

WILD PASTURES By REX BEACH

THE STORY TO DATE

Tom Kennedy, young Texas cowboy, has come to the cattle country of Florida in the wild '90's to work for his uncle, Capt. Ben Noble, wealthy and respected rancher. 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, powerful but disliked sons of Asa Dolman, a rancher, who by a secret arrangement with Mr. Rubio is shipping arms to Cuban revolutionists. While Tom Kennedy is fencing in his uncle's privately owned pasture land, his friend, Bide Willing, tells him that other cattlemen have threatened to cut the wire. Tom wins the admiration of Belle Sprague, unconventional woman rancher. He saves her father's life after an operation the old man performs upon himself.

INSTALMENT V.

TOM recited a brief biography which was in no wise extraordinary. Before he had finished, Belle Sprague broke in to inquire:

"Why don't you team up with me, Tom?"

"Captain Ben offered me a deal and I took it. I've got the world by the tail and a downhill pull."

"Too bad! We'd make a lot of money. . . . I reckon you had a high time in town last night."

"No, ma'am."

"Some pretty girls in Fort Meade."

"Yes'm. I reckon so."

"Hm-m!" Belle stared at the speaker curiously. "You're a good deal like your uncle."

"That's a compliment, ma'am."

"I see. A virtuous cowboy! I'd like to have you framed and hang you in the parlor. Funny how he and my father are such friends, isn't it? You've probably heard stories about dad—and me, too. Most of 'em are lies, of course, but they're close enough to the truth. Cap'n Ben usually gets what he goes after, and so does Gordon; the difference is they don't go after the same thing. It was good of you to play doctor; you saved father's life."

Belle rose and extended her hand, allowing it to rest in Tom's. Her eyes were nearly at the level of his and she stood so close to him that he could see her plainly; in fact, her body almost touched his. Her lips were parted in a smile; she wore an expression he had never seen before, and although he could not read its meaning, a sudden discomfort seized him.

He managed to mumble some commonplace remark.

Belle paused at the door and stood for a moment looking at him, still smiling. She was about to say something further when she turned her head at a sound from the road. Tom heard it, too; evidently somebody had turned in at the gate. Soon the dark blur of a horse and rider could be seen.

"Evenin', Miss Belle! That you, Mr. Hobby?" The voice was that of Nick Nickerson. Tom hailed him eagerly and descended the steps.

"Why, Nick! What are you doing here?"

"Hi, Tom! I figured you'd be here or in Fort Meade. There's hell to pay at the ranch. Somebody cut our fence."

"Honest?"

"What I mean, they cut it! There ain't a piece of wire a hundred foot long in five miles. I'm riding to Fort Myers if I can get a fresh horse. Want to go along?"

"Do it!" Tom's heart leaped.

"Who did it, Nick?" Mrs. Sprague inquired.

"Wouldn't I like to know? Is your father in bed yet?"

"He's in bed, all right," the woman asserted. In a few words she made known what had happened. Nickerson was shocked.

"Why, the old scoundrel!" he exclaimed.

FROM inside the house issued a feeble call from the scoundrel himself, who had recognized the newcomer's voice. Belle led the way to his room and Hobby extended a bloodless hand. The foreman took it, admiringly he said:

"Well, Gordon, it's a mercy you didn't have a bad attack of dandruff. I reckon you'd have cut off your head."

"I've got a bet with Belle. I'll give you odds I get well."

"Pshaw! You're that ornery you'd do it to spite me if I took you up. I'd like to borrow the loan of a horse, though." Again Nickerson explained the reason for his presence.

"I warned Ben Noble against barbed wire," the sick man said.

"It ain't the cost of the wire, although that's considerable; it's the principle of the thing. Looks like a man can't own property in this state. It sets me afire!"

"Couldn't you track 'em, Nick?"

"I been trackin' 'em. That's why I'm so late. They came from over this direction."

"Belle, be a good girl and scramble up some eggs for the boys," her father directed. "They've got a long ride ahead of them. And you might fix about four for me. I think I'd like a bite."

It was a cool night; the horses traveled at a good gait. The road which Nick and Tom followed, a poor road at best, led past an occasional house now dark and silent except for the querulous bark of some dog roused by the heat of hoofs. In time it dwindled to a pair of ruts, and finally to a mere trail.

"AINT that smoke?" Nick inquired. He pointed, and Tom beheld a lazy blue streamer that rose and wavered like a wispy egret plume.

Together they rode toward it until they saw a tiny blaze and a figure stooped over it. Four horses were grazing near by, and not until they lifted their heads did the man at the campfire straighten his back. A moment, then a second man rose, stretched himself, and finally waved at the approaching horsemen.

"It's Homer Tuttle," Nick said in a low voice.

"Hi, Nick! Where you heading?" Tuttle called out.

"Hi, Homer! You're up early. . . . Mr. Tuttle, meet Tom Kennedy. Mr. Kennedy, Mr. Tuttle. Homer's the sheriff of Lee county."

At these words a man flung his blankets aside and sat up. It was Tad Dolman; with him was none other than his brother Sonny. Their faces were swollen from sleep. Out of widening eyes they gazed at the newcomers. They greeted Nick, but ignored his companion.

The fourth member of the party was not introduced.

"We saw your smoke," the foreman explained, "and thought you might be vealers." As he spoke he ran his eyes over the camp equipment, but it was limited. He saw nothing more than the usual paraphernalia carried by men who travel light.

"Vealers, eh? Well, now, that's good!" Tuttle laughed loudly. "Step off and have a bite of breakfast."

"We've done et. Where you been, Homer?"

"O, just out on a case!"

"Over our way?"

"Nopel! Been up around Bartow. Sort of politikin for the next election."

"Kind of off your course, ain't you? Mebbe you need a compass."

Again Tuttle brayed. "That's it. Lost! Dogged if I don't believe you think we are vealers."

"How are things at the ranch?"

Tad inquired.

"Good! Just fine."

"Got your fence finished?"

For the first time Kennedy spoke. "Some dirty rats finished it for us."

It was the tone of his voice rather than his words which revealed his feelings; his lips had whitened, his eyes blazed; involuntarily all six men stiffened. Nick in particular was astonished, for during his limited acquaintance with Tom he had never seen the young man lose his temper nor heard him make use of profanity; now, in describing the outrage which had occurred, he released a string of epithets the least venomous of which was a fighting word. There was provocation, defiance, in the gaze he kept fixed upon the two Dolmans. Tad flushed, Sonny averted his eyes, Tuttle grinned vacuously. He it was who spoke first when Tom had finished.

"I reckon you belong to be sore," he agreed amiably. "But don't you let me hear no such language out of you if there's ladies present. I'd have to house you."

"We may call on you to house these night riders," Nickerson told him. "There ain't many tools in this country to stretch bob wire or to take it down with. Some of ours was chopped, but most of it was cut with tools. Not many stores han'tle the stuff; mebbe we'll find who bought it."

"Now you're shoutin'!" Tuttle exclaimed heartily. "You get me the evidence and I'll do the rest. Better light; the coffee is boiling."

Tom Kennedy spoke again, and this time more quietly, but with a

menace that drew attention back to him. He had turned his horse until the group at the campfire was on his left; he sat his saddle loosely; his right hand lay upon his saddle horn; his eyes were leveled at the two brothers, who still sat on their blankets. "I hear it said you boys have sworn to nail my hide on the door. Is it true?"

"Now, see here, son! You aiming to start a ruckus?" Tuttle demanded. "It's too early in the morning to pick a fight."

"Speak when you're spoken to," Tom warned him. "I'm talking to your betters. . . . They tell me

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Rita lifted a fluttering hand to her throat, her eyes widened, for she heard Miguel's voice and—another. Footsteps sounded upon the side porch, an instant of blind, sulfoating panic, then she saw Tom Kennedy standing before her, his hat in his hand.

HIS agitation, it seemed, was even more painful than hers, for he was awkward, stiff; he stammered and he had difficulty in disposing of his hands. Thank heaven Luisa and Miguel were present to hide her confusion!

Rita felt acute surprise when she heard herself greet the young man with admirable restraint; in fact, with a composure that bordered upon coolness. Then, almost before she had finished shaking hands, Ofelia emerged from the house, her eyes hostile, her face grimly set in lines of disapproval. She acknowledged Tom's bow and his few words of Spanish with a stare; she seated herself and loided her hands in her lap.

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"You going to take this on the chin?" the foreman demanded incredulously.

"I am. Take it and smile."

"That ain't like you, Cap'n Ben."

"I know it isn't, but we can't crowd nature."

A few days later in the columns of the Citizen, only newspaper published in Fort Myers, this item appeared:

BRILLIANT SOCIAL AFFAIR

On Thursday evening a formal party was given at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Vicente Rubio in honor of their cultured and beautiful niece, Miss Rita Mendez of Havana, Cuba, who is sojourning in our midst. Those who attended were enchanted by the personal charm of the honoree, and they were privileged to partake of an entertainment that for joviality and social enjoyment has never been eclipsed by any gathering held in our fair city.

Music and dancing were provided for members of our gay younger set, while the elder guests engaged themselves