

The Horses of Bostil's Ford

by Zane Grey, 1872-1939

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Chapter I

Illustration

BOSTIL himself was half horse. The half of him that was human he divided between love of his fleet racers and his daughter Lucy.

He had seen ten years of hard riding on that wild Utah border, where a horse meant all the world to a man; and then lucky strikes of water and gold on the vast plateau wilderness north of the Rio Virgin had made him richer than he knew. His ranges beyond Bostil's Ford were practically boundless, his cattle numberless, and, many as were his riders, he always had need of more.

In those border days every rider loved his horse as a part of himself. If there was a difference between any rider of the sage and Bostil, it was that, as Bostil had more horses, so he had more love.

If he had any unhappiness, it was because he could not buy Wildfire and Nagger, thoroughbreds belonging to one Lamar, a poor daredevil rider who would not have parted with them for all the gold in the uplands. And Lamar had dared to cast longing eyes at Lucy. When he clashed with Bostil he avowed his love, and offered to stake his horses and his life against the girl's hand, deciding the wager by a race between Wildfire and the rancher's great gray, Sage King.

Among the riders, when they sat around their camp-fires, there had been much speculation regarding the outcome of such a race. There never had been a race, and never would be, so the riders gossiped, unless Lamar were to ride off with Lucy. In that case there would be the grandest race ever run on the uplands, with the odds against Wildfire only if he carried double.

If Lamar put Lucy up on Wildfire, and he rode Nagger, there would be another story. Lucy was a slip of a girl, born on a horse, and could ride like a burr sticking in a horse's mane. With Wildfire she would run away from any one on Sage King—which for Bostil would be a double tragedy, equally in the loss of his daughter and the beating of his favorite. Then such a race was likely to end in heart-break for all concerned, because the Sage King would outrun Nagger, and that would bring riders within gunshot.

Bostil swore by all the gods that the King was the swiftest horse in the wild upland of wonderful horses. He swore that the gray could look back over his shoulder and run away from Nagger, and that he could kill Wildfire on his feet. That poor beggar Lamar's opinion of his steeds was as preposterous as his love for Lucy!

Now, Bostil had a great fear which made him ever restless, ever watchful. That fear was of Cordts, the rustler. Cordts hid back in the untrodden ways. He had fast horses, faithful followers, gold for the digging, cattle by the thousand, and women when he chose to ride off with them. He had always had what he wanted—except one thing. That was a horse. That horse was the Sage King.

Cordts was a gun-man, outlaw, rustler, a lord over the free ranges; but, more than all else, he was a rider. He knew a horse. He was as much horse as Bostil. He was a prince of rustlers, who thought a horse-thief worse than a dog; but he intended to become a horse-thief. He had openly declared it. The passion he had conceived for the Sage King was the passion of a man for an unattainable woman. He swore that he would never rest—that he would not die till he owned the King; so Bostil had reason for his great fear.

One morning, as was sometimes the rancher's custom, he ordered the racers to be brought from the corrals and turned loose in the alfalfa fields near the

house. Bostil loved to watch them graze; but ever he saw that the riders were close at hand, and that the horses did not graze too close to the sage.

He sat back and gloried in the sight. He owned a thousand horses; near at hand was a field full of them, fine and mettlesome and racy; but Bostil had eyes only for the six blooded favorites. There was Plume, a superb mare that got her name from the way her mane swept in the wind when she was on the run; there were Bullet, huge, rangy, leaden in color, and Two-Face, sleek and glossy and cunning; there was the black stallion Sarchedon, and close to him the bay Dusty Ben; and lastly Sage King, the color of the upland sage, a horse proud and wild and beautiful.

„Where’s Lucy?“ presently asked Bostil. As he divided his love, so he divided his anxiety.

Some rider had seen Lucy riding off, with her golden hair flying in the breeze.

„She’s got to keep out of the sage,“ growled Bostil. „Where’s my glass? I want to take a look out there. Where’s my glass?“

The glass could not be found.

„What’re those specks in the sage? Antelope?“

„I reckon that’s a bunch of hosses,“ replied a hawk-eyed rider.

„Huh! I don’t like it. Lucy oughtn’t to be ridin’ round alone. If she meets Lamar again, I’ll rope her in a corral!“

Another rider drew Bostil’s attention from the gray waste of rolling sage.

„Bostil, look! Look at the King! He smells somethin’—he’s lookin’ for somethin’! So does Sarch!“

„Yes,“ replied the rancher. „Better drive them up. They’re too close to the sage.“

Sage King whistled shrilly and began to prance.

„What in the—“ muttered Bostil.

Suddenly up out of the alfalfa sprang a dark form. Like a panther it leaped at the horse and caught his mane. Snorting wildly. Sage King reared aloft and plunged. The dark form swung up. It was a rider, and cruelly he spurred the racer.

Other dark forms rose almost as swiftly, and leaped upon the other plunging horses. There was a violent, pounding shock of frightened horses bunching into action. With a magnificent bound, Sage King got clear of the tangle and led the way.

Like Indians, the riders hung low and spurred. In a single swift moment they had the horses tearing into the sage.

„Rustlers! Cordts! Cordts!“ screamed Bostil. „He sneaked up in the sage! Quick men—rifles, rifles! No! No! Don’t shoot! You might kill a horse! Let them go. They’ll get the girl, too—there must be more rustlers in the sage—they’ve got her now! There they go! Gone! Gone! All that I loved!“

Chapter II

AT almost the exact hour of the rustling of the racers, Lucy Bostil was with Jim Lamar at their well-hidden rendezvous on a high, cedared slope some eight or ten miles from the ranch. From an opening in the cedars they could see down across the gray sage to the alfalfa fields, the corrals, and the house. In

Lucy's lap, with her gauntlets, lay the field-glass that Bostil's riders could not find; and close by, halted under a cedar, Lucy's pinto tossed his spotted head at Lamar's magnificent horses.

„You unhappy boy!“ Lucy was saying. „Of course I love you; but Jim, I can't meet you any more like this. It's not playing square with dad.“

„Lucy, if you give it up, you don't love me,“ he protested.

„I do love you.“

„Well, then—“

He leaned over her. Lucy's long lashes drooped and warm color flushed her face as she shyly lifted it to give the proof expected by her lover.

They were silent a moment, and she lay with her head on his breast. A soft wind moaned through the cedars, and bees hummed in the patches of pale lavender daisies. The still air was heavily laden with the fragrance of the sage.

Lamar gently released her, got up, and seemed to be shaking off a kind of spell.

„Lucy, I know you mustn't meet me anymore, but oh, Lord, I do love you so! I had nothing in the world but the hope of seeing you, and now that'll be gone. I'll be such a miserable beggar!“

Lucy demurely eyed him.

„Jim, your clothes are pretty ragged and you look a little in need of some good food, but it strikes me you're a splendid-looking beggar. You suit me. You oughtn't say you have nothing. Look at your horses!“

Lamar's keen gray eyes softened. Indeed, he was immeasurably rich, and he gazed at his horses as if that were the first moment he had ever laid eyes on them. Both were of tremendous build. Nagger was dark and shaggy, with arched neck and noble head that suggested race, loyalty, and speed. Wildfire was so finely pointed, so perfectly balanced, that he appeared smaller than Nagger; but he was as high, as long, and he had the same great breadth of chest; and though not so heavy, he had the same wonderful look of power. As red as fire, with sweeping mane and tail, like dark-tinged flames, and holding himself with a strange alert wildness, he looked his name.

„Jimmy, you have those grand horses,“ went on Lucy. „And look at me!“

Lamar did look at her, yearningly. She was as lithe as a young panther. Her rider's suit, like a boy's, rather emphasized than hid the graceful roundness of her slender form. Lamar thought her hair the gold of the sage at sunset, her eyes the blue of the deep haze in the distance, her mouth the sweet red of the upland rose.

„Jimmy, you've got me corralled,“ she continued archly, „and I'm dad's only child.“

„But, Lucy, I haven't got you!“ he passionately burst out.

„Yes, you have. All you need is patience. Keep hanging round the Ford till dad gives in. He hasn't one thing against you, except that you wouldn't sell him your horses. Dad's crazy about horses. Jim, he wasn't so angry because you wanted to race Wildfire against the King for me; he was furious because you were so sure you'd win. And see here, Jim dear—if ever you and dad race the red and the gray, you let the gray win, if you love me and want me! Else you'll never get me in this world.“

„Lucy! I wouldn't pull Wildfire—I wouldn't break that horse's heart even to—to get you!“

„That’s the rider in you, Jim. I like you better for it; but all the same, I know you would.“

„I wouldn’t!“

„You don’t love me!“

„I do love you.“

„Well—then!“ she mocked, and lifted her face—

„Oh, child, you could make me do anything,“ went on Lamar presently. „But, Lucy, you’ve ridden the King, and you’re the only person besides me who was ever up on Wildfire. Tell me, isn’t Wildfire the better horse?“

„Jim, you’ve asked me that a thousand times.“

„Have I? Well, tell me.“

„Yes, Jim, if you can compare two such horses. Wildfire is the better.“

„You darling! Lucy, did Bostil ever ask you that?“

„About seven million times.“

„And what did you tell him?“ asked Lamar, laughing, yet earnest withal.

„I wouldn’t dare tell dad anything but that Sage King could run Wildfire off his legs.“

„You—you little hypocrite! Which of us were you really lying to?“

„I reckon it was dad,“ replied Lucy seriously. „Jim, I can ride, but I haven’t much horse sense. So what I think mayn’t be right. I love the King and Wildfire—all horses. Really I love Nagger best of all. He’s so faithful. Why, it’s because he loves you that he nags you. Wildfire’s no horse for a woman. He’s wild. I don’t think he’s actually any faster than the King; only he’s a desert stallion, and has killed many horses. His spirit would break the King. It’s in the King to outrun a horse; it’s in Wildfire to kill him. What a shame ever to let those great horses race!“

„They never will, Lucy, dear. And now I’ll see if the sage is clear; for you must be going.“

Chapter III

LAMAR’S eye swept the gray expanse. A few miles out he saw a funnel-shaped dust-cloud rising behind a bunch of dark horses, and farther on toward the ranch more puffs of dust and moving black specks.

„Lucy, something’s wrong,“ he said quietly. „Take your glass. Look there!“

„Oh, dear, I’m afraid dad has put the boys on my trail,“ rejoined Lucy, as she readjusted the glass and leveled it. Instantly she cried: „Three riders and three led horses—unsaddled. I don’t know the riders. Jim! I see Sarchedon and Bullet, if ever I saw them in my life!“

„Rustlers! I knew it before you looked,“ said Jim, with compressed lips. „Give me the glass.“ He looked, and while he held the glass leveled he spoke: „Yes, Sarch and Bullet—there’s Two-Face. The three unsaddled horses I don’t know. They’re dark bays—rustlers’ horses. That second bunch I can’t make out so well for dust, but it’s the same kind of a bunch—three riders—three led horses. Lucy, there’s the King. Cordts has got him!“

„Oh, Jim, it will ruin dad!“ cried Lucy, wringing her hands.

Lamar appeared suddenly to become obsessed by a strange excitement.

„Why, Jim, we’re safe hidden here,“ said Lucy, in surprise.

„Girl! Do you think me afraid? It's only that I'm—“

His face grew tense, his eyes burned, his hands trembled. „What a chance for me! Lucy, listen. Cordts and his men—picked men, probably—sneaked up in the sage to the ranch, and run off bareback on the racers. They've had their horses hidden, and then changed saddles. They're traveling light. There's not a long gun among them. I've got my rifle. I can stop that bunch—kill some of them, or maybe all—get the horses back. If I only had more shells for my rifle! I've only ten in the magazine. I'm so poor I can't buy shells for my rifle.“

„Dear Jim, don't risk it, then,“ said Lucy, trembling.

„I will risk it,“ he cried. „It's the chance of my life. Dearest, think—think what it'd mean to Bostil if I killed Cordts and got back the King! Think what it'd mean for me! Cordts is the bane of the uplands. He's a murderer, a stealer of women. Bostil can't sleep for fear of him. I will risk it. I can do it. Little girl, watch, and you'll have something to tell your father!“

With his mind made up and action begun, Jim grew cold and deliberate. Freeing Lucy's pinto, he put her saddle on Nagger, muttering:

„If we have to run for it, you'll be safe on him.“

As he tightened the cinches on Wildfire, he spoke low to the red stallion. A twitching ripple quivered over the horse, and he pounded the ground and champed his bit.

„S-sh! Quiet there!“ Jim called, louder, and put a hand on the horse.

Wildfire seemed to turn to stone. Next Lamar drew the long rifle from its sheath and carefully examined it.

„Come,“ he said to Lucy. „We'll go down and hide in the edge of the cedars. That bunch'll pass on the trail within a hundred paces.“

Lamar led the way down the slope, and took up a position in a clump of cedars. The cover was not so dense as he had thought it would be. There was not, however, any time to hunt for better.

„Lucy, hold the horses here. Look at Wildfire's ears! Already he's seen that bunch. Dear, you're not afraid—for once we've got the best of the rustlers. If only Cordts comes up in time!“

As the rustlers approached, Lamar, peering from his covert, felt himself grow colder and grimmer. Presently he knew that the two groups were too far apart for them both to pass near him at the same time. He formed a resolve to let the first party go by. It was Cordts he wanted—and the King.

Lamar lay low while moments passed. The breeze brought the sharp sound of iron-shod hoofs. Lamar heard also a coarse laugh—gruff voices—the jingle of spurs. There came a silence—then the piercing whistle of a frightened horse.

Lamar raised himself to see that the rustlers had halted within pistol-shot. The rider on Two-Face was in the lead, and the cunning mare had given the alarm. Jim thought what a fool he had been to imagine that he could ambush rustlers when they had Two-Face. She had squared away, head high, ears up, and she looked straight at the hiding-place.

It appeared as if all the rustlers pulled guns at the same instant, and a hail of bullets pattered around Lamar. Leaping up, he shot once—twice—three times. Riderless horses leaped, wildly plunged, and sheered off into the sage.

Illustration

Lamar shifted his gaze to Cordts and his followers. At sound of the shots, the rustlers had halted, now scarcely a quarter of a mile distant.

„Are y-you all right, Jim?“ whispered Lucy.

Lamar turned, to see the girl standing with eyes tight shut.

„Yes, I'm all right, but I'm stumped now. Cordts heard the shots from my rifle. He and his men won't ride any closer. There, they've started again—they've left the trail!“

Lucy opened her eyes.

„Jim, they're cutting across to head off Sarch. He's leading. If they ever catch the other racers, it'll be too late for you.“

„Too late?“

„They'll be able to change mounts—you can't catch them then.“

„Lucy!“

„Get up on Wildfire—go after Cordts!“ cried the girl breathlessly.

„Great Scott, I hadn't thought of that! Lucy, it's Wildfire against the King. That race will be run! Climb up on Nagger. Girl, you're going with me. You'll be safer trailing after me than hiding here. If they turn on us, I can drop them all.“

He had to lift her upon Nagger; but once in the saddle, when the huge black began to show how he wanted to run, her father's blood began to throb and burn in the girl, and she looked down upon her lover with a darkening fire in her eyes.

„Girl, it'll be the race we've dreamed of! It's for your father. It's Wildfire against the King!“

„I'll stay with you—as long as Nagger lasts,“ she said.

Chapter IV

LAMAR leaped astride Wildfire, and ducked low under the cedars as the horse bolted. He heard Nagger crash through close behind him. Cordts and his companions were riding off toward the racers. Sarch was leading Bullet and Two-Face around in the direction of the ranch. The three unsaddled mounts were riding off to the left.

One rustler turned to look back, then another. When Cordts turned, he wheeled the King, and stopped as if in surprise. Probably he thought that his men had been ambushed by a company of riders. Not improbably, the idea of actual pursuit had scarcely dawned upon them; and the possibility of any one running them down, now that they were astride Bostil's swift horses, had never occurred to them at all. Motionless they sat, evidently trying to make out their pursuers.

When Lamar stood up in his stirrups, and waved his long rifle at them, it was probably at that instant they recognized him. The effect was significant. They dropped the halters of the three unsaddled horses, and headed their mounts to the left, toward the trail.

Which way they went was of no moment to Lamar. Wildfire and Nagger could run low, stretched out at length, in brush or in the open. It was evident, however, that Cordts preferred open running, and as he cut across the trail, Lamar gained. This trail was one long used by the rustlers in driving cattle, and it was a wide, hard-packed road. Lamar knew it for ten miles, until it turned

into the rugged and broken passes. He believed the race would be ended before Cordts had a chance to take to the cañons.

Nagger had his nose even with Wildfire's flank. Lucy rode with both hands at strong tension on the bridle. Her face was pale, her eyes were gleaming darker, and wisps of her bound hair whipped in the wind. Lamar's one pride, after what he felt for his horses, was in Lucy, and in the fact that she could ride them. She was a sweetheart for a rider!

„Pull him, Lucy, pull him!“ he shouted. „Don't let him get going on you. Wait till Plume and Ben are out of it!“

As for himself, he drew an iron arm on Wildfire's bridle. The grimness passed from Lamar's mood, taking with it the cold, sickening sense of death already administered, and of impending fight and blood.

Lucy was close behind on the thundering Nagger, and he had no fear for her, only a wild joy in her, that she was a girl capable of riding this race with him. So, as the sage flashed by, and the wind bit sweet, and the quick, rhythmic music of Wildfire's hoofs rang in his ears, Lamar began to live the sweetest thing in a rider's career—the glory of the one running race wherein he staked pride in his horse, love of a girl, and life.

Wildfire was not really running yet; he had not lengthened out of his gallop. He had himself in control, as if the spirit in him awaited the call of his master. As for the speed of the moment, it was enough for Lamar to see the space between him and Cordts gradually grow less and less. He wanted to revel in that ride while he could. He saw, and was somehow glad, that Cordts was holding in the King.

His sweeping gaze caught a glimpse of Bullet and Two-Face and Sarchedon dotting the blue horizon-line; and he thrilled with the thought of the consternation and joy and excitement there would be at Bostil's ranch when the riderless horses trooped in. He looked back at Lucy to smile into her face, to feel his heart swell at the beauty and wonder of her. With a rider's keen scrutiny, he glanced at her saddle and stirrups, and at the saddle-girths.

He helped Wildfire to choose the going, and at the turns of the trail he guided him across curves that might gain a yard in the race. And this caution seemed ordered in the fringe of Lamar's thought, with most of his mind given to the sheer sensations of the ride—the flashing colored sage, the speeding white trail, the sharp bitter-sweetness of the air, the tang and sting of the wind, the feel of Wildfire under him, a wonderful, quivering, restrained muscular force, ready at a call to launch itself into a thunderbolt. For the moment with Lamar it was the ride—the ride!

As he lived it to the full, the miles sped by. He gained on Dusty Ben and Plume; the King slowly cut out ahead; and the first part of the race neared an end, whatever that was to be.

The two nearer rustlers whirled in their saddles to fire at Lamar. Bullets sped wildly and low, kicking up little puffs of dust. They were harmless, but they quickened Lamar's pulse, and the cold, grim mood returned to him. He loosened the bridle. Wildfire sank a little and lengthened; his speed increased, and his action grew smoother. Lamar turned to the girl and yelled:

„Let him go!“

Nagger shot forward, once more with his great black head at Wildfire's flank. Then Lamar began to return the fire of the rustlers, aiming carefully and high,

so as to be sure not to hit one of the racers. As he gained upon them, the bullets from their revolvers skipped uncomfortably close past Wildfire's legs.

Lamar, warming to the fight, shot four times before he remembered how careful he must be of his ammunition. He must get closer!

Soon the rustlers pulled Ben and Plume, half lifting them in the air, and, leaping off the breaking horses, they dashed into the sage, one on each side of the trail. The move startled Lamar; he might have pulled Wildfire in time, but Lucy could never stop Nagger in such short distance. Lamar's quick decision was that it would be better to risk shots as they sped on. He yelled to Lucy to hug the saddle, and watched for the hiding rustlers.

He saw spouts of red—puffs of smoke—then a dark form behind a sage-bush. Firing, he thought he heard a cry. Then, whirling to the other side, he felt the wind of bullets near his face—saw another dark form—and fired as he rode by.

Illustration

Over his shoulder he saw Lucy hunched low in her saddle, and the big black running as if the peril had spurred him. Lamar sent out a wild and exulting cry. Ben and Plume were now off the trail, speeding in line, and they would not stop soon; and out in front, perhaps a hundred yards, ran the Sage King in beautiful action. Cordts fitted the horse. If the King was greater than Wildfire, Cordts was the rider to bring it out.

„Jim! Jim!“ suddenly pealed in Lamar's ears. He turned with a tightening round his heart. „Nagger! He was hit! He was hit!“ screamed Lucy.

The great black was off his stride.

„Pull him! Pull him! Get off! Hide in the sage!“ yelled Lamar.

Lucy made no move to comply with his order. Her face was white. Was she weakening? He saw no change of her poise in the saddle; but her right arm hung limp. She had been hit!

Lamar's heart seemed to freeze in the suspension of its beat, and the clogging of icy blood. He saw her sway.

„Lucy, hang on! Hang on!“ he cried, and began to pull the red stallion.

To pull him out of that stride took all Lamar's strength, and then he only pulled him enough to let Nagger come up abreast. Lamar circled Lucy with his arm and lifted her out of her saddle.

„Jim, I'm not hurt much. If I hadn't seen Nagger was hit, I'd never squealed.“

„Oh, Lucy!“ Lamar choked with the release of his fear and the rush of pride and passion.

„Don't pull Wildfire! He'll catch the King yet!“

Lamar swung the girl behind him. The way she wrapped her uninjured arm about him and clung showed the stuff of which Lucy Bostil was made. Wildfire snorted as if in fierce anger that added weight had been given him, as if he knew it was no fault of his that Sage King had increased the lead.

Lamar bent forward and now called to the stallion—called to him with the wild call of the upland rider to his horse. It was the call that let Wildfire know he was free to choose his going and his pace—free to run—free to run down a rival—free to kill.

And the wild stallion responded. He did not break; he wore into a run that had slow increase. The demon's spirit in him seemed to gather mighty forces, so that every magnificent stride was a little lower, a little longer, a little faster, till

the horse had attained a terrible celerity. He was almost flying; and the white space narrowed between him and the Sage King.

Lamar vaguely heard the howling of the wind in his ears, the continuous ringing sound of Wildfire's hoofs. He vaguely noticed the blurring of the sage and the swift fleeting of the trail under him. He scarcely saw the rustler Cordts; he forgot Lucy. All his senses that retained keenness were centered in the running of the Sage King. It was so swift, so beautiful, so worthy of the gray's fame and name, that a pang numbed the rider's breast because Bostil's great horse was doomed to lose the race, if not his life.

For long the gray ran even with his red pursuer. Then, by imperceptible degrees. Wildfire began to gain. He was a desert stallion, born with the desert's ferocity of strife, the desert's imperious will; he never had love for any horse; it was in him to rule and to kill. Lamar felt Wildfire grow wet and hot, felt the marvelous ease of the horse's action gradually wearing to strain.

Another mile, and the trail turned among ridges of rock, along deep washes, at length to enter the broken country of crags and cañons. Cordts bent round in the saddle to shoot at Lamar. The bullet whistled perilously close; but Lamar withheld his fire. He had one shell left in his rifle; he would not risk that till he was sure.

He watched for a break in the King's stride, for the plunge that meant that the gray was finished. Still the race went on and on. And in the lather that flew back to wet Lamar's lips he tasted the hot blood of his horse. If it had been his own blood, the last drops spilled from his heart, he could not have felt more agony.

At last Sage King broke strangely, slowed in a few jumps, and, plunging down, threw Cordts over his head. The rustler leaped up and began to run, seeking cover.

Wildfire thundered on beyond the prostrate King. Then, with terrible muscular convulsion, as of internal collapse, he, too, broke and pounded slow, slower—to a stop.

Lamar slipped down and lifted Lucy from the saddle. Wildfire was white except where he was red, and that red was not now his glossy, flaming skin. He groaned and began to sag. On one knee and then the other he knelt, gave a long heave, and lay at length.

Lamar darted back in pursuit of Cordts. He descried the rustler running along the edge of a cañon. Lamar realized that he must be quick; but the rifle wavered because of his terrible eagerness. He was shaken by the intensity of the moment. With tragic earnestness he fought for coolness, for control.

Cordts reached a corner of cliff where he had to go slowly, to cling to the rock. It was then that Lamar felt himself again chilled through and through with that strange, grim power. He pulled trigger. Cordts paused as if to rest. He leaned against the face of the cliff, his hands up, and he kept that posture for a long moment. Then his hands began to slip. Slowly he swayed out over the cañon. His dark face flashed. Headlong he fell, to vanish below the rim.

Lamar hurriedly ran back and saw that the King was a beaten, broken horse, but he would live to run another race. Up the trail Lucy was kneeling beside Wildfire, and before Lamar got there he heard her sobbing. As if he were being dragged to execution, the rider went on, and then he was looking down upon his horse and crying:

„Wildfire! Wildfire!“

Choked, blinded, killed on his feet. Wildfire heard the voice of his master.

„Jim! Oh, Jim!“ moaned Lucy.

„He beat the King! And he carried double!“ whispered Lamar.

While they knelt there, the crippled Nagger came limping up the trail, followed by Dusty Ben and Plume.

Again the rider called to his horse, with a cry now piercing, thrilling; but this time Wildfire did not respond.

Chapter V

THE westering sun glanced brightly over the rippling sage, which rolled away from the Ford like a gray sea. Bostil sat on his porch, a stricken man. He faced the blue haze of the West, where, some hours before, all that he loved had vanished. His riders were grouped near him, silent, awed by his face, awaiting orders that did not come.

From behind a ridge puffed up a thin cloud of dust. Bostil saw it, and gave a start. Above the sage appeared a bobbing black dot—the head of a horse.

„Sarch!“ exclaimed Bostil.

With spurs clinking, his riders ran and trooped behind him.

„There’s Bullet!“ cried one.

„An’ Two-Face!“ added another.

„Saddled an’ riderless!“

Then all were tensely quiet, watching the racers come trotting in single file down the ridge. Sarchedon’s shrill neigh, like a whistle-blast, pealed in from the sage. From fields and corrals clamored the answer, attended by the clattering of hundreds of hoofs.

Sarchedon and his followers broke from trot to canter—canter to gallop—and soon were cracking their iron shoes on the stony road. Then, like a swarm of bees, the riders surrounded the racers and led them up to Bostil.

On Sarchedon’s neck showed a dry, dust-caked stain of reddish tinge. Bostil’s right-hand man, the hawk-eyed rider, gray as the sage from long service, carefully examined the stain.

„Wall, the rustler thet was up on Sarch got plugged, an’ in fallin’ forrard he spilled some blood on the hoss’s neck.“

„Who shot him?“ demanded Bostil.

„I reckon there’s only one rider on the sage thet could ever hev got close enough to shoot a rustler up on Sarch.“

Bostil wheeled to face the West. His brow was lowering; his hands were clenched. Riders led away the tired racers, and returned to engage with the others in whispered speculation.

The afternoon wore on; the sun lost its brightness, and burned low and red. Again dust-clouds, now like reddened smoke, puffed over the ridge. Four horses, two carrying riders, appeared above the sage.

„Is that—a gray horse—or am I blind?“ asked Bostil unsteadily.

The old rider shaded the hawk-eyes with his hand.

„Gray he is—gray as the sage, Bostil—an’ so help me if he ain’t the King!“

Bostil stared, rubbed his eyes as if his sight was dimmed, and stared again.

„Do I see Lucy?“

„Shore—shore!“ replied the old rider.

„I seen her long ago. Why, sir, I can see that gold hair of hers a mile across the sage. She’s up on Ben.“

The light of joy on Bostil's face slowly shaded, and the change was one that silenced his riders. Abruptly he left them, to enter the house.

When he came forth again, brought out by the stamp of hoofs on the stones, his riders were escorting Lucy and Lamar into the courtyard. A wan smile flitted across Lucy’s haggard face as she saw her father, and she held out one arm to him. The other was bound in a bloody scarf.

Cursing deep, like the muttering of thunder, Bostil ran out

„Lucy! For Heaven's sake! You’re not bad hurt?“

„Only a little, dad,“ she said, and slipped down into his arms.

He kissed her pale face, and, carrying her to the door, roared for the women of his household.

When he reappeared, the crowd of riders scattered from around Lamar. Bostil looked at the King. The horse was caked with dusty lather, scratched and disheveled, weary and broken, yet somehow he was still beautiful. He raised his drooping head, and reached for his master with a look as soft and dark and eloquent as a woman’s.

No rider there but felt Bostil’s grief. He loved the King. He believed the King had been beaten; and his rider’s glory and pride were battling with love. Mighty as that was in Bostil, it did not at once overcome his hatred of defeat.

Slowly the gaze of the rancher moved from the King to tired Ben and Plume, over the bleeding Nagger, at last to rest on the white-faced Lamar. But Bostil was not looking for Lamar. His hard eyes veered to and fro. Among those horses there was not the horse he sought.

„Where’s the red stallion?“ he asked.

Lamar raised eyes dark with pain, yet they flashed as he looked straight into Bostil’s face.

„Wildfire’s dead.“

„Shot?“

„No.“

„What killed him?“ Bostil’s voice had a vibrating ring.

„The King, sir; killed him on his feet.“

Bostil’s lean jaw bulged and quivered. His hand shook a little as he laid it on the King’s tangled mane.

„Jim—what the—“ he said brokenly, with voice strangely softened.

„Mr. Bostil, we’ve had some fighting and running. Lucy was hit—so was Nagger. And the King killed Wildfire on his feet. But I got Cordts and three of his men—maybe four. I’ve no more to say, sir.“

Bostil put his arm round the young man’s shoulder.

„Lamar, you’ve said enough. If I don’t know how you feel about the loss of that grand horse, no rider on earth knows. But let me say I reckon I never knew your real worth. You can lead my riders. You can have the girl—God bless you both! And you can have anything else on this ranch—except the King!“