

# WILD PASTURES

By  
REX BEACH

## THE STORY TO DATE

Tom Kennedy, young Texas cowboy, arrives in the Florida cattle country in the wild '90's to work for his uncle, Capt. Ben Noble, wealthy and respected cattleman. Tom falls in love with Rita Mendez, beautiful Cuban girl, who is visiting her relatives, the Rubio family, at Fort Myers. Tom incurs the enmity of Tad and Sonny Dolman, sons of Asa Dolman, banker and rancher, suspected of shady dealings. Tom's friend, Bide Willing, a cowboy, receives an anonymous threat against Tom. While the two are fencing in Captain Noble's pasture land, Nick, the ranch foreman, brings them news that part of the fence has been cut. They suspect the Dolmans. By a cowboy feat Tom wins the admiration of Belle Sprague, unconventional woman rancher. An attempt is made one night to kill Tom and Bide Willing. The two ride in pursuit of their unknown enemies and are joined en route by Belle Sprague. Bide is bitten by a moccasin and cannot continue. Tom and Belle ride on together into the 'Glades country.

## INSTALLMENT VII.

ALTHOUGH Belle Sprague was casual enough now and wholly preoccupied with other concerns, it was impossible to be long in her company without feeling the conviction that she was primitive, lawless, and—nine-tenths animal. A healthy, buxom, ruthless creature who had never denied herself a single desire! That was Belle Sprague. In his mind Tom likened her vaguely to a tawny lioness—savage, fearless, predatory. The more he tried to analyze her the more acute became his disquiet.

They saw no dwellings after leaving the river; there were no roads, no wagon tracks in these woods, not even an occasional skeleton tent frame to show that this range had ever been explored. They had passed the last frontier and were in no man's land.

It was a region unlike any Kennedy had seen so far. The pine woods were not continuous; patches of timber alternated with grassy prairies containing shallow, reed-bordered ponds from some of which rose the stuttering shouts of whooping cranes. The birds were here by the thousands. When they passed overhead the air pulsed to their throbbing cries.

Belle could certainly ride. Tom admired the way she sat her saddle and managed her horse. Her energy, her fixity of purpose, her indifference to discomfort were admirable, too. She was strong and tireless and swift of decision. A real pioneer woman, he admitted. Those settlers' wives who followed Boone's track across the Alleghenies and into the scowling wilderness of the Ohio and the Tennessee long before the west was even heard of were made of similar stuff. They were the Belle Spragues of their time. Or, to put it better, she was a throwback to the hard-handed, deep-bosomed, oxcart woman of earlier days. There must have been a good many of her sort, Kennedy told himself, who strode shoulder to shoulder with the men, sharing their perils and their hardships, lifting their faces to the wind braving the dark loneliness of the forest and the subtle menace of the unknown.

He admired the type. He admired "Miss Belle," too, in a grudging way. He would have admired her thoroughly, enormously if only she were a decent woman. But, alas, those stories! He could not get them out of his head. And to think of finding himself in the heart of desolation alone with a loose woman! Too bad his hands were tied by the modern code; there were moments when he felt as primitive as she.

SUNDOWN A parklike island of pines into which an ox had never been laid. On either hand a sea of grass, broken by other islets of timber, and directly ahead a distant wall of vegetation resembling a short line of black rock. According to Mrs. Sprague, it was the edge of the jungle guarding Lake Okeechobee. She and Tom unsaddled, for it was useless to go farther, and the tired animals stood with drooping heads and slack haunches while camp was made.

Supper was under way when the travelers saw outlined darkly against the copper horizon the solitary figure of a man. He was approaching them across the prairie; under his arm he carried a gun. There was something arresting either in his carriage or in the cut of his clothing, and this Belle explained by saying:

"It's a Seminole hunter. We're in luck."

She waved, and the Indian quickened his gait. He raised his arm in recognition, whereupon she cried: "Hello, Billy! Why it's Billy Goodbear!" She advanced and held out her hand. For several minutes she talked with the hunter in his own language, then informed Tom: "Billy's all right. He's been at the Lower Place many a time. He's hungry, of course."

While she and the Indian talked, Tom went on with the supper. Here was a relief. Even the presence of a red man took the curse off of this situation to a certain extent. He could venture now to meet Belle's gaze openly. Of a sudden he realized how seldom he had done so since leaving Bassenger, and it stirred his anger. What a self-conscious ass he was!

Supper was finished, the horses were attended to, when Belle said: "Those fellows are about five miles from here with a 'gator plume hunter named Black Jack. Billy saw them this morning."

"Will he lead the way?"

"Sure! He'll be back for us at four o'clock. That'll give us time to—"

"Back for me, you mean."

"I said 'us.'"

"All right. But why let him leave? He can have my blanket."

"Don't be a fool!"

"I mean he may weaken, or—"

"What's the matter? Scared?"

"Scared? Of what?"

"Of me." Belle exposed her firm white teeth in a smile. "Why, Tom Kennedy! You act like you never slept out with a woman before."

In confusion he exclaimed: "I never did! I wasn't thinking about that, ma'am; I—"

"You've been thinking about nothing else all day. It has worried you sick. You're right pecked." Tom was silent. "Well, it isn't the first time I've slept alongside a cowboy. . . . All I hope is you don't snore."

"Suppose this Indian doesn't wake up?"

"No danger! I told him four; he won't miss it ten minutes. Well, I'm tired. It's time we turned in." The speaker's preparations for bed were simple. She placed her saddle for a pillow and spread her blanket on a mat of grass and palmetto leaves which Tom had gathered earlier, then, seating herself upon it, she pulled off her boots. Meanwhile she talked.

"How do you aim to take those two toppers?"

Kennedy shrugged. "I'll manage somehow. If they vex me I'll maybe cut down on 'em. Honest! You better stay here and—"

"O, I wish you'd hush. I'm right fond of you, Tom, but I can't take orders from you." Mrs. Sprague removed her jacket, loosened her belt, and unbuttoned her waist at the throat carelessly, exposing the white skin below her line of tan. "Have you got a girl?"

"Yes'm. That is, I've—kind of got one."

"Hm! You're so shy I thought maybe—" The speaker yawned, she stretched herself, she ran her hands over her tired muscles and rubbed gently here and there. "If Jim Sprague had been like you I'd have made a man of him, but he was an empty gourd." Her blue eyes gleamed, a smile flickered over her face when the cowboy picked up his saddle and blanket and moved away. "Where you bound for?" she inquired.

"O, just—over yonder."

MALICE mingled with her amusement. In apparent unconcern she protested:

"No, no! You've got to sleep close. I'm all right by myself in the daytime, but when night comes I'm nervous as a cat."

"Why, sure. If you feel that way."

"I do." It gratified her to see how awkwardly Tom made down his bed and how studiously he avoided looking at her. After a while she said casually: "Good night. Sleep tight."

"Good night, ma'am."

There was a silence, which Belle found thoroughly agreeable. She thought some of asking Tom to kiss her good night and wondered what he would do. Stampede, probably; break a leg or butt his brains out against some tree. At length she said:

"Don't mind if I—reach out and touch you during the night?" No answer. "I said don't be startled if—"

"I heard you, Mrs. Sprague."

"Oh . . . You must have been saying your prayers."

"Yes'm. I was."

Belle turned her head. "Honest?"

"It's a habit I never broke myself of."

"Well, I declare! . . . What were you praying for?"

"O, nothing! Things a person prays for he don't like to talk about."

THE forest was still gloomy when Billy Goodbear directed Belle and Tom to dismount and tie their horses. From here on, he said, they must go afoot. With her carbine under her arm, the woman fell in behind her two companions; soon they stepped into a blackness through which they had to feel their way. The jungle roofed them over, the earth grew damp and soft in places water stood ankle deep.

Leaves wet with dew slapped their faces, dampened their garments; thorns clung to their limbs, and roots, vines, ferns, an unseen litter of decaying vegetation impeded their feet. As they penetrated deeper into the swamp the trees increased in size and rose in



"How come these rats to hole up here?"

height; strange, unclean odors became noticeable. There was no piney perfume here; the air was stale, it was dead; it was hard to breathe, and the travelers felt their pores open. Almost before they knew it their bodies ran with sweat; the noisome place seemed actually to radiate a heat like that from a rotting manure pile.

Plainly Goodbear was following a trail hewn out by hand, otherwise it would have been impossible to push through such a growth; once in it, moreover, there was no getting out.

It seemed to Tom and Belle that they must have stumbled through that chaos of slime and rioting vegetation for at least an hour before the ground rose, became firmer under their feet, and they realized that they stood at last on the scarcer rim of the mighty lake. Here they could walk more warily, breathe more easily. Ahead was open water, and to the east the horizon was beginning to color.

Billy Goodbear stopped; he whispered to Belle and pointed with up-lifted chin.

"He says the camp is maybe two hundred yards ahead," she translated. "He's going now. He says Black Jack doesn't keep a dog. A 'gator got it."

Even while she was speaking Goodbear vanished. When Tom raised his head the Seminole had dematerialized, evaporated.

Under their breath the man and woman outlined their procedure, and when the light improved sufficiently for them to see what they were doing they stole forward. Even yet distances were deceitful and objects were magnified in size. They came to a clearing under a grove of live oaks in the center of which stood a wattled hut with a roof of palm leaves. It was doorless, windowless; in the opening which served both purposes hung a ghostly curtain of mosquito netting. Near by was a crude shed roof supported upon four posts which sheltered a stove, a crazy table, and a cupboard made of packing boxes.

Either the dew or the damp night breath of the nearby lake had laid a thin coverlet of moisture over the premises, for foliage glistened, the eaves of the hut dripped, and in the silence every drop was audible. The place was odorous of stale smoke, of fish, of half-cured alligator hides, of careless filth; it smelled more like the den of some wild animal than a human habitation, and in its utter sordidness there was a certain sinister menace.

The woman stationed herself;

cautiously Tom moved forward to the shelter of a tree trunk; they waited.

The first hot rays of the sun were making an oven of the cabin and had roused a humming of flies and insects before there came a lazy stir, a mutter of voices from within. A black-bearded man in faded cotton shirt and ragged overalls pushed the mosquito bar aside and emerged. His pants were rolled up to his knees, he was barefooted, he was unarmed. The fellow stretched, he yawned enormously, scratched himself industriously; after a drink from a water jug swathed in wet burlap he went to the rickety stove and rattled it.

Belle Sprague was anything but a nervous woman, nevertheless she experienced difficulty in breathing and the lift of her bosom sounded like a loud noise in a narrow room. She wondered how much longer Tom could endure the strain. He was only a kid; his immaturity had amused her, but she realized now that he had more steel in him than

"O, we followed you every inch! Joe Long and Red Howell are hot after your partner, and they've probably killed him by now."

"I'd dearly love to gut-shoot both of you," Kennedy exclaimed in a grating voice.

"Come on. Speak up. Who set you to kill him and Bide Willing?"

There was no answer. The cowboy returned Belle's accusing gaze with stares of sullen defiance.

"What's your name?"

"Iley Rowe."

"And yours?"

"Sid Fisher."

"Humph! Bartow boys. I know your people. They're no good. Tom."

Kennedy turned upon the furtive, downcast owner of the premises.

"How come these rats to hole up here? Friends of yours?"

"No, sir! I never seen any one of 'em till yestiddy. They just came in an' took up—"

Black Jack's words were cut short by a crash that roared through the clearing. Profiting by Tom's first

they were grouped more thickly, and their peculiar shapes lent a distinctive character to the scene. To Tom Kennedy those trees, all of a kind, suggested an incredibly numerous horde of tufted warriors halted by black magic in the midst of a fantastic dance. Some were tall and erect, others crouched or were bent and crooked. All stood poised in the attitudes they had struck when the savage ritual was stopped. Their naked bodies were motionless, but their plumes stirred and rustled in the wind. They were listening, doubtless, for some long-awaited blast of ram's-horn or conch shell to set them whirling and stamping once more in thunderous rhythm. In his fancy he could see them tossing lances and clashing shields of rhinoceros hide.

All that day he and Belle and Sid Fisher had ridden west. The lake was behind them. Somewhere ahead lay the southernmost tip of the sand hills, and on beyond that, past pine woods and prairie, lay Arcadia, Fort Myers, the land of the living.

As usual, Belle had taken charge of things. Instead of retracing their course she bore across country in the direction of her lower ranch. There, according to her plan, they would rest up, clean up, and fill up before pushing on. Meanwhile she set herself the task of wringing a confession out of their prisoner.

Before leaving the outlaw's camp she had told Tom: "If these fellows were hired by Asa Dolman or the boys, as I suspect, we've got to get it out of Fisher this side of jail."

"Looks to me like a pretty plain case," Tom had asserted, but the woman shook her head.

"I'll take more than we've got to convict him. More than horse tracks. I reckon you're glad now that I came along. I mean—with Iley Rowe dead."

"I sure am, Miss Belle. I guess nobody will question your story of how the play happened. I'm a newcomer here—"

"Is that the first man you ever shot?"

"Yes'm! I never thought I'd have to—"

Belle had "worked" on the unhappy Fisher at intervals ever since. She rode near him most of the time, while Tom brought up the rear.

THAT night they tied the fellow hand and foot. The next morning Mrs. Sprague renewed her pressure.

In time they left the Okeechobee flatlands behind, crossed the ridge, and headed southwest. Belle dropped back to say:

"He won't open up, damn him! Knows he'll be safe with Tuttle, I reckon. I've been thinking about poor Bide Willing and—"

She paused, she scanned Tom with her hard blue eyes. "You really want to learn who put up the job to kill you?"

Tom's face darkened. "If you'll jog on alone I'll find out."

"All right! I just wanted to make sure. I'll tell you when to start work." She spurred her horse once more into the lead.

A time came when the stately forest thinned and ahead stretched another marshy plain, down to the edge of which grew clumps of palmettoes and a low thicket scrub of dwarfed bushes.

Here Mrs. Sprague altered her course, slowed to a walk, and followed the margin, her eyes roving from side to side. She seemed to pursue an aimless course, and her horse picked its way carefully with ears alert. A half hour then it suddenly shied. It would have leaped out from under a less skillful rider than she. It stood trembling. From near by came a dry buzzing like the note of a locust.

"Snake!" exclaimed Sid Fisher. "There belongs to be plenty of snakes around this prairie."

"Yes. I see him."

"Better get out of here. We don't want no truck with them things."

"Tom! Put a loop on him!"

The speaker inclined her head in Fisher's direction.

As Kennedy loosened his rope the prisoner stared at first one, then the other of his captors, then kicked his horse and it lunged forward.

"Catch him!"

Tom was the better, quicker animal. Before Fisher had traveled forty yards the lariat settled over his head. Sid fought its closing loop for the briefest fraction of a second, then it ripped him bodily out of his saddle and he struck the ground with rib-cracking violence. He uttered a frightened shout; he

struggled as he felt himself being dragged like a sack of corn; he clawed at the noose which was cutting him in two, but it resisted his fingers as rigidly as a wire cable. He managed somehow to scramble to his feet and come bounding behind Tom's horse. Towed by the lariat, he ran with exaggerated strides, yelling at every leap. As he approached the place whence that sinister death warning issued he "crow-hopped" and managed to avoid by a matter of some ten feet the glittering menace which lay coiled and waiting. The body of the thing, he could see, was as thick as his leg at the knee, its flat head was the size of his fist. Fisher collapsed to his knees. When the rope eased he rose and stood rocking.

"Jesus! . . . I'll tell! For God's sake, whol . . . Loose me!"

Mrs. Sprague spoke in a wintry voice. "Sure you'll tell! You'll tell everything or you'll be swelled up like a dead horse by sundown and the buzzards will pick you. . . . Was it Asa Dolman?"

"No'm. It was—Tad."

"Make haste! Tell us the whole story. We'll put it down in writing when we get to the ranch and you'll sign it in the presence of witnesses. Go on!"

STANDING with his body brace rigidly against the rope, his staring eyes straining from side to side, Fisher talked. The words came reluctantly, in painful bursts, and the effort of speaking brought a sweat to his brow.

"You reckon you can remember every single bit of that when we get to the Lower Place?" Belle inquired.

"Yes'm."

"If I had any paper I'd write it out now. You'll sign tonight?"

"Hell, yes! I'd as lief write it as tell it."

"Loose him."

Tom did as he was directed. He fetched the other horse and Fisher climbed unsteadily into his saddle.

"So you like my ranch," Belle Sprague said that night.

"Yes'm! From what little I've seen this is the best cow country outdoors."

She and Tom had arrived at the Lower Place about sundown. They had secured their prisoner's signature to his confession and had turned him over to the help in the bunk house.

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(To be continued.)

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Sunday, November 4, 1934