

# Wild Pastures ~ by REX BEACH

INSTALLMENT I.

THE Summerlin house had been built to withstand hurricanes. It stood upon tall, thick posts, hand-hewn out of heart pine. These foundation posts were stoutly braced and cunningly mortised and tenoned into massive sills at top and bottom; they were held together with wooden pins, for not a nail had been used in the big bound skeleton of the structure.

Waves blown from the harbor had washed under it waist deep at times. It had rocked and groaned under the onslaught of those boisterous September gales which come shouting out of the Caribbean, but it had never moved.

It was two stories high; it was square. An elevated "gallery" ran around its front and its two sides and connected with another smaller structure, the office, so called, where details of cattle shipments, clearances, and the like were attended to.

The entire space under the house was open to the gulf breeze. It was the gathering spot for guests, it was the cowboys' lounge, the lobby of the Summerlin house. It was carpeted with white beach sand and finely broken particles of shell; the massive sills provided seats at least as soft as saddle leather, and the square posts made back rests comfortable to aching shoulders.

It was always shady under the house and agreeably cool. The place was free from gnats and mosquitoes, too, for a breath from the harbor was constantly stirring. Here sun-browned riders from the Missimée marshes and the ranges north of the Caloosahatchie renewed their friendships and their enmities with fellows from the Okeechobee prairies, the Big Cypress and the "Glades country."

Of friendships there were many; of feuds there were few, for the Florida cattle barons were men of good character in the main and their employes were well behaved.

These latter carried revolvers and dirks, most of them rode with a rifle or a shotgun on their saddles, and, furthermore, here at Punta Rassa rum was cheap—five gallons for a dollar, demijohn included. Nevertheless, breaches of the peace were by no means epidemic. Men who have slept alone under the stars for weeks and months welcome civilization; they roll their sweetness on their tongues; they enjoy its grateful flavor, and for a while at least they walk warily and keep a bright eye peeled for "the law."

PUNTA RASSA was the principal shipping point for south Florida stock. Annually some twenty thousand head were loaded there for Cuba, the steers and the "she stuff" for beef, the bulls for the bull ring; and cowboys from the piney woods and the cabbage hummocks looked forward eagerly to the occasional drives thither, knowing that they would find friends and strangers and sights to see. There were ships. There was the salty gulf to swim in. Sharks in the harbor. Dice and cards and aguardiente. And Fort Myers only twenty miles away, with its lights, its stores, its pretty houses, and its women.

After the cattle were loaded some of them stayed a few days to play poker in the old commissary, with its cheescloth partitions and its leaky roof. There were always holes in the commissary roof, for good hands were celebrated by pistol shots. Occasionally there were gunplays of more sinister portent—and why not, with a five-gallon demijohn of rum and piles of Spanish gold on the table? The little Schultz girl always hovered around the players to pick up what money fell to the floor. It was the house percentage. O, yes! There was something doing at Punta Rassa. And then on the way home, Fort Myers! Apples! Canned goods! Music! Women! A corner of cowboy heaven. After that the wilderness once more; the creak of leather, the lowing of cattle, the hoot of owls, the sigh of the wind in lonely pine tops.

Some punchers were squatting under the Summerlin house. One of them exclaimed:

"Hey, fellows! Here comes the Lily Snow!"

Immediately there was a scramble; the cowboys streamed out into the sunshine and thence to the dock, where a Cuban four-master was moored.

## In a Thrilling Serial of the Lawless Florida Cattle Country of the 90's a Master Novelist Writes Stirringly of Feuds... Fighting... Romance

The arrival of the Tampa steamer was an event for these horsemen; a certain excitement invariably accompanied it. Eagerly now they stared at a rusty side-wheel craft which had rounded Sanibel point and was plowing up the bay. A plume of black pitch pine smoke rose from its funnel, its walking beam lifted and fell, its prow clove the placid waters, turning graceful furrows of foam. To the observers the Lily Snow was a thing of beauty.

The schooner at the dock was loading cattle from a chute; its deck carried stalls into which the lean, long-horned animals were driven one by one. They were wild and unruly, they were frightened, too; from the pen whence they issued came a great bawling and bellowing.

This particular shipment was being handled on a cash basis and the simplicity of the transaction was characteristic of the Florida cattle business. There was no bookkeeping involved. Alongside the narrow chute stood the two principals in the deal, and each carried a leather bag. As an animal crowded past, the buyer handed to the seller a Spanish doubloon.

FROM the cabin deck of the incoming steamer Tom Kennedy looked down at the scene on the dock and thrilled at the sight of it. With interest he studied the men, the shore, the houses. Punta Rassa at last! A mighty small place to have its name printed so big on the map; he had expected to see quite a city. All the same it was pretty. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of the West Indies. Those leaning trees with the funny clusters of fruit were coconut palms. And those queer bushes standing high up on spraddling, crooked legs were mangroves. He wondered how a mangrove ever got its start in life.

Ordinary trees spring from roots, but evidently these sprouted in midair and dropped roots down into the mud. Silly idea! He was tempted to comment on its absurdity to the girl standing near by, and he glanced at her. He had tried more than once to meet her eyes, but always unsuccessfully; what was more, she seemed to feel his gaze and turned away. Now, with her attention fixed upon the shore, he was free at least to stare at her as intently as he desired.

She was lovely. Tom felt a stirring, breathless excitement racing through his veins. She was slim, dark, olive skinned. Her eyes were black and lustrous, and they had thrown him into a panic the moment they rested on him. That was when she came aboard at Tampa with her elderly woman companion. He had been in a daze ever since.

A dozen times on the trip down he had prayed for tempest or shipwreck, or for the Lily Snow to burst her boiler, so that he could save this girl's life. Instead the weather had remained balmy, the boiler had held together.

He guessed she'd be mighty surprised if he stepped up to her just as the ship was sinking, took off his hat, and said politely:

"Don't be in the least alarmed, Miss Mendez. I'll save you."

He'd have to say it in Spanish, of course.

That would make her open her big black pansy eyes, all right. After they were safely ashore on some uninhabited island he'd explain his knowledge of her language by telling her he was from the Rio Grande country.

Her name was Rita Mendez. Her father was a rich Cuban. She was going to Fort Myers to visit relatives. The woman she was traveling with was not her mother, but a maid, a companion. All this Tom had learned from the pursers.

Well, that meant he would be able to meet her. If necessary he'd get a guitar and "play bear" under her window.

The steamer had docked. Valise in hand, Tom lingered until he could follow Miss Mendez and her duenna ashore. He wondered how any girl could walk on such high heels—but she managed it. Why, her feet weren't as big as mice. He could span her waist with his fingers, nevertheless her hips and her bust were rounded and she was alive with health and vitality.

Tom heard somebody direct the women to the Schultz hotel, a place which he inferred was too rich for his blood, so regretfully he walked across to the Summerlin house and asked how he could get to Fort Myers.

There was no stage line, he was told. Neither was there any regular boat service. He would have to beg a ride from some returning cattle outfit or hire a craft of some sort to set him up the river.

Mr. Kennedy did not choose to charter any boat for the very good reason that he had been traveling for three weeks solid—quick time from west Texas to south Florida—and he had so calculated his expenditures en route as to have his trip and his money peter out at the same time. Aside from a few silver coins he was broke.

He was not greatly concerned thereat, however, for this was journey's end.

The two men Tom



He was free to stare at her as intently as he desired.

had seen at the cattle chute as he came ashore entered the office at his left and for a while they talked. When the Cuban left, Tom entered and inquired of the other:

"Are you the boss of this cattle outfit?"

The man turned with a frown, and Kennedy saw that he had been drinking, for his face was flushed and a demijohn on the table was far from full.

"Yes, I'm the boss. And I have all the hands I need."

THE speaker was a lithe, sandy-haired fellow several years older than Tom. His features were clean cut and prominent, his eyes were bold, and there was an insolent curl to his lips. He was handsome and he carried an air of consequence.

"I'm not looking for a job, mister. I thought you might have a chuck wagon going to Fort Myers, or maybe an extra horse—"

Carelessly the man shook his head. Deliberately he turned his back. Kennedy felt himself color at the fellow's callous indifference. In order to say something he explained: "I'm all the way from Texas, and these are the first Florida cow brutes I ever saw. Kind of poor compared with our cattle. I guess your range isn't as good as ours."

"And you're the first Texas cow hand I ever saw." The man turned and stared over his shoulder. He ran his eyes over Tom from head to foot. "I'll bet you're a top hand and know all about cattle."

"I can tell a bull from a heifer," the newcomer admitted.

"Well, Florida pickings are poor. You won't fatten up much, either."

"I'll manage to winter it out," Kennedy wondered if all cattlemen in this country carried their liquor as badly as this one, or if Florida rum had lightning in it. "I'd certainly like to get to Fort Myers."

"Did you ever think about walking?"

When Tom answered his voice had softened, but not his expression. "Why, no!" he said in a silky tone. "That thought never occurred to me. Out my way it's an unfamiliar form of exercise for cow men. Farmers and sheep-herders make it a practice, but we never took up the practice. For one thing, we aren't shod for walking." Tom looked down at his tight, high-heeled calfskin boots, the tops of which he wore con-

cealed beneath his pants legs. They were expensive boots, and, like all cowboys, he was proud of his feet. "No, sir, that never occurred to me. I can ride in these boots and fight in them; they'll do to kick a man in the belly with or stomp on his face if he gets impudent; but they're no good for walking. . . . My name is Kennedy. It's easy remembered. I'll be shipping cattle over this dock some day, and if ever you want the loan of a pony don't fail to ask me."

He stood for a moment in silent expectancy; then he sauntered out upon the gallery. Inwardly he was boiling; he was still seething when the dinner bell rang and he joined the resulting stampede.

There was the customary banter, the usual cattle talk, all familiar to the visitor, but tinged now with a new color and pointed by an idiom which he found a little strange. Soon somebody spread a saddle blanket and began throwing dice. The stakes were moderate, and Kennedy edged into the circle. He won and lost for a while, then his luck changed for the better. The coins in front of him grew. He

felt a swiftly mounting rage.

Sonny rose to his knees snarling. He reached for his revolver, and the bystanders broke ground, but as the weapon came from its holster Kennedy neatly kicked it out of his hand, sent it flying. The owner uttered a cry of pain and surprise which ended in a choking gasp as he felt himself dragged to his feet and an open palm smote his cheek with blinding force.

His limber lack of balance indicated that he was drunker than he had appeared on horseback, so Tom held him up, shook him like a wet shirt, slapped him again and again. He had about finished when he heard a cry of warning, then felt something hard and blunt driven forcibly into his ribs. A harsh voice back of him shouted:

"Drop that kid!"

Kennedy stiffened. He released his victim, he elevated his hands until they were at the level of his ears. He heard somebody exclaim affrightedly:

"Hey, Tad! Don't shoot!"

Over his shoulder he glimpsed the face of the man he had seen earlier in the office. It was distorted now with fury; the fellow was spilling curses.

"For God's sake, Tad, you can't do that!" It was the voice of Bide Willing. "Sonny rode his horse right over us—"

Sonny himself broke in with hoarse passion: "Kill 'im, Tad! You kill 'im or I will." He fumbled for the knife at his belt, but hands pinioned him and removed the weapon. He struggled to throw them off.

The tableau lasted only a second or two, but it was indelibly fixed upon the memory of those present. Some of them doubtless were impelled to intervene forcibly, but they were frozen in a paralysis of dread, fearing to move lest they provoke the insane elder brother to act.

Again Bide Willing lifted his voice in earnest entreaty. "This man's a stranger here. He don't know y'all, Tad. He wouldn't do a thing if—"

"Nobody's going to beat up my kid brother."

KENNEDY had said nothing, he had made no move. Apparently the pressure of that gun barrel had frozen him; then suddenly his right arm dropped and he whirled in his tracks. It was a maneuver familiar enough in the west, where quick draws and pistol tricks of all sorts were practiced by nine cowboys out of ten, but it was wholly unexpected here. Furthermore, it was executed in a flash. Although apparently at a hopeless disadvantage, he was anything but that, for his right elbow had less than a foot to travel before it collided with Dolman's wrist and knocked the revolver aside. As a part of the same movement he turned and seized it.

In those days, when gun fighting had developed a technique of its own, no experienced law officer ever came closer than arm's length to the man he held covered, for more than one had been shot with his own weapon; some had even been forced to pull the trigger that fired it.

This could have happened to Tad Dolman now, for not only did Kennedy strike his pistol aside, but also with a continuation of the same lightninglike movement he flung his arm over Tad's in such a way as to lock it in an unbreakable hold. Dolman found himself unable either to point the weapon or fire it, for his assailant's right hand covered his and exerted a pressure which his closed fingers could not resist.

As the men struggled the muzzle of the weapon described an erratic pattern, and the cowboys retreated until Tom forced it lower, then squeezed Tad's fingers and fired it into the ground once, twice. He was master of the situation. He compelled the owner to burn his last cartridge.

Then with a sudden wrench he ripped the gun out of Dolman's hand and thrust him back.

"I could have made you gun-shoot yourself," he cried harshly. "Next time I will."

Dolman said something in a strangled voice, then cringed as Tom menacingly raised the heavy weapon. Instead of striking with it the Texan waved him to be gone.

"Shove off," he cried savagely.

With these words he seized Sonny by the belt and simultaneously prodded his horse in that sensitive portion of its anatomy just back of its ribs. The animal leaped forward, its master was snatched out of the saddle and came sprawling to the ground. There was a startled clamor, but Tom did not hear it, for his temper, never very trustworthy, was completely out of control and he

was on his knees warming the dice with his breath and earnestly imploring them to come six when the game was unceremoniously interrupted.

Rapid hoof beats sounded upon the shell road, there was a yell, a rider approached at a gallop. As he came abreast of the Summerlin house he turned his horse sharply and rode under it, straight at the squatting group. The men scattered like a covey of quail, but a couple of them were bowled over as the rider set his horse down in their very midst.

"Hey, Sonny! You aimin' to kill somebody?" protested one fellow who had escaped a flying hoof by inches.

"Get that horse off our money," another cried.

To a chorus of this sort Tom Kennedy picked himself up, brushed off his clothes—he was wearing his best suit—and spat sand from his lips. His pile of quarters had been flung broadcast, and he retrieved them one by one. He had seen a woolly Texas roundup hand scatter a crowd at a campfire in this very manner, but on that occasion the cook had promptly put a dent in his skull with a skillet. Tom awaited some similar move from his companions. Evidently customs differed, however, for none came. From the resentful, hangdog demeanor of these cowboys he assumed this horseman was something of a bully.

THE confusion he had created appeared to amuse the latter. He sat his quivering pony and grinned down at the group.

"Don't mind me," he said. "It's just one of my capers." Tom reached for a coin, whereupon the rider spurred his horse. It all but trod on Tom's hand. When he made another move the maneuver was repeated.

The Texan straightened himself; he spoke to the bystanders. "These dice are mine, and I had that six as good as made. Now, mister," he lifted his eyes to the figure above him, "here's a caper to put with yours."

With these words he seized Sonny by the belt and simultaneously prodded his horse in that sensitive portion of its anatomy just back of its ribs. The animal leaped forward, its master was snatched out of the saddle and came sprawling to the ground. There was a startled clamor, but Tom did not hear it, for his temper, never very trustworthy, was completely out of control and he

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"Quick! Before I bend this on you. Kennedy is the name. It's easy remembered."

The brothers were sobered. Together they lurched out into the glare of the white shell road.

Tom watched them go, then he picked up the dice and rolled them between his palms.

"Now let's get some action on that six," he said, and spilled them out upon the blanket.

The cowboys stared at him, but interest in the game languished.

What a rotten introduction to Florida, Tom reflected as he mounted the steps to the hotel a few minutes later. He couldn't have made a worse beginning, and all on account of his temper.

Idiot! It wouldn't have hurt him to swallow Sonny's affront. Evidently these Dolmans were people of consequence. Presumably they were friends of his uncle, or possibly even business associates.

Wasn't that his luck? Tom knew comparatively little about his uncle except that he was a sober, God-fearing man who stood well in the community. Hm-m! The sooner he got to Fort Myers and laid his side of the affair before Capt. Ben Noble the better.

He noticed that a trim little sailboat had been moored to the dock within the last half hour, and he assumed it must have come from Fort Myers, so he went in search of its owner. The skipper turned out to be a Cuban boy of about fourteen. His name was Miguel Rubio, and he was talkative.

Here was some good luck at last. Eagerly Tom tried to arrange passage with Skipper Miguel, but the boy shook his head. He was willing to oblige, but his sister, Luisa, would never consent. Nor would the other two women. Ofelia, the cousin's duenna, was an old cross-patch. She'd be scandalized. Her principal business in life was to prevent precisely such things as this. Spanish conventions were rigid, and Rita was not Americanized like Miguel and his sister.

Tom did not press the point. He engaged the boy in conversation of a general nature, he discussed the cattle business, he spoke of Texas and the Rio Grande, of the western ranges and the western herds.

MIGUEL was interested. His father owned several cattle ships like the one which was loading here. He, Miguel, intended to become a vaquero. Tom wondered if he had ever seen any real Mexican roping. It would be an accomplishment for Miguel to master it. How? That was simple. Tom would teach him.

When Senorita Rubio, her cousin, and the latter's companion came down to the dock Miguel shocked them into a stupefied silence by announcing that the sloop had another passenger. With a flourish he introduced his friend.

"I'm afraid that is—impossible," Miss Rubio said. "I mean—you see—"

She avoided Tom's eyes. She was considerably embarrassed. "O, you make me sick!" her brother broke in. "Mr. Kennedy is the nephew of Captain Noble."

"You are? Is that true?" the girl inquired eagerly.

"Yes'm."

"Why, then—"

Again she hesitated and cast a troubled glance toward her two companions, whereupon the elder woman asked in Spanish:

"What are you talking about? Who is this man?" Briefly the facts were put before her, but she frowned, she shook her head until her long earrings danced.

But now Miss Mendez asserted herself for the first time. She silenced Ofelia, and she assured Luisa that she could do no less than assist the young gentleman to his destination. The young gentleman himself she quite ignored, but he thanked her silently, then lent Miguel a hand in stowing away the luggage and in raising the sail. Soon the sloop was under way.

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(To be continued.)

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