Navahos and the Apaches had never been too friendly, but the two old chiefs had found something in common. In fact, it had long been rumored that if Cleetus wanted to, he could tell where Cochino was at any time. But that was just cow-country gossip, and nobody was really looking for the tough and wily old Apache any longer.

“Yes,” Rowdy said finally, “if you’re positive, Vaho, I’ll take a chance. Tell me where he is.”

“I can’t,” Vaho said quietly, “but I’ll take you there. But let me warn you—it’s an awful ride.”

"You'll take me there?" He was incredulous. "Nothing doing! I'd take a chance on Cochino myself, but not you!"

"Without me you wouldn't have a chance, Rowdy. With me, you may have. It's a big gamble, for old Cochino is peculiar and uncertain. He still believes the soldiers are after him, and he and the twenty or so renegade Apaches he has with him are dangerous. But he knows me, and he likes old Cleetus. Will you chance it?"

"You're sure you'll be safe?" he protested.

She grew suddenly serious. "I think so, Rowdy. Nobody knows about Cochino. He's like a tiger out of the jungle, one that has been partly trained. He may be all right, and he might turn ugly. But I'm willing to chance it. I want to see you win this rodeo, and I want to see you keep your ranch!"

He looked at her strangely, and as he looked into the soft depths of those lovely dark eyes, he remembered the momentary hardness of Jenny's blue eyes. Suddenly he knew that Jenny would never have ridden with him in that weird, sun-stricken desert where the Apache lived. Aside from the danger, she would have shied at the discomfort.

Scarcely were Rowdy and Vaho on the trail when doubts began to assail him. The horse Cochino had simply couldn't be Silverside—and it had probably been years since he had been used for roping. Besides, the horse would be ten or eleven years old! Perhaps older. He scowled and mopped his brow, then glanced at the girl riding at his side, her eyes on the horizon.

The devil with it! If he found no horse, if he lost the ranch, if he couldn't beat Luby, the ride with this girl would be worth any chance he took...

BACK ON THE RANCH, alone in the cabin, Neil Rice finished cleaning up and put away the dishes. There was work to do outside, but he felt in no mood for it. Idly, he began to rummage around the house, hunting for something to read. The few books failed to strike his interest, but when he was about to give up he remembered having seen several books in an old desk and bookcase in the inner room.

He found them and studied them thoughtfully, one by one. He was about to replace the last one, when he noticed what appeared to be a thin crack in the walnut of the old desk. Curious, he ran his hand back into the space from which he had taken the book. It was then that he noticed, on closer inspection, that there seemed to be some waste space in the desk, or some unaccounted-for space.

Remembering that many such old secretaries or cabinets had secret compartments, he felt around with his fingers, finally dug his nails into the crack, and pulled. The wood moved under his hand, and a small panel slid back!

In the small space beyond, he felt several pieces of paper. One had the feel of parchment. Slowly, he got his fingers on them and drew them out, then took them to the window for better light.

The first was an old legal paper, a corporate charter of some long-defunct mining company. What caught his eye at once was the missing seal. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Then he opened the next paper. Glancing at the heading, he read:

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF THOMAS B. SLATER

His eyes sharpening, he read on:

I, Thomas B. Slater, being of sound mind, make this my last will and testament. After payment of my just debts and funeral expenses, I devise and bequeath all my worldly goods and properties to Rowell D. Horn, who has been as a son to me through many months and whose friendship and interest in the future and well-being of the Bar O have shown him a fit person to possess this property.

There was more, and it was followed by the signature of the old rancher and that of two witnesses. Rice had never heard of either of them. He studied the document for a long time, then closed the compartment and replaced the book. He retained the charter with the missing seal and the will.

"Now wouldn't Bart Luby like to know about *this!*" he muttered thoughtfully.

He scowled. Possibly Luby *did* know about it. Hadn't Rowdy said that this place had been for a long time a line cabin for the Bar O? And after that for a while it had been headquarters for Bart Luby's cattle buying. No doubt Luby had taken the seal from this document, and then had concealed it and the will, believing that he might have some further use for it, at least for the signature; so he had hidden the will until he could make up his mind. He might have expected the place to be in his possession longer than it had been, but when Rowdy Horn had made his down payment without Luby's knowledge and had appeared suddenly and unexpectedly to take over, it may have left no chance for Luby to get into the old cabinet—until he could slip back secretly. And he had probably believed it safely hidden.

That the will was in existence at all was a serious oversight on Luby's part. Once in his hands, he should have destroyed it. Here, Rice thought, was the key to the whole situation in the South Rim. With this, Rowdy could get the Bar O and prove that Luby was the crook Rowdy believed him to be. But suppose Luby got it? There might be a lot of money in these papers if handled discreetly.

Neil Rice was painfully conscious of the emptiness of his own pockets. He came to a decision suddenly. He would ride into Aragon...

Out on the range with Rowdy Horn, Vaho Rainey led the way, and the route she took led across the wide sagebrush flats toward the vague purple of distant mountains. Before they had ridden a mile they seemed lost in a limitless sea of distance where they moved at the hub of an enormous wheel of mountains. They talked but little, riding steadily onward into the morning sunlight, but Rowdy Horn kept his mind on the slim, erect girl who rode sometimes before him and sometimes behind.

As they drew nearer the mountains beyond the wide disk of the desert, Rowdy could see that what had appeared to be a wall of purple was actually broken into weird figures and towers, strange, grotesque monsters sculptured from the sandstone by sun, wind, and rain. The trail led along the valley floor between

these rows of columns or battlemented walls, the sagebrush fell behind, and there was mesquite, a sure sign of undersurface water.

The afternoon was spent among the columns of sandstone and granite, then Vaho guided Rowdy into what was scarcely more than a crease between rolling hills. A mile of this and it widened, and they went down through a forest of saguaro. Then the trail wound steeply up among towering crags, and the saguaro was left behind, traded by the trail for borders of piñon and juniper. Some of their squat, gnarled trunks seemed gray with age and wind, but the bright green of their foliage was a vivid, living streak across the reds and pinks of the Kaibab sandstone.

Yellow tamarisks, smoke trees, and orange-hued rabbit brush brightened the way, but the mountains became more lonely. As dusk drew on they rounded into a small basin, grass-floored and cool, and here Vaho swung down. For all the heat and the length of the ride, she appeared fresh. "We'll camp here," she said, indicating the water hole.

"All night?" he asked.

She looked at him and smiled lightly. "Of course. The devil himself couldn't travel by night where we're going."

"You aren't afraid?" he asked curiously. "I mean, well—you don't know me very well, do you?"

"No, I'm not afraid. Should I be?"

He shrugged, not knowing whether to be pleased or deflated.

"No, of course not," he said.

There was plenty of dry wood, bone-dry and dusty, most of it. In a few minutes he had wood gathered and a fire going. He picketed the horses while Vaho began to prepare food. He watched her thoughtfully.

"You're quite a girl, you know," he said suddenly.

She laughed. "Why did you think I started this if it wasn't to show you that?" she asked. "I'm not a town girl, Rowdy. I could never be. Not all the time I was away at school, nor in all my traveling to New Orleans or New York or Boston did I ever forget the desert."

"I'm glad," he said, although he knew as he spoke that he was not quite sure why he should be glad. So he added lamely, "Some man is going to get a fine girl. He'll be lucky!"

She looked at him thoughtfully, then lifted the coffee from the fire.

"He will be if he likes the desert and mountains," was her only comment.

When they had finished eating he threw more wood on the fire and stretched out on the sand where he could look across the flames into Vaho's eyes. He felt vastly comfortable and relaxed, with myriad stars littered across the sky. The black loom of the cliffs, the ranch, the rodeo, and even Jenny seemed far behind.

They talked for a long time, while in the distance a coyote yapped at the stars. The grass rustled softly with the movements of the horses as they cropped quietly of the rich green grass.

Chapter 4

Silverside.

Daybreak found Rowdy and Vaho moving again, and dipping down into the wide white bowl of another arm of the desert. Sweat broke out on Rowdy's forehead as the heat waves banked higher around them. There was no air, no movement save their own, and always and forever the heat.

Suddenly, Vaho Rainey turned her bay at right angles and dipped steeply down a narrow path to the bottom of a great sink. It was at least a thousand yards across, and all of two hundred feet from bottom to rim. Against the far wall, walled in by a huddle of stones, was a pool of clear cold water, and the dozen or so wickiups of Cochino, the Apache chief.

Rowdy Horn's pulse leaped as he saw the horses scattered nearby, feeding quietly, for among them was the tall black horse with the single great splash of white upon his left side—Silverside, the greatest roping horse he had ever seen!

His eyes turned again to the village. Nobody was in sight, neither squaws nor children, but he was conscious of watching eyes. For years the old renegade Apache had refused to live on a reservation, instead retreating steadily into the farthest vastnesses of the desert and mountains. At times he had fought savagely, but in the last years he had merely held to his loneliness, fiercely resenting any attempt to come near him or lure him out. It was reported that his braves were insane, that he was mad, that they had eaten of the fruit of a desert plant that rendered them all as deadly as marijuana addicts.

Vaho drew rein. "Be very careful, Rowdy," she said, low-voiced. "Make no quick moves, and let me do the talking."

From behind the wickiups and out of the rocks the Indians began to appear. Attired only in the skimpiest of breechclouts, their dusky bodies were dark as some of the burned red rocks of the desert, and looked as rough as old lava. Their black eyes looked hard as flint, as one by one they came down from the rocks and slowly gathered in a circle about the two riders.

Rowdy could feel his heart pounding, and was conscious of the weight of the six-shooter against his leg. It would be nip and tuck if anything started here. He might get a few of them, but they would get him in the end. Suddenly he cursed himself for a fool for having come here or letting Vaho come.

An old man emerged from the group and stared at them with hard, unblinking eyes. Vaho suddenly started to speak. Knowing a few words of Apache, Rowdy could follow her conversation. She was explaining that she was the adopted daughter of Cleetus, that he sent his best wishes to Cochino, the greatest of all Apache war chiefs.

The old man stared at her, then at Rowdy. His reply Horn could not interpret, but Vaho said to Rowdy suddenly, "He says for us to get down. He will talk."

That was no proof of their safety, yet it was something. Rowdy swung down and allowed an Indian to take their horses, then he followed Cochino to the fire, and all seated themselves. After a few minutes the girl took some of the presents they had

brought from the bag she had prepared with Rowdy's help. A fine steel hunting knife, a package of tobacco, a bolt of red calico, other presents.

Cochino looked at them, but his expression was bleak. He lifted his eyes to Vaho, and there was a question in them. Slowly, she began to explain. This friend—she gestured to Rowdy—was the friend of Cleetus also. She told how he had taken the old Indian in, treated his broken wrist, fed him and cared for him until he was able to move. She explained how Rowdy was a great warrior, but that in the games of his people he could not compete because his horse was injured, that he was an unhappy man. Then she had told him that her friend Cochino, the friend also of Cleetus, had a magnificent horse that he might lend or sell—the great Silverside.

For an hour the talk went on. Following it with difficulty, Rowdy Horn could be sure of nothing. Cochino should have been a poker player, he reflected. His expression was unreadable. Little by little, however, he seemed to be showing approval of Rowdy, and of Vaho. Suddenly he asked a question, looking from Rowdy to the girl, and she flushed.

Rowdy glanced at her quickly. "What did he want to know?" he said.

She would not meet his eyes, but continued to talk. He listened, straining his ears to get every syllable, doing his best to interpret what she was saying. The old Apache suddenly chuckled. It was a grim, hard sound, but there was a glint of ironic humor in his eyes as he looked from the girl to Rowdy. Finally, he nodded.

"Yes," he said, speaking plainly in English.

Her face flushed with happiness, Vaho turned to Rowdy, putting her hand impulsively on his arm.

"He says you can have the horse! He gives him to you, and he wishes you luck."

The old Indian got to his feet, and they did also.

"Tell him," Rowdy said impulsively, "that when he wishes, if there is anything a friend can do for him or his people, to come to me, or to send a messenger. There is only peace and brotherhood between the people of Cochino and Rowdy Horn."

She explained briefly, and the old Indian nodded gravely.

"Invite him to the rodeo if he wishes to come," Rowdy added.

Vaho spoke swiftly, and the old Indian stared at them, his eyes bleak. Then he shook his head.

"He says," Vaho explained, "he is too old to give up now. As he has lived, so will he die."

A long time after that, riding away through the great broken hills, Rowdy glanced back again and again at the splendid horse he was leading. And that night when they camped again beside the pool, he talked with the tall horse, curried him carefully. The horse nuzzled him, eager for affection.

Vaho walked out to them from the fire, and he looked around at her. "This horse is almost human," he said. "Somehow he gives a man the feeling of standing near something superb, something beyond just horse-flesh."

She nodded. "I know. He likes you, too, Rowdy. Already that is plain." She hesitated for a moment. "But Rowdy, it has been a long time since he has worked with cattle. Do you think he will be as good?"

"I've no idea," he admitted, "but he's my only chance, and somehow I think we'll make it. Anyway, it will be a treat to ride this horse."

Yet he was scarcely thinking of that. He was thinking of the girl by his side—tall, clean-limbed, and lovely—and he was remembering the long ride through the desert beside her, the calm way she had talked to Cochino, the strange feeling of ease and happiness he had when riding with her, when knowing she was close to him. She was in his thoughts even as he slept—and dreamed...

"Rowdy," Vaho said suddenly the following morning, "there's another trail, a way through the Rim to the back of your place. Old Cleetus showed it to me when I was just a little girl. Let's go that way. I think it's shorter."

Turning their horses they cut off through the pines toward the blue haze that hung in the distance, and abruptly they drew up on the very edge of an amazing canyon whose sides dropped sheer away to the sandy bottom where a small stream slid over a bottom now of rocks, now of sand. Skirting the cliff, they came to a steep path and wound their way down. When they and their horses had rested and had drunk long of the clear, cold water, they mounted again and turned downstream.

It was cool in the shadow of the cliffs. When they had followed the canyon for several hours, Rowdy called softly to Vaho, who had ridden on ahead.

"Look here." He drew up, pointing.

In the sand of the canyon bottom were the tracks of several shod horses.

"No Indian ponies," he said grimly, "and no white man that I know of knows this country. Except one."

"You think it's Rollick?" she asked.

"Who else? Times have changed since the old days, but there's still a market for rustled beef, and Jack Rollick is supposed to be back in here somewhere."

"The tracks go the same way we're going," she said, "but there's no way out of here now except downstream."

"Let's go," he said grimly.

He reached back and slipped the thong from the butt of his six-gun. His rifle he always carried in a scabbard that pointed forward and down just ahead of his right knee so that the stock of the rifle was within easy grasp of his right hand. He was glad now that it was so handy.

Riding cautiously downstream they had gone no more than two miles when suddenly the canyon widened out and the rock walls fell back. They drew up sharply in the screen of aspen and willow beside the trail. Before them was a wide green meadow through which coursed the stream. The meadow was all of fifty acres in extent. A branch canyon seemed to lead off an immeasurable distance to the right. Within view were at least one hundred head of cattle, fattening on the grass.

Beyond, and close to the sheer wall at the far end of the little meadow, was a stone cabin, and a corral. There were several horses in the corral. No saddled horses were in sight.

Skirting the cliff wall, they circled to the right, trusting to the sparse trees and the brush, as well as to the wide shadow of the encircling cliffs, to hide them. As

they neared the cabin, Rowdy saw that the stream had been dammed and there was a large pool, all of an acre in extent.

Vaho touched his arm, indicating the pool. "That may be your trouble," she said, low-voiced. "This stream is probably the source of your water supply."

He had been thinking the same thing, and he nodded. When they had a better view, he could see that no more than a trickle seemed to be escaping from the pool, and the waters of the stream had been diverted to irrigate another small meadow.

More cattle were in view in the branch canyon. Rowdy Horn estimated that three hundred head were held here. From the brands he saw, nearly every ranch in the South Rim country was represented except the Bar O. That was, in itself, evidence of a kind. He stored the fact grimly away in his mind.

"Nobody around," he said thoughtfully. "I'm going to have a look in that cabin."

"I'll wait here," Vaho said. "Be careful."

He left her with Silverside and rode forward slowly. When near the cabin he dismounted and walked nearer on cat feet. A glance through the window showed the cabin to be empty. Stepping inside, he took a hasty look around. Six or seven men were bunking here, and they had supplies and ammunition enough to last a long time. Also, the house gave every evidence of long occupancy.

Under one of the bunks he saw a square black box and drew it out. It was padlocked, but picking up a hatchet, he smashed the lock with a few well-directed blows. Inside the box were a couple of engraved six-shooters, some odds and ends of letters addressed to Jack Rollick, and a small black tally book. He had picked it up and opened it, when he heard a scream.

With a lunge he was on his feet, racing to the door. He sprang outside, his eyes swinging to the woods where he had left Vaho. The bushes were thrashing, and he heard another low cry. Instantly he vaulted into saddle and the black horse lunged into a dead run for the woods. Rowdy hit the ground running, and dived through the bushes.

Vaho, her blouse torn, was fighting desperately with a tall, powerful man in a sweat-stained red shirt. When Rowdy plunged through the brush, the man's head turned. With an oath he hurled the girl from him and grabbed for his gun.

His draw was like a flash of light, and in an instant of desperation as the big man's hand darted, Rowdy Horn knew he could never match that draw, yet he palmed his own gun. The rustler's six-shooter roared, then Rowdy fired.

The big man lifted on his tiptoes, raised his eyebrows, and opened his mouth slowly, then plunged over on his face.

Chapter 5

Framed into Jail.

Carefully, gun ready, Rowdy walked forward. He had never killed a man before, and he was frightened. The rustler's shot had been hasty and had missed.

Evidently, the big fellow had stumbled when he tried to move, for Rowdy's bullet had gone into his back, just behind his left arm, and had come out under the heart.

"Oh, Rowdy!" Vaho cried, her eyes wide. "You killed him!"

"I reckon I did!" he said. "And I reckon we'd better make tracks out of here before they get back! There's at least five or six more of them around somewhere."

Swiftly they rode away, and in his hip pocket was the black tally book, forgotten.

They were skirting the Slash Bar range when Vaho spoke up suddenly. "Rowdy, hadn't you better ride on into Aragon and report this to the sheriff? Wouldn't it be best?"

"That's a good idea," he said worriedly. "What about you?"

"I'll wait at the Point of Rocks with Silverside. You can cut across to town; then come back here and we'll go on to your place."

Despite the fact that the killing had been in self-defense, and to protect Vaho, Rowdy was worried. It was no small thing to kill a man, even a thief and rustler. He rode swiftly, hurrying by every shortcut he knew, for Aragon. Yet when he arrived, the sheriff's office was deserted. He walked down the street, but could find him nowhere.

Eager to be back with Vaho, and worried about her—for he realized that the dead rustler's friends might trail them—Rowdy finally abandoned his quest for the sheriff and returned to the Point of Rocks. Together they rode on to the Slash Bar.

Riding into the yard, he called out, but there was no reply. Neil Rice was evidently away. Rowdy swung down, and wearily the girl dismounted. He stripped the saddles and bridles from the sweat-stained horses and turned all three of them into the corral. He and Vaho walked toward the house, but Vaho halted suddenly.

"Rowdy," she said, "I'm as tired as can be, but I should be going back to the Indians. Cleetus was to come today, and he'll be worried about me."

"All right." He turned back and saddled a paint horse for her to ride. As she sat in the saddle, he took her hand. "Vaho," he said, "you've been swell. I didn't know they made them like you."

"It's all right. I liked doing it."

"Look," he said. "After the rodeo there's a big dance. Will you go with me?"

Her eyes brightened. "Oh, Rowdy! I'd love to! A dance! Why, I haven't danced since I left Boston! Of course I'll go!"

When she was out of sight in the gathering dusk, he turned back again toward the cabin. Opening the door, he walked in. The place was hot and stuffy, so he left the door open. Striking a match, he lit the coal-oil lamp, then turned around to replace it in the bracket. With the lamp in his hand, he stopped, riveted to the spot.

There on the floor of his cabin lay the body of a dead man. The redshirted man he had killed at the hideout!

But how on earth had he come here? Rowdy did not even hear the approaching horses until a voice spoke abruptly behind him: "Here! What's this?"

Turning, he found Sheriff Ben Wells staring from him to the body.

"What's happened here?" demanded the lawman. "Who is this hombre?"

Behind Wells were Bart Luby and Mike McNulty. "That's cold-blooded killing, Ben!" Luby said triumphantly. "This man was shot in the back."

"He was not!" Horn declared hotly. "He was left side toward me, and he fired, then started to move. My bullet went in where you see it, back of his arm."

"It's still in his back!" Luby said. "And," he added grimly, "we have only your story for it. You say he fired a shot. Why, his gun's still in its holster!"

"He wasn't killed here!" Horn said angrily. "This hombre grabbed Vaho Rainey when we were riding back of the Rim. I rushed up to help and he drew and fired. He missed and I shot and killed him!"

Sheriff Wells knelt beside the body. Drawing the gun, he checked it, then looked up, his face grave.

"This gun is fully loaded," he said, "and hasn't been fired!"

"What?" Rowdy was dumbfounded. "Why, that couldn't be. He—" He shrugged. "Well, I reckon the man or men who brought him here changed guns with him."

Wells gnawed at his gray mustache. Secretly, he had always liked Rowdy Horn as much as he disliked Bart Luby, but this story was out of all reason.

"You mean to say," he demanded, "that you killed this man back of the Rim? And that somebody packed his carcass down here and dumped him on you?"

"That's exactly what happened!" Rowdy Horn said flatly. "It's the only way it could have happened."

Luby laughed. "Give him credit for being original, Ben. But he certainly hasn't much respect for your intelligence, to try a story like that."

"You'll have to come into town, son," Wells said, his voice hardening. "This will have to be explained."

"But you can't put me in jail!" Rowdy pleaded. "Think, man! The rodeo's tomorrow."

"You should have thought of that," Luby suggested, "before you killed this man. Anyway, that's no excuse. Your ropin' horse is laid up, so you can't compete!"

On the verge of bursting out with an explanation about Silverside, he caught himself just in time. If he had to go to jail, and there was nobody to watch the horse, it might easily be stolen.

"I knew this hombre," McNulty said suddenly. "He was Jake Leener, one of the Rollick outfit."

"No matter," Wells said positively. "He was shot in the back. We had nothing against him, even if he did ride with Rollick. The law can't call a man a crook until he's known to be one. This here hombre hadn't no record I know of, and he sure ain't wanted now."

"But listen!" Rowdy protested. "I've a witness! Vaho Rainey saw all this! She knows what happened!"

"Vaho Rainey?" Wells stared at him. "Rowdy, what you giving us? If that girl was with you, where is she now? You know as well as I do that if there is any such girl nobody has seen her around. You're just pullin' rabbits out of your hat. Tell us what happened, and I'll see you get a break if you've got one comin'."

"I told you what happened!" Horn said stubbornly. "Take it or leave it!"

"We'll take you," Wells said. "Mike, rustle this gent's horse, and be quick!"

Bart Luby glanced thoughtfully across the room toward the door of the bedroom. He was thinking of that old cabinet. Now that he was arrested, Horn

would be away from the house. In the dozen or so times he had tried to enter, he had failed to find him away even once. But with a killer charge hanging over him he would not return, and he was out of the rodeo...

It was a solemn and silent group that rode over the trail to Aragon. Grimly, Rowdy thought that this was the last straw. He was through now. The rodeo had been his last hope. With that money, even though he had lost Jenny, he could pay off the mortgage on his ranch.

His thought of Jenny brought it home to him that he had scarcely thought of her for days. Ever since he had first seen her, several years before, he had dreamed of her. She had been an ideal girl, the prettiest one around, and all his attentions had been centered upon her. When they had become engaged, it was almost more than he could believe.

Yet after he had begun to see more of her and know her better, his first doubts of her had arisen. After all, there were other things than beauty, and although he told himself he was being unjust, Jenny seemed to be lacking in too many of them. Despite this, his loyalty made him refuse to accept the evidence of his senses until the day she had broken their engagement. For in spite of the shock and pain of that moment, he had felt a queer sense of escape and relief.

In town Rowdy was safely lodged in jail, and the morning sun was making a latticework of bars on the wall opposite the cell window when he awakened with a start. For an instant he lay still, then it hit him, and his heart went sick. After all his planning, he was stuck in jail on the day of the rodeo!

He got up slowly, dressed, and splashed his face in the bucket of cold water that had been left for him. Gloomily he stared out of the barred window at the crowded streets. Already the hitching rails were lined with horses, and there were many buckboards and spring wagons in town. In another hour the streets would be jammed. It began to look as if the boosters of Aragon and the annual Stockman's Show and Rodeo would be right: that between two and three thousand spectators would be on hand for the show.

Yet as he paced the floor, cursing his luck and alternately staring out the window and going to the barred door, hours passed. He heard the band playing, and the confusion that heralded the big parade that opened the rodeo. And then suddenly Sheriff Ben Wells was at the bars.

"Rowdy, if I turn you loose to compete in this show, will you promise not to leave town?" Wells gnawed at his mustache. "I know you, son, and I never figured you'd shoot a man in the back, but that story of yours is plumb far-fetched. But just now I got a lead that may help. Maybe we jumped to conclusions, so I'm goin' to turn you loose for the duration of the rodeo."

With a whoop of joy, Horn jumped to the opening door. Grabbing the sheriff's hand, he tried to thank him, but Wells shook his head.

"Don't thank me. Thank this young lady here."

Rowdy turned quickly to face Vaho Rainey.

"You? You got here?"

“You invited me for the dance. Have you forgotten?” She laughed. “When I heard you were in jail, naturally I had to get you out! A girl can’t go to a dance with a man who’s in jail, can she, Sheriff?”

Ben Wells shook his head, his eyes twinkling. “Son,” he said seriously, “I don’t know where you found her or how you rate it, but you’ve got a wonderful girl there, and I’d sure latch onto her if I was you.”

Vaho reddened, but her eyes were bright. She was still wearing her denims and blue shirt, but she was sparkling this morning. Rowdy took her arm and squeezed it.

“How in the world did you do it?” he exclaimed.

“I’ll tell you later. Only it wasn’t just what I did. Now we have to get down to the rodeo grounds. Silverside is down there, waiting for you. We’ve covered him with a blanket so nobody will know who he is.”

Vaho had thought of everything, Rowdy found. Mike McNulty had rousted out the outfit Rowdy had purchased to wear in the rodeo, and in a short time Rowdy had bathed and changed. He came out, immaculate in dove-gray shirt and trousers, with a white hat and a black neckerchief. Black braid outlined his pockets. He wore his guns, but in new holsters, black and shining. His boots, which he had been breaking in around the ranch, felt good.

Vaho’s eyes widened. “Why, Rowdy!” she exclaimed. “You’re handsome!”

He blushed. “Me?” he choked. And as Mike McNulty and Pete Chamberlain went into roars of laughter, he flushed even deeper.

Hurriedly, he rushed over to Silverside and stripped the blanket from the horse. After a brief workout with the animal, he brought him back to the stall they had procured for him.

“Don’t let anybody near him,” he warned. “All I’ll have to do on that horse is throw the rope! He’s so smart he scares me!”

Chapter 6

Devil May Care.

With Vaho at his side, Rowdy turned toward the arena. The stands were jammed. Going through the gate toward the chutes, almost the first person Rowdy saw was Bart Luby. And with him was Jenny Welman!

Bart started and scowled. “What are you doin’ out?” he demanded.

Jenny’s eyes had gone immediately to the girl, taking in Vaho’s shabby outdoor clothes with a quick contemptuous smile.

“I’m ridin’ in the show, Bart,” Rowdy drawled. “Reckon you’ll have me to beat, ropin’ and everything.”

“Where’d you get a horse?” Luby demanded suspiciously.

“I’ve got one.” Rowdy’s eyes shifted to Jenny. Suddenly he was no longer angry or even irritated with her. “Jenny,” he said pleasantly, “I want you to know Vaho Rainey. Miss Rainey, Miss Welman and Bart Luby.”

"Oh!" Jenny exclaimed. "You're that Indian girl, aren't you? Or a white girl who lives down in the wickiups? I've forgotten which."

"Yes, that's who I am," Vaho said easily, and Rowdy grinned at the quick smile on her lips. It wouldn't be necessary to protect Vaho, he could see. The contempt in Jenny's voice had been evident, as was the malice, but Vaho was equal to it. "And it's nice to be here today," Vaho added.

"It must be," Jenny fired back. "I hear it's very dirty down there, and it would be a relief to get away for a while."

"Any change is a relief," Vaho replied gently. "You should try it sometime, or"—her voice was suddenly level—"would you rather continue to be a girl of the town?"

Before Jenny, whose face went white with fury, could reply, Vaho took Rowdy's arm.

"Shall we go, dear?" she said sweetly.

As they strolled away, Jenny got her voice back. "Girl of the town!" she cried furiously. "Why, that no-account Indian! I could—"

"Forget it!" Bart said, shrugging. "She just meant you were a city girl."

"I know what she meant!" Jenny flared.

But Luby was not listening. He was staring at his toes, thinking, and his thoughts were not pleasant. In spite of all his plans, Rowdy Horn would ride in the rodeo today, and if Wells had released him, it could only be on sufficient evidence to clear him.

Could it have been the testimony of this girl, Vaho, alone? He weighed that thoughtfully. Doubt arose, for there had been triumph in Rowdy Horn's eyes. Well, no matter. Rowdy had no roping horse, and that was one event he could not hope to win. Nor would he win the bronc riding. For all that, however, Luby's mind was not at ease. There was something wrong, something very wrong, where he was concerned.

As soon as Vaho Rainey and Rowdy reached the chutes, she had excused herself and disappeared. The parade was lining up for the ride around the arena, and McNulty led Silverside, saddled, but still under a blanket, up to where Rowdy Horn was waiting. Beside him was the palomino for Vaho.

The band began to play, and there were excited shouts from the crowd. Silverside's head lifted, and the splendid-appearing horse tossed his head, eyes bright and nostrils distended, as old memories of parades and triumph flooded back. Rowdy stepped to his side.

"Yes, this is it, boy! Show them for me, just like you did for Buck!" The big horse bobbed his head, as if in assent.

Suddenly, Mike let out an awed exclamation. "Boss!" he whispered hoarsely. "Look!"

Startled by McNulty's voice, Rowdy turned, and his mouth dropped open. Before him, resplendent in formfitting forest green and silver, was Vaho Rainey!

Never more beautiful in her life, the tall, dark girl looked proudly into his eyes—proudly, yet hesitantly—looking for the evidence that he found her lovely. And it was there. It was in the eyes of every man who had turned at Mike's astonished exclamation.

Never in all her days had Jenny Welman been as lovely as this. Her pale blond beauty was a poor shadow beside this vivid loveliness, dark, flashing, proud.

“Am I all right?” Vaho asked, her eyes bright with fun. “I had the suit made, and saved it. I knew, somehow, you’d ride. And I wanted you to be proud of me!”

“*Proud* of you?” he shouted. “Honey, I feel like some fairy princess had waved a wand over a little woods girl and turned her into something better than the Queen of Sheba and Helen of Troy rolled into one! Wait till the crowd sees you!”

“Don’t you want, just a little,” she said gently, “to have Jenny Welman see me?” Her eyes sparkled as she asked the question primly.

He grinned. “I sure do!” he said.

Mike McNulty jerked the blanket from Silverside, and after helping Vaho into the saddle on the palomino, Rowdy Horn swung up himself.

Sheriff Ben Wells walked up with Dick Weaver, the rodeo boss. Weaver froze in midstride.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Ain’t that Silverside?”

At the magical name of the greatest rodeo horse of the southwest, men wheeled about. There were shouts, and others came running. They gathered around, staring.

“He’s Silverside, all right,” Horn said quietly.

Then the band struck up once more, and the parade began to move.

As if by magic that name had flown across the arena, so that by the time the contestants rode into the arena all eyes were turned to find the great horse, so miraculously back from the dead. And the eyes of the crowd went from the great horse to the rider, tall in the saddle, and to the girl in green and silver who rode beside him. Jenny Welman, hearing all the excited talk, turned in her saddle—she was riding beside Luby—and the smile on her face froze. The laughter went out of her. Beside that girl with Rowdy she herself looked shabby and small, and she knew it.

Bart Luby heard the name of Silverside, but would not turn. His heart pounded, and his lips tightened. This rodeo meant more to him than anything in the world, and he was going to win! He was going to win, no matter how!

There was scarcely a person in the crowd but understood what drama and excitement lay before them. Gossip in a small town flies quickly, and the fact that Jenny Welman had returned Rowdy Horn’s ring was known to them all, as was the trouble and rivalry between Bart Luby and the young rancher who would ride against him today.

The mysterious girl from the mountains, whom all had heard of but never seen, was before them now, riding proudly beside Rowdy. And to top it all, Rowdy Horn—out of the running when his horse, Cub, had gone lame—had come in at the last minute, freed from jail, to ride. And he was mounted on the greatest horse of the generation—Silverside!

Rowdy Horn watched carefully as he waited beside the chute. There were some good hands riding in this show. Still, he knew, the man he had to beat was Bart Luby.

Never before had he appeared before a crowd of this size. He had been riding all his life, and had appeared in various small-town rodeos, and had spent two summers breaking wild broncs for the rough string. For the sheer sport of it and a little mount money, he had ridden in try-outs when big showmen were testing

contest stock for the big shows. But he was in no sense the professional that Luby was.

Roping was his specialty; it was part of his day's work and had been for a long time, but he had never competed in such a show as this, even if it did not rank anywhere near tops in size.

Bart Luby, on the other hand, had been appearing in all the big shows and winning consistently, and he had been competing against the greatest performers in the business. Today, in the first event, the preliminaries in the calf roping, Rowdy would be riding a horse which for all its greatness was unfamiliar to him. Bitterly, he stared out at the dusty arena, soon to be the scene of battle and danger, and for the first time realized what this attempt really meant.

He was no stranger to the flying hoofs and tigerish bucking of outlaw horses or Brahma bulls. He had seen men die in the arena, had seen others crippled or broken under the lashing hoofs of some maddened bronc. But for Rowdy more than life was at stake out there today, and remembering Luby from the old days on the Bar O, he knew the man was fast and skillful. Undoubtedly, he had grown more so.

"I'm a fool," Horn told himself. "I'm bucking a stacked deck. I'm not good enough for these hombres."

After the parade was over, gloomily, Rowdy watched the first leppy dart from the chute and leg it across the arena, with a cowboy on a flying paint horse behind it. That was Gus Petro, a Greek rider from Cheyenne. Doubts lost in sudden interest, Rowdy watched the dust clear, and heard the time called. He smiled. He could beat that. He knew he could beat it.

Yet when the official announcer announced his own name, and he heard that voice rolling out over the arena, something leaped inside him.

"Folks, here comes Rowdy Horn, of the Slash Bar, ridin' that greatest ropin' horse of all time—*Silverside!*"

The calf darted like a creamy streak, and *Silverside* took off with a bound. Instantly, Rowdy knew that all he had heard of the horse he be-strode was only half the truth. With flashing speed, the black horse with the splash of white on his side was after the fleeing calf. Horn's rope shot out like an arrow, and in almost the same breath, Rowdy was off the horse, grounding the bawling, struggling calf and making a quick tie. He sprang away from the calf.

"There it is, folks!" Weaver's voice boomed out over the arena. "Eleven seconds even, for Rowdy Horn on *Silverside!*"

Bart Luby's eyes narrowed. It was a tough mark, yet he had tied it twice. He was off like a streak when his calf darted away from the chute. He roped, flopped the calf, and made his tie.

"Eleven and one-fifth seconds!" Weaver bawled.

Luby swore softly, his eyes bitter. With a jerk he whipped his horse's head around and rode off to the stands. These were only preliminaries, and the final test was yet to be made. But he had never believed that Rowdy Horn would beat him, even by a fifth of a second in a tryout, and he didn't like being beaten.

While the band played and the clowns ripped and tore around the tanbark, mimicking the performances of the preceding event, the contestants headed for the shack to draw horses for the saddle bronc riding contest.

Vaho was waiting for Rowdy near chute 5, from which he would ride. He found that he had drawn Devil May Care, a wicked buckner that had been ridden only twice the preceding year in twenty-two attempts, and not at all in the current season. Bart Luby had drawn an equally bad horse, Firefly.

“You were wonderful!” Vaho said, as Rowdy walked up. “I never saw anyone move so fast!”

He grinned a little. “It’s got to be better, honey,” he said honestly. “Bart Luby has done that well, and he’ll be really trying next time.”

“You can do it!” she insisted. “I know you can!”

“Maybe,” he said. “But if I do, it will be that horse. I’ll know him better next time. Let’s just hope I draw a calf that’s fast.”

“How about this event?” she asked, worriedly. “You drew a bad horse.”

“Just what I wanted. You can’t win in these rodeos on the easy ones. The worse they buck, the better the ride—if you stay up there.”

Bart Luby was first out of the chute on Firefly, and the horse was a demon. It left the chute with a rush and broke into a charge, then swapped ends three times with lightning speed and went into an insane orgy of sunfishing. Luby, riding like the splendid performer he was, raked the big horse fore and aft, writing his name all over its sides with both spurs. At the finish he was still in the saddle and making a magnificent ride. He hopped off and lifted a hand to the cheers of the crowd.

Rowdy stared out through the dust and touched his tongue to dry lips. He mounted the side of the chute and looked down at the trembling body of the sorrel, Devil May Care. Sheriff Ben Wells stood nearby, and he looked up at Horn.

“Watch yourself, boy. This horse is a mean one. When you leave him, don’t turn your back or you’re a goner.”

Rowdy nodded and, tight-lipped, lowered himself into the saddle and eased his feet into the stirrups. His fingers took a tighter hold on the reins, and he heard Weaver’s voice booming again.

“Here it comes, folks! Right out of chute five! Rowdy Horn on that bundle of pure poison and dynamite, Devil May Care!”

Rowdy removed his hat and yelled, “Let ’er go, boys!”

The gate tripped open and Devil May Care exploded into the arena in a blur of speed and pounding hoofs. His lithe body twisting in unison with the movements of the horse, Rowdy Horn got one frenzied view of the whirling faces of the crowd, then the horse under him went mad in a series of gyrations and sunfishing that made anything Rowdy had ever encountered before seem a pale shadow.

The sorrel outlaw was a fighter from way back, and he knew just exactly why he was out here. He was going to have this clinging burr out of the saddle or know the reason why. Devil May Care swallowed his head and lashed at the clouds with his heels and went into another hurricane of sunfishing, all four feet spurning the dust, his whipcord body jackknifing with every jump. He swapped ends as Rowdy piled up points, scratching the sorrel with both spurs.

Suddenly, with less than a second to go, the sorrel raced for the north wall and swung broadside in a wicked attempt to scrape his rider off. In one grasping breath, Rowdy saw that the horse was going to miss the wall by inches. He kept

his foot in the stirrup, fighting the big horse's head around. Devil May Care came around like the devil he was and, as the whistle sounded, went into a wicked burst of bucking that made anything in the past seem mild by comparison.

Chapter 7

Unlisted Event.

Riders rushed from near the judges' stand, and Rowdy kicked loose both feet and left the horse just as all four feet of the sorrel hit ground. Wheeling, teeth bared, Devil May Care sprang for his rider, but the horsemen wheeled alongside and snared the maddened bronc. With cheers ringing in his ears, Rowdy Horn walked slowly back across the arena. The crowd was still cheering when he walked up to chute 5.

Wells grinned at him. "That horse must be on your side, son," he said. "Goin' for you like that sure impressed the crowd, and the judges, too! Showed he had plenty of fight!"

"If he's friendly"—Rowdy grinned—"deliver me from my friends!"

Wells spat. "You've got a couple of mighty good friends, son. And neither of them are horses."

Luby was standing nearby. He turned, his elbows on the crossbar of the gate.

"You were lucky," he said. "Plain lucky."

Rowdy's eyes darkened. "Maybe. If so, I hope my luck holds all day. And tomorrow."

"It won't," Luby said flatly. "Your luck's played out! I've protested to the judges. I told them that allowin' a killer to ride would ruin the name of the show."

"Killer?" Rowdy wheeled. "Why, you—"

Bart Luby had been set for him, and too late Rowdy saw the punch coming. It was a smashing right that caught him on the side of the jaw. His feet flew up and he hit the dust flat on his back. Bart lunged for him. Rowdy rolled over and came up fast, butting Luby in the chest and staggering the bigger man. Bart set himself and rushed, smashing Horn back against the gate with a left and right, then following it up with a wicked hook to the head that made Rowdy's knees wobble.

Ducking a left, Horn tried to spring close, but Luby grabbed him and threw him into the dust. His face smeared with blood and dust, Rowdy came up, and through a fog of punch-drunkenness, he saw the big rancher coming in, on his face a sneer of triumph.

The man's reach was too long. Rowdy tried to go under a left and caught a smashing right uppercut on the mouth. Bart, his face livid with hatred, closed in, punching with both hands. Then Rowdy saw his chance. Luby drew his left back for a wide hook and Horn let go with a right. It beat the hook and caught Luby on the chin with the smash of a riveting hammer.

The big man staggered, his face a study in astonishment, and then Rowdy closed in, brushed away a left, and smashed both hands to the body, whipping

them in with wicked sidearm punches, left and right to the wind. Luby threw a smashing right, but Rowdy was watching that left. It cocked again, and he pulled the trigger on his right.

Bart hit the dust on his shoulders. He rolled over, and Rowdy stood back, hands ready, waiting for him to get up. Blood dribbled from Rowdy's mouth and there was a red welt on his cheekbone, but he felt fine.

Luby was up with a lunge and caught Rowdy with two long swings, but Horn was inside of them, smashing a left to the body and a right to the head. Luby backed off, and suddenly, sensing victory, Rowdy Horn closed in. He chopped a left to the head, then a right, then another left. He smashed Luby with a straight left, and as Luby cocked a right, knocked him down.

Bart Luby lay there in the dust, thoroughly whipped. Reaching down, Rowdy jerked him to his feet and shoved him back against the corral bars. He cocked his right hand to smash the bigger man in the face, then hesitated.

Coolly, he stepped back.

"Nothing doing, Bart," he said calmly. "You started this, and you've had a beating comin' for a long time, but I'm givin' you no alibis. I want your eyes open because I'm goin' to beat your socks off out there in the arena. When I win, I'll win on the tanbark!"

Deliberately, he turned his back and walked toward the stables.

Bending over a bucket he bathed the dust and blood from his face and combed his hair. He scowled suddenly, remembering Neil Rice. What had become of the printer? In the hurry and confusion of being arrested, and then the rodeo, there had scarcely been time to think. Still, Rice might be back at the ranch by now.

What did Ben Wells have up his sleeve? Who were the friends he had mentioned, and had they effected his release to compete in the rodeo? He was puzzled and doubtful, and recalling the finding of the body in his cabin, he realized how desperate his situation truly was. Aside from Vaho, he had no evidence of any kind. To the sheriff, as well as to people generally, his story of killing a man in a remote canyon and then finding his body in his own cabin would seem too utterly fantastic.

Deliberately, he forced his thoughts away from that. First there were the contests. Each thing in its own time.

The next event was bareback bronc riding, then came steer wrestling and bull riding. After that, the finals in calf roping. Four men would compete in the finals: Cass Webster from Prescott and Tony Sandoval from Buffalo, Wyoming, besides Bart Luby and himself.

Bareback bronc riding was a specialty of Rowdy's, and he took a fighting first, riding Catamount, a wicked devil of a horse. Luby took second, with Webster a close third. Luby won the steer wrestling, beating Rowdy by two-fifths of a second. Sandoval, the Wyoming rider, won the bull riding, and again Rowdy took a second, with Luby a third.

Sweating and weary, he walked slowly back to the corrals at the day's end. Tomorrow would decide it, but he was ahead of Luby so far...

Morning came, and the air was electric with expectancy. Even the other contestants eyed Rowdy thoughtfully as he strolled quietly down to the stables.

Silverside nickered softly as he came up, and Rowdy Horn stopped to talk to the horse as it nuzzled him under his arm with a delicate nose.

Cass Webster stopped nearby.

"This killin' stuff don't go with me, boy," he said quietly. "I don't savvy this fuss, but you stack up A-one where I stand." He ground his cigarette into the dust. "Luby washed himself out with me down to White Rock last year. He's dirty, Horn. You keep your eyes open."

"Thanks," said Rowdy.

His attention had turned from the cowboy and was centered on Vaho Rainey, who was walking toward him, followed by the admiring glances of everyone.

"We've visitors," she said, "so be careful what you say."

His frown was puzzled. "I don't get it," he protested.

"You will... Look!"

As she spoke, he turned his head. A small group of Indians was approaching. The first was old Cleetus, and the others were all men of his tribe, except one. That one, carefully concealed by a blanket, was Cochino!

"Glad to see you here," Rowdy told the Indians sincerely. "Very glad. If there's anything I can do, tell me."

They looked at Silverside and talked in low tones.

"They were here yesterday, too," Vaho whispered. "They watched you ride."

Suddenly, Cochino spoke to the girl, swiftly, with gestures. Her eyes brightened and she turned quickly.

"Oh, Rowdy! He says you can keep the horse! He is a present to you!"

"Good glory!" Beside himself with excitement and delight, he could scarcely find words. "But what'll I say? What can I give him?"

"Nothing. That is—well, he asks only one thing." Vaho was blushing furiously.

"What is it? Whatever it is, I'll do it!"

"I—can't tell you now. Later."

She quickly hurried away, and the old Indian chuckled. Cleetus smiled, showing broken teeth, but his eyes were grimly humorous.

An even bigger crowd swelled the arena to overflowing, and men crowded every available space. Pete Drago and his Demon Riders did their trick riding, their efforts augmented by the clowns, some of them rivaling Drago's amazing riders for sheer ability and thrills. The chuck wagon race followed, and an exhibition with bullwhips.

By the time the finals in the calf roping came around, Rowdy Horn was up on Silverside and ready. This time he was following Bart Luby. The piggin' strings he kept in Silverside's stall were checked, and he brought them out ready for the tie. Momentarily, he draped them around the saddle horn, and at a call from Wells, walked over to him.

"Soon's this event is over," the sheriff said, "I want to see you."

Rowdy nodded grimly. "Sure," he said, "I'll look you up. It was mighty fine of you to give me this chance, Ben, and I'll be ready to go back to jail."

Despite that, his heart was heavy as he walked back to his horse and swung into the saddle. Thoughtfully, he stared out at the arena. Eleven seconds, the time

he had made yesterday, was fast time. It was fast enough to win in many shows, but could he equal it today?

He picked up the piggin' strings and kept one in his right hand. The other he put in his teeth. Suddenly his consciousness, directed at the arena where Bart Luby had just charged out after his calf, was jerked back to himself. His lips felt something strange with the rawhide piggin' string. Jerking it from his teeth, he stared at it. Both strings had been carefully frayed with a file or some rough object. When drawn taut, to bind the calf's legs, they would snap like thread!

"Time!" Weaver's voice boomed out over the arena. "Bart Luby ties his calf in the record-breaking time for this show of ten and nine-tenths seconds!"

Cheers swept the arena, and Rowdy Horn felt something go sick inside of him. He heard his name called, and he twisted in the saddle.

"Cass!" he yelled. "Piggin' strings! Quick!"

Webster sprang as if stuck with a pin and thrust some piggin' strings in Rowdy's fingers. At the same instant, Rowdy tossed the frayed strings to the other contestant.

"Look!" he yelled.

He saw his calf leave the chute with a bound and take off down the arena like a bolt. Silverside saw it go and was in a dead run, heading down the arena. Rowdy's rope whirled and shot out, and he left the saddle with a leap, swept the calf from its feet and down deftly, swiftly. His heart pounding and the dust swirling in his nostrils, he made his tie and sprang free, arm uplifted!

Dead silence held the arena, and then, his voice wild with excitement, Weaver announced:

"Folks! Rowdy Horn, ridin' the great Silverside, wins the calf ropin' with the record time of ten and eight-tenths seconds!"

Cheers boomed across the arena, and Rowdy swung into the saddle and trotted his horse across to the judges' stand. His great horse reared high, and Rowdy's hat swung wide, acknowledging the cheers. Then, to the martial music of the band, Silverside dance-stepped across the arena to accompanying cheers. Then Rowdy turned the horse and rode him back to the chutes.

The memory of those frayed piggin' strings was in his mind. There was only one time it could have been done, hastily but deftly, and obviously planned for, and that had been while he was exchanging his few words with the sheriff.

Bart Luby had been sitting his horse, awaiting his signal, right beside Silverside!

Swift work, but it could have been done, for several minutes must have elapsed before Rowdy had returned to his horse. Only the sudden feel of the frayed place by his lips had saved him, for a snapped piggin' string would have meant too much loss of time.

He swung down and approached the tight little circle of men—Sheriff Ben Wells, Cass Webster, Tony Sandoval, Neil Rice, and others. And in the center of them, pale and defiant, his eyes hard with hatred, was Bart Luby.

Rowdy shoved through the crowd. "All right, blast you!" he flared. "Now you can have that beatin'!"

"Hold it, Horn!" Wells said sternly. "Step back now! This is in my hands!"

"All this talk is foolishness!" Luby declared harshly. "Why would I do a thing like that? I don't care what Webster says, I never touched those piggin' strings!"

“Same thing you done at White Rock!” Webster said flatly. “And you say I’m a liar, Bart Luby, and you’ve me to whip!”

Wells turned on him, scowling.

“Will you shut up!” he said testily. “That piggin’ string deal was bad enough, but I’m arrestin’ Luby for fraud, and for rustlin’.”

“What?” Luby’s face paled. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“What I said,” Ben Wells replied calmly. “This here hombre”—he gestured to Rice—“found Tom Slater’s true will hid in a cabinet in the old Slash Bar ranch house. He also found a document there that had its seal removed. Meantime, I’d sent a couple of deputies with a posse back to hunt for that valley Rowdy told us about. They hit the jackpot and rounded up Jack Rollick and two of his boys. Rollick confessed that he helped you tote that body over to the Slash Bar, Luby, to dump it on Horn. Besides that, when I jugged Horn, I searched him, and found what he had plumb forgot—Rollick’s tally book showin’ he rustled cows he’d sold through you and to you, even tellin’ about the percentage he took off whenever you tipped him to good steals.”

“It’s all a pack of lies,” Luby said, but his protest lacked emphasis.

“A search warrant got us into your house while you was down here,” Wells went on remorselessly, “and we scared up that fake deed. Rice, here, he showed me how that seal was removed from one paper and used on the other. He also showed how the will you had was actually an old letter to you from Slater, but changed so to make it a will. You can tell by the creases where words were changed and added on.”

Rowdy Horn looked up and saw Jenny Welman standing on the edge of the crowd, her lips parted. She stared at Luby, horrified, then at Rowdy. Abruptly, she turned and fled.

Horn had no wish to hear more. He was cleared now. Rice caught his eye.

“Boss,” he said, “I did what I thought was right. You were gone, so I acted on my own.”

“Fine,” Rowdy said, “I’m glad you did.” His eyes were straying, searching for the face he wanted. “You’ve got your job with me as long as you want it.”

Vaho Rainey walked out from the stables, leading her palomino. Rowdy walked past Rice and stopped her. For an instant, their eyes held.

“Honey,” he said then, “how many sheep would I have to swap Cleetus for you?”

She laughed. “He’d probably give you sheep to be rid of me. He loves me, I know, but now that I’m a young lady, I think I worry him.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t want to marry a cowman, even one with a ranch,” he suggested.

“Why, Rowdy!” She laughed suddenly, her eyes dancing. “We’ve been engaged, or practically engaged, ever since we got Silverside!”

“What?” He stared at her. “What do you mean?”

She blushed, but her eyes were happy. “Why, I told Cochino that it was the custom of your people for the bride to bring a pony to her husband, and only the finest pony would do. That was what he was saying by the stables this morning. He said all he wanted in return for the horse, which he had actually given me to give you, anyway, was for you to take good care of your squaw!”

He chuckled. "Why, I reckon that's a good deal," he said whimsically. "The cheapest durned horse I ever got!"
