WILD PASTURES

By REX BEACH

THE STORY TO DATE

Tom Kennedy, young Texas rancher, has come to the cattle country of Florida in the wild '90's to work for his uncle, Capt. Ben Noble, wealthy and respected cattleman. He 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 suspected of questionable dealings. While Tom 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 ranch owner.

INSTALMENT IV.

THE sun was low; the members of the fence gang were resting. Nickerson, Kennedy, and Willing were talking. Bide had been promised a job; the other two were waiting for him to refer again to the subject of fence cutting, for they were sure that he knew more than he had told them. Inasmuch as he was a good hand and could join any outfit, Tom suspected that the fellow had ridden out not so much to find employment as to put him on his guard.

The nearest Bide came to a definite warning was when, apropos of nothing, he began to talk about the Dolmans. Asa was a violent-tempered, hard-headed old man, he said. Tad was smart and ruthless. Sonny was a vengeful boaster. Both boys were furious at the manner in which Tom had humiliated them at Punta Rassa. Bide, it seemed, had encountered Sonny in Fort Meade; Sonny had been drinking and talking loud.

It was unnecessary for Willing further to point his remarks, and, having volunteered this much, he changed the subject pointedly and called Nickerson's attention to some distant animals which with the coming of evening had emerged from a bay head to graze. "Funny how them mossy-horn cattle manage to stay fat when the range stuff gets pore," said he. "Tom allows he can rope an' brand 'em. What do you think, Nick?"

"If I had a pony that knew his business——" Tom began.

"I'm tellin' you these cracker cow brutes will bite you an' chew the pieces."

Nickerson agreed. "They're bad, all right. Them Cuban bullfighters say our stuff is the worst they get."

"If I can rope 'em I can gentle 'em," Kennedy declared. For a moment he studied the little band, which was steadily grazing farther over from cover. The bay head from which they had issued was bordered by a strip of prairie which at this season was firm and dry. He knew his horse was fresh; he rose and walked toward it.

"If I was you, Tom——" Nick began.

"My pony will have to learn some time; why not now? Mose! Heat a kettle of water and get out the liniment. Maybe some of you better come along to gather me up."

Several of the cowboys scrambled to their feet and saddled their horses, but Owlfoot climbed upon the wagon. "I'll stay here an' cover up my eyes," he said. "I seen a bullfight in Cuby, an' the cruelty of it sickened me. That critter hooked so many men they finally had to shoot him."

FOLLOWED by his mounted campmates, Kennedy rode toward the distant cattle and finally cut between them and the swamp. He had made the end of his rope fast to his saddle horn; next he shook out and held its ample coils ready for action. The cattle were wary; they trotted off. When he pressed them closer they broke into a gallop, holding their heads and their tails high. Tom rose in his stirrups and his horse flattened itself; he uttered a yell which was echoed by the onlookers. The bunch split up; some of its members stampeded through the pine woods, others doubled back for the hammoc; horse and rider pursued the patriarch of the herd, a rangy, long-horned bull. They turned him away from the palmettos and drove him headlong down the prairie.

It was a race. When the distance between Tom and his quarry had lessened to a few yards he swung his rope lazily; smoothly he cast it, and the loop settled over its head.

Nickerson and the others expected then to see him set his horse down and snub the animal, but he did nothing of the sort. When the noose had closed he snapped his rope expertly, casting it over the creature's back so that it fell loosely on the farther side; then he turned his horse sharply to the left and spurred it forward.

There came a surge against the lariat which all but ripped the saddle out from under him; the rope suddenly tautened, swept the bull's legs cleanly out from under it, and brought it down upon its side with a breath-taking crash. Simultaneously Kennedy flung himself to the ground and ran back, snatching a short tie rope from his belt as he did so; deftly he looped it over one foreleg of his kicking captive, then around both hind legs, and trussed them together. Meanwhile he shouted to his horse. Its eyes were white, its nostrils were distended, but obediently it dug its hoofs into the soil and leaned its full weight against the lasso. It seemed strange that an animal so strong, so active as that bull did not instantly lunge to its feet, but in order to do so it had first to lift its head. This it was powerless to do by reason of that steady pull on the rope. Once an animal is thrown, it requires but little weight on its horns to prevent it from rising.

NICKERSON and his companions were unfamiliar with the mechanics of the lightning-swift tie which Kennedy had used; when they galloped up the bull was helpless, Tom was lighting a cigaret.

"Dogged if that ain't pretty!" Bide Willing exclaimed. "Now all you need to tame that brute is a rifle!"

But the Texan was not satisfied with the show he had given. He seized the creature's tail, divided the tuft of hair on the end of it, and knotted the two strands together. Somehow he bent one of the animal's hind legs, wrapped the tail around it, and secured the loop in the split hoof. Then he flipped his lariat from its horns, loosed his tie rope and jerked it away, and the maddened animal lunged to its forefeet.

Promptly the onlookers wheeled their horses and gave it room. It managed to stand, propped on three legs, but it could move only with difficulty. Its sides heaved, its muscles strained, saliva streamed from its muzzle.

"Rough deal on you, ain't it?" Kennedy said soothingly. His horse was wet and it was quivering nervously. He stroked it, he put his arms around its neck and buried his face in its mane. In a gentle voice he murmured: "Boy! You're a roping fool!"

The bull rocked, it uttered a hoarse and agonized complaint; it tried to charge, only to crash down once more.

"Pull out, fellows," Tom directed. "I'm going to turn him loose before he lames himself." With his knife he cut the knot of hairs, then swung into his saddle.

Bide spurred up to his side a moment later and confessed in a subdued voice: "I thought I knew something about cow business, but I never seen that kind o' ropin' or that kind of a hobble. What did you mean when you said if you could rope 'em you could gentle 'em?"

"All it takes is a surgeon's needle and some thread."

"I—I never was very bright. That's on account I was undernourished——"

"Sew up their eyelids. In two weeks the thread will rot out, and by that time they'll be tame enough to drive."

"Say! That gives me an idea! Yes, sir! And when I get an idea I go to bed with it. If you hear things creak tonight and skull bones rubbing together, or if I groan in my sleep, don't you mind. It's only me having a thought."

Bide returned home the next morning to get his things, and at his request Tom "rode a piece" with him along the line of the new fence. On their way Willing said:

"Well, sir, I labored hard during the night, and I finally had that idea. Boy, it's a dandy! It weighs all of ten pounds."

"Let's hear it."

"The way you busted that beef was educational, but it never meant anything to me until you said what you did about sewing up his eyelids. You sure it will work?"

"Positively. When I learned how many cattle have taken to the swamps and how hard it is to dig 'em out, I wrote Captain Ben."

"You mean about reclaimin' 'em for him? . . . Pshaw! There goes my bran' new brain child. I got to figurin' how many head of outlaw stock there must be in this country, especially below here, an' I thought how smart it would be for us to go pardners. You throw 'em an' I brand 'em and do the hemstitching. I couldn't rope a stack of deer horns myself, but I could pen an' gentle the stuff. You see, we could register the brand as our own and in no time we'd have a herd. That's what I was thinkin' out. Why, Tom, down around Miss Belle's Lower place an' the Big Cypress——"

"No use, Bide. Uncle Ben and I are as good as partners right now. He paid my schooling, he sent to Texas for me; I'm to have an interest in his business as soon as I show I'm worth it."

"No!"

"He offered it himself."

Willing's face fell; he heaved a sigh of disappointment. Dejectedly he said: "That's different, of course. I might have knowed the idea was too easy born to be any good . . . Pardners with Cap'n Ben!" He whistled softly. "Why, you're rich already. Boy, you certainly fell on a feather bed, an' I hope your luck holds out. By the way, Sonny Dolman has been practicin' that pistol trick of yours, an' he's got it down fine. Tad, too, I reckon; so don't ever——"

Bide saw that his companion had reined in, and he did likewise; he followed the direction of Tom's gaze until his eyes came to rest upon a freshly blazed pine tree. They had ridden perhaps a mile past the end of the new fence. Along the proposed line they now beheld several other blazes equally recent and evidently so placed as to attract attention.

"THOSE weren't here a few days ago," said Tom. He rode closer, and Willing followed; silently they stared at the tree trunk.

It had been smoothed with an ax; traced on the scar by a heavy indelible blue pencil was the outline of a coffin.

The men rode to the next blaze, and it was similarly decorated.

"I presume that's a warning," Kennedy said.

Upon Willing's good-natured face there had come a troubled frown; he uttered a feeble oath. "I hope to tell you! Everybody thinks this fence is your doin'."

"You know something, Bide? If I were to meet the Dolman boys right now I'd go through them for a blue pencil. Yes, sir, I'd go through their pockets like a pet squirrel."

"Sure! If they didn't do it, they know who did."

"Listen, Bide! You don't have to take this job. No use of you getting married to a row."

"I'm just a pore, cowardly country boy, but if there's goin' to be any trouble I'd like to hang around and see how it comes out. Anyhow, pictures don't give me goose flesh; it takes at least some harsh and threatening language. . . . So long."

. . . . . .

"I've never been able to work those swamp cattle at a profit," Capt. Ben Noble wrote to his nephew, "but perhaps you can succeed where I failed. It won't hurt to try.

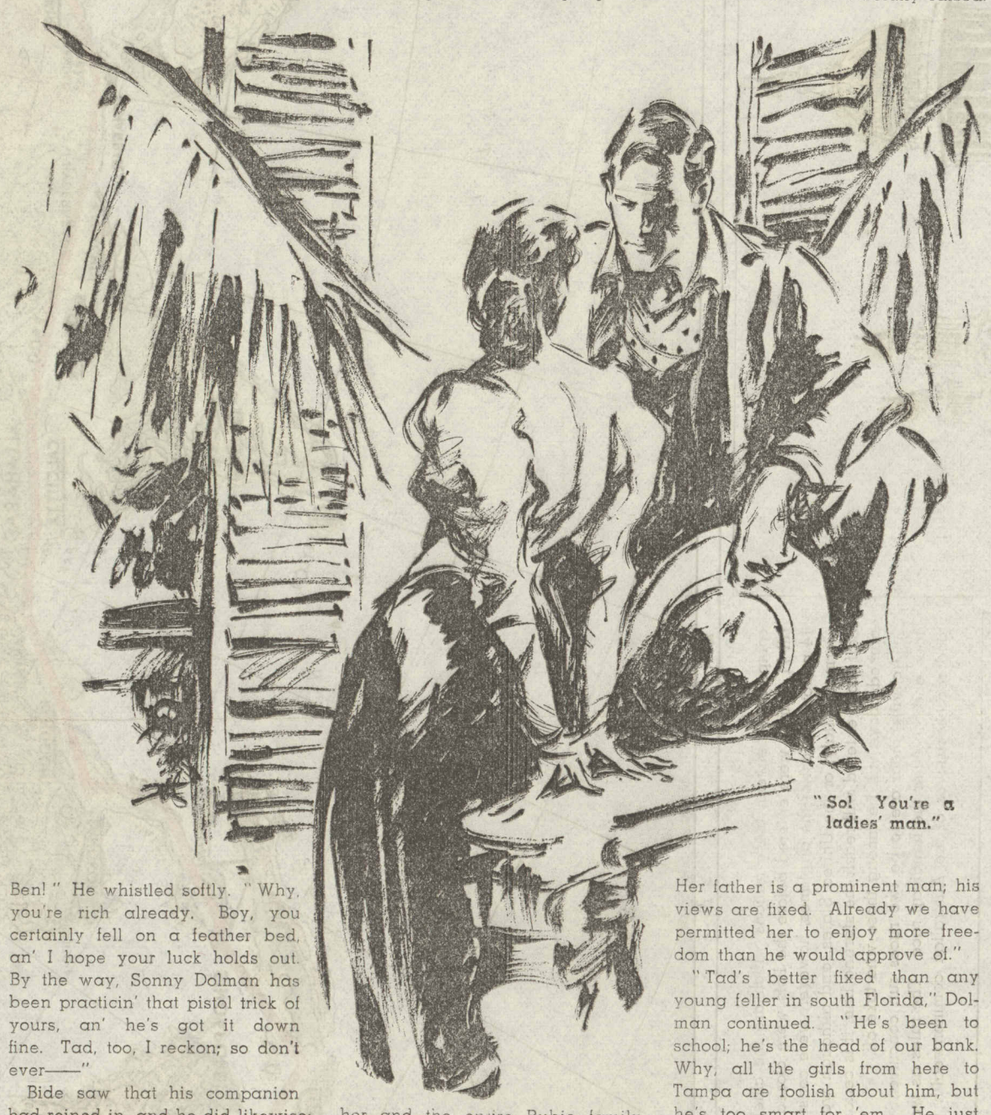
"If you're in Fort Meade any time soon, drop by Gordon Hobby's place and see how he's getting along. Tell him I'll be up soon.

"I'm sending some newspapers which will post you on politics and the progress of world affairs."

GOOD old Captain Ben! The Fort Myers Citizens he had sent were folded so as to display the usual weekly column headed "Local Doings in Society," and in several places Tom saw the name of Rita Mendez.

His heart leaped; then it sank. She was being shown much attention, she was being entertained; plainly Fort Myers was making a real fuss over her.

Tom had seen her the night before he left for the ranch. He had called; he had spent the evening in the living room in company with



"So! You're a ladies' man."

her and the entire Rubio family.

She had played the piano for him. He had gabbled foolishly. But not even when it came time to say good-by had he been able to obtain a word alone with her. Ever since he had been out here on the ranch his mind had been ceaselessly preoccupied with thoughts of her.

One day he was in despair; the next he was blithe, optimistic; he suffered all the intolerable doubts, the maddening pains, the intoxicating dreams, and the agreeable speculations of first love.

Tom would have been even more sorely troubled had he realized why the name of Tad Dolman occurred so frequently in the accounts of "social doings" at Fort Myers, or had he overheard a conversation that occurred between Vicente Rubio and Asa Dolman.

MR. RUBIO'S cattle boats during the last few years had often carried certain freight to Cuba which was not entered upon their manifests—heavy freight, in small packages; freight which crossed the Punta Rassa dock under the cover of darkness. He had first felt out Capt. Ben Noble on a proposition to act as purchasing agent for a group of prominent friends of Cuban liberty, but without success. Noble sympathized sincerely with the ideals of the Cuban patriots, but he had refused to involve himself in any way with the running of arms for them. The island, he felt sure, would eventually succeed in ridding itself of the Spanish yoke, but in the meantime any Florida cattle dealer who failed to maintain strict neutrality would risk financial suicide.

Eventually Rubio had turned to Asa Dolman; they had effected a deal. It was on a matter connected therewith that they had met on this occasion.

As Asa was about to leave he said: "O, there's another thing, Vicente! My boy, Tad, is right peeved at you and your wife."

Mr. Rubio raised his black brows in astonishment.

"He says you-all treat him like a robber."

"Impossible!"

"It's about that girl you got visiting you. Tad's thinking about marrying her." This casual statement quite naturally rendered Mr. Rubio speechless. "I don't blame him for feeling like he does, for every time he goes to make love there's somebody in the way; you won't let her go walking or riding with him; much as ever he can do to say 'howdy' to her at a dance or a fish fry. Give her a chance, Vicente. Tad ain't up to anything."

"My good friend, you don't understand Spanish customs."

"Sure I do. But this ain't Cuba. We're free and easy here."

"Rita has been carefully raised. Her father is a prominent man; his views are fixed. Already we have permitted her to enjoy more freedom than he would approve of."

"Tad's better fixed than any young feller in south Florida," Dolman continued. "He's been to school; he's the head of our bank. Why, all the girls from here to Tampa are foolish about him, but he's too smart for 'em. He just takes his fun and——"

"My cousin Umberto has made plans for his daughter. I cannot interfere with them." Mr. Rubio spoke with finality. "Perhaps I should send Rita home."

"You can't do that when her old man sent her over here on purpose to keep her clear if anything happens. You told me that's how come she's here. Say! If she went back to Havana Tad would cut up. I don't know what he might do, he's that hot-headed. Looks to me like you'd be sending her slap into jail. Tad'll do right by her. All he wants is a chance to love her up like a white man and see if she's—well, what he thinks she is."

Rubio paled. It was with difficulty that he managed to hold his voice even while he said:

"In business I am an American, but in my family life I am a Spaniard. If your son comes to my home he must observe the niceties of behavior to which my wife, my daughter, and my niece are accustomed; otherwise he will not be welcome."

"All right! I'll tell him. But chances is the girl don't want you riding herd on her any more than he does, and one of these days she'll up and run off with him, wedding or no wedding."

A GOOD many of Gordon Hobby's neighbors considered him a wicked, worldly man. They admitted that he was honest, kindly, public-spirited; most of them had reason to know that his word was as good as his bond; nevertheless they emphatically disapproved of him. For one thing, he was an inveterate gambler; and for another, he was "immoral." In his private life, that is to say, in his dealings with members of the fairer sex, as he gallantly referred to all women, he was blithely and notoriously unscrupulous. He enjoyed an evil reputation. He enjoyed it immensely, be it said. Secretly he sometimes wished that he could have done more to warant the general discredit in which he was held, but while his wife was alive that privilege had been denied him. Prior to his great bereavement he had felt his oats and had tentatively sowed a few, but he had never been allowed the satisfaction of harvesting them, for she had pulled up the sprouts. Now, however, he flung them broadcast, and the crop delighted him.

He was a man of reasonless likes and dislikes—his prejudices were fixed. He was a great beef eater, for instance, but mutton gagged him. He liked ministers, but he hated doctors and lawyers.

His distrust of the medical profession was grounded upon his contempt for the few doctors he knew, a pretty sorry lot, if the truth must be told, and this it was which accounted for his present condition.

Gordon was sick. Infirmity crowded him; he was in need of an operation. Having repeatedly asserted that any man who lives as naturally as a beef creature will be as strong as a bull, it sorely provoked him to find a painful and persistent lump growing in his groin. In every other part of him he was healthy, hence there was no reason or excuse for this thing. He had ignored it for a long while, but plainly something had to be done now. The more he thought about it the madder he got, and rather than trust to one of the hated sawbones he decided to operate on himself.

To that end he spat upon his finest-grained whetstone and sharpened the blade of his pocket knife to a razor edge, then sterilized the instrument by carefully wiping it on his pants leg. This done, he tore up a bed sheet and directed his Negro cook to fetch him some basins and a bucket of hot water. He opened a bottle of whisky, propped himself up in bed, and went to work.

At sound of the blasphemies which issued from his bedroom the help fled and he had the house entirely to himself.

TOM KENNEDY, on his way back from Fort Meade to the ranch, rode past the Hobby place to deliver his uncle's message. The place appeared to be deserted, so he went around to the rear.

Not a soul was in sight even here—a peculiar hush hung over the premises. From the quarters came a sound which grew to a monotonous murmur as he approached. Somebody was praying. In one of the cabins he discovered a man, a woman, and several children on their knees, and when he spoke he realized that all were nearly out of their senses with fright. It was strange. Sharply he inquired:

"What's the matter? Is somebody dead?"

The man scrambled to his feet; the wife rocked herself more violently, she wrung her hands, she sobbed, and she wailed.

"Yassir! He done daid," quavered the husband.

"Who?"

"Mistuh Go'don."

"God have mercy on that po' sinner!" shouted the wife.

"Amen! Hallelujah!" piped the children.

It took Tom a moment to learn what had happened, then he hastened toward the house, followed by a wailing black comet's tail which terminated in a frightened, squalling pickaninny barely able to trudge.

Gordon Hobby, it seemed, had deliberately committed suicide! He had disemboweled himself, and, moreover, he had died unrepentant. He had perished in sin. According to the Negro man, his last words had been:

"Get away from that goddam window!"

Tom left the terrified family at the back steps and entered the house alone; he paused on the threshold of Gordon Hobby's bedroom and felt himself grow sick.

The bed was crimson. Propped against its headboard lay the body of a grizzled, bull-necked, square-jawed man. His chin sagged, his head lolled, his eyes were closed, his limp hands were bloody to the wrists. But he was still alive, for his hairy chest feebly rose and fell.

Incredible to relate, Hobby had finished the grewsome task; he had even packed the wound in his abdomen and bandaged it after a fashion, as Tom discovered. Here was an example of mingled courage and folly, proof of a robust indifference to pain and a savage intensity of purpose that astounded the visitor.

THE cattleman appeared to be dying, however, and something had to be done. Tom's knowledge of surgery was elemental, but he had sewed up wounds in live stock; in his pocket at this moment were several curved surgeon's needles, purchased in Fort Meade that very morning. Lucky indeed that he had laid them in for use on those swamp cattle. He had got some stout cotton thread, too. Gut, of course, was the thing to use in a case of this sort, and he presumed it should be handled with extreme care to prevent infection. Infection! Rubber gloves! Iodine! Gauze! That was funny under the circumstances. The most he had time to do now was wash his hands.

He strode out into the kitchen and issued sharp orders to the Negro couple.

It was perhaps an hour later when Gordon Hobby opened his eyes. After a while he said in a weak voice:

"I told those niggers I wouldn't have a doctor."

"Well, you got your wish. I'm a cowboy. My name is Kennedy. I'm Capt. Ben Noble's nephew."

"O! How is the old son of a gun?"

"Fine, I guess. How are you?"

"Hell! I'm all right. . . . I must have dropped off to sleep."

"Humph! You damn near whittled yourself to a point. I've sent for a doctor."

Hobby scowled. "I won't have him, I tell you."

"O, yes, you will. Think I want people to say I killed you?"

IT WAS late that night; Belle Sprague had stopped at her father's house on her way home from the annual "protracted meeting," which had been in progress for several days at the camp meeting grounds some miles away; she had taken charge of the situation.

"It's good you got here when you did," she told Tom, "and you were lucky to find the doctor at home."

"He told me I did a pretty fair job, and I'm kind of proud of myself. I went at it like your father was a steer."

"Well, he is. A bull, anyhow. He's been threatening to do this very thing for months. Idiot! Say, how did you happen to have a surgeon's outfit with you?"

"That's something of a story." Tom told about roping the outlaw bull and his plan to reclaim some of the swamp cattle on his uncle's ranch. When he had finished, the woman smiled approvingly.

"I told Cap'n Ben you were a cow hand. I dare say there's money in it for a man who knows how; we never bothered much about roping. Every cow country has its own customs." Belle led the way out to the front gallery, where she and Tom could talk without disturbing her father, and when she had seated herself she resumed: "I heard things about you at the camp meeting. What's this about you starting a feud with the Dolman boys?"

"Are they friends of yours?"

"They're not friends of anybody. We'll all be better off when they're out of the cattle business. Yes, and they'll be out of it sooner or later if they don't quit smuggling."

"Sure! They're helping run arms and ammunition to Cuba. They buy the stuff and Vicente Rubio sends it through on his boats. If the government learns what Asa Dolman is doing it will be the end of him—and Vicente, too. They'll probably feed Umberto Mendez to the sharks. He's the leader. He's Vicente's cousin."

"I—met his daughter—I mean Miss Mendez—at Fort Myers," Tom said. "She's a right pretty young lady."

"So! You're a ladies' man."

"No, ma'am! . . . Yes'm! I reckon I would be if I knew how."

"All cowboys are alike."

It was dark out here, but Tom felt Mrs. Sprague's eyes fixed upon him with an intensity that seemed to render them luminous. "Who are you? Tell me about yourself."

(To be continued.)