

WILD FIRE

A dramatic, high-contrast photograph of a wildfire at night. The scene is dominated by dark, billowing smoke and the intense, glowing orange and yellow light of the fire. The background is a deep black sky, speckled with numerous bright stars, creating a stark contrast with the fiery foreground. The overall mood is one of power, danger, and awe.

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Wildfire

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CHAPTER I

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For some reason the desert scene before Lucy Bostil awoke varying emotions—a sweet gratitude for the fullness of her life there at the Ford, yet a haunting remorse that she could not be wholly content—a vague loneliness of soul—a thrill and a fear for the strangely calling future, glorious, unknown.

She longed for something to happen. It might be terrible, so long as it was wonderful. This day, when Lucy had stolen away on a forbidden horse, she was eighteen years old. The thought of her mother, who had died long ago on their way into this wilderness, was the one drop of sadness in her joy. Lucy loved everybody at Bostil's Ford and everybody loved her. She loved all the horses except her father's favorite racer, that perverse devil of a horse, the great Sage King.

Lucy was glowing and rapt with love for all she beheld from her lofty perch: the green-and-pink blossoming hamlet beneath her, set between the beauty of the gray sage expanse and the ghastliness of the barren heights; the swift Colorado sullenly thundering below in the abyss; the Indians in their bright colors, riding up the river trail; the eagle poised like a feather on the air, and beneath him the grazing cattle making black dots on the sage; the deep velvet azure of the sky; the golden lights on the bare peaks and the lilac veils in the far ravines; the silky rustle of a canyon swallow as he shot downward in the sweep of the wind; the fragrance of cedar, the flowers of the spear-pointed mescal; the brooding silence, the beckoning range, the purple distance.

Whatever it was Lucy longed for, whatever was whispered by the wind and written in the mystery of the

waste of sage and stone, she wanted it to happen there at Bostil's Ford. She had no desire for civilization, she flouted the idea of marrying the rich rancher of Durango. Bostil's sister, that stern but lovable woman who had brought her up and taught her, would never persuade her to marry against her will. Lucy imagined herself like a wild horse—free, proud, untamed, meant for the desert; and here she would live her life. The desert and her life seemed as one, yet in what did they resemble each other—in what of this scene could she read the nature of her future?

Shudderingly she rejected the red, sullen, thundering river, with its swift, changeful, endless, contending strife—for that was tragic. And she rejected the frowning mass of red rock, upreared, riven and split and canyoned, so grim and aloof—for that was barren. But she accepted the vast sloping valley of sage, rolling gray and soft and beautiful, down to the dim mountains and purple ramparts of the horizon. Lucy did not know what she yearned for, she did not know why the desert called to her, she did not know in what it resembled her spirit, but she did know that these three feelings were as one, deep in her heart. For ten years, every day of her life, she had watched this desert scene, and never had there been an hour that it was not different, yet the same. Ten years—and she grew up watching, feeling—till from the desert's thousand moods she assimilated its nature, loved her bonds, and could never have been happy away from the open, the color, the freedom, the wildness. On this birthday, when those who loved her said she had become her own mistress, she acknowledged the claim of the desert forever. And she experienced a deep, rich, strange happiness.

Hers always then the mutable and immutable desert, the leagues and leagues of slope and sage and rolling ridge, the great canyons and the giant cliffs, the dark river with its mystic thunder of waters, the pine-fringed plateaus, the endless stretch of horizon, with its lofty, isolated, noble

monuments, and the bold ramparts with their beckoning beyond! Hers always the desert seasons: the shrill, icy blast, the intense cold, the steely skies, the fading snows; the gray old sage and the bleached grass under the pall of the spring sand-storms; the hot furnace breath of summer, with its magnificent cloud pageants in the sky, with the black tempests hanging here and there over the peaks, dark veils floating down and rainbows everywhere, and the lacy waterfalls upon the glistening cliffs and the thunder of the red floods; and the glorious golden autumn when it was always afternoon and time stood still! Hers always the rides in the open, with the sun at her back and the wind in her face! And hers surely, sooner or later, the nameless adventure which had its inception in the strange yearning of her heart and presaged its fulfilment somewhere down that trailless sage-slope she loved so well!

Bostil's house was a crude but picturesque structure of red stone and white clay and bleached cottonwoods, and it stood at the outskirts of the cluster of green-inclosed cabins which composed the hamlet. Bostil was wont to say that in all the world there could hardly be a grander view than the outlook down that gray sea of rolling sage, down to the black-fringed plateaus and the wild, blue-rimmed and gold-spined horizon.

One morning in early spring, as was Bostil's custom, he ordered the racers to be brought from the corrals and turned loose on the slope. He loved to sit there and watch his horses graze, but ever he saw that the riders were close at hand, and that the horses did not get out on the slope of sage. He sat back and gloried in the sight. He owned bands of mustangs; near by was a field of them, fine and mettlesome and racy; yet Bostil had eyes only for the blooded favorites. Strange it was that not one of these was a mustang or a broken wild horse, for many of the riders' best mounts had been captured by them or the Indians. And it was Bostil's supreme ambition to own a great wild stallion.

There was Plume, a superb mare that got her name from the way her mane swept in the wind when she was on the ran; and there was Two Face, like a coquette, sleek and glossy and running and the huge, rangy bay, Dusty Ben; and the black stallion Sarchedon; and lastly Sage King, the color of the upland sage, a racer in build, a horse splendid and proud 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 wind. This was an old story.

"She's up on Buckles?" Bostil queried, turning sharply to the speaker.

"Reckon so," was the calm reply.

Bostil swore. He did not have a rider who could equal him in profanity.

"Farlane, you'd orders. Lucy's not to ride them hosses, least of all Buckles. He ain't safe even for a man."

"Wal, he's safe fer Lucy."

"But didn't I say no?"

"Boss, it's likely you did, fer you talk a lot," replied Farlane. "Lucy pulled my hat down over my eyes—told me to go to thunder—an' then, zip! she an' Buckles were dustin' it fer the sage."

"She's got to keep out of the sage," growled Bostil. "It ain't safe for her out there.... Where's my glass? I want to take a look at the slope. Where's my glass?"

The glass could not be found.

"What's makin' them dust-clouds on the sage? Antelope? ... Holley, you used to have eyes better 'n me. Use them, will you?"

A gray-haired, hawk-eyed rider, lean and worn, approached with clinking spurs.

"Down in there," said Bostil, pointing.

"Thet's a bunch of hosses," replied Holley.

"Wild hosses?"

"I take 'em so, seein' how they throw thet dust."

"Huh! I don't like it. Lucy oughtn't be ridin' round alone."

"Wal, boss, who could catch her up on Buckles? Lucy can ride. An' there's the King an' Sarch right under your nose—the only hosses on the sage thet could outrun Buckles."

Farlane knew how to mollify his master and long habit had made him proficient. Bostil's eyes flashed. He was proud of Lucy's power over a horse. The story Bostil first told to any stranger happening by the Ford was how Lucy had been born during a wild ride—almost, as it were, on the back of a horse. That, at least, was her fame, and the riders swore she was a worthy daughter of such a mother. Then, as Farlane well knew, a quick road to Bostil's good will was to praise one of his favorites.

"Reckon you spoke sense for once, Farlane," replied Bostil, with relief. "I wasn't thinkin' so much of danger for Lucy... But she lets thet half-witted Creech go with her."

"No, boss, you're wrong," put in Holley, earnestly. "I know the girl. She has no use fer Joel. But he jest runs after her."

"An' he's harmless," added Farlane.

"We ain't agreed," rejoined Bostil, quickly. "What do you say, Holley?"

The old rider looked thoughtful and did not speak for long.

"Wal, Yes an' no," he answered, finally. "I reckon Lucy could make a man out of Joel. But she doesn't care fer him, an' thet settles thet.... An' maybe Joel's leanin' toward the bad."

"If she meets him again I'll rope her in the house," declared Bostil.

Another clear-eyed rider drew Bostil's attention from the gray waste of rolling sage.

"Bostil, look! Look at the King! He's watchin' fer somethin'.... An' so's Sarch."

The two horses named were facing a ridge some few hundred yards distant, and their heads were aloft and ears

straight forward. Sage King whistled shrilly and Sarchedon began to prance.

"Boys, you'd better drive them in," said Bostil. "They'd like nothin' so well as gettin' out on the sage.... Hullo! what's thet shootin' up behind the ridge?"

"No more 'n Buckles with Lucy makin' him run some," replied Holley, with a dry laugh.

"If it ain't! ... Lord! look at him come!"

Bostil's anger and anxiety might never have been. The light of the upland rider's joy shone in his keen gaze. The slope before him was open, and almost level, down to the ridge that had hidden the missing girl and horse. Buckles was running for the love of running, as the girl low down over his neck was riding for the love of riding. The Sage King whistled again, and shot off with graceful sweep to meet them; Sarchedon plunged after him; Two Face and Plume jealously trooped down, too, but Dusty Ben, after a toss of his head, went on grazing. The gray and the black met Buckles and could not turn in time to stay with him. A girl's gay scream pealed up the slope, and Buckles went lower and faster. Sarchedon was left behind. Then the gray King began to run as if before he had been loping. He was beautiful in action. This was play—a game—a race—plainly dominated by the spirit of the girl. Lucy's hair was a bright stream of gold in the wind. She rode bareback. It seemed that she was hunched low over Buckles with her knees high on his back—scarcely astride him at all. Yet her motion was one with the horse. Again that wild, gay scream pealed out—call or laugh or challenge. Sage King, with a fleetness that made the eyes of Bostil and his riders glisten, took the lead, and then sheered off to slow down, while Buckles thundered past. Lucy was pulling him hard, and had him plunging to a halt, when the rider Holley ran out to grasp his bridle. Buckles was snorting and his ears were laid back. He pounded the ground and scattered the pebbles.

"No use, Lucy," said Bostil. "You can't beat the King at your own game, even with a runnin' start."

Lucy Bostil's eyes were blue, as keen as her father's, and now they flashed like his. She had a hand twisted in the horse's long mane, and as, lithe and supple, she slipped a knee across his broad back she shook a little gantleted fist at Bostil's gray racer.

"Sage King, I hate you!" she called, as if the horse were human. "And I'll beat you some day!"

Bostil swore by the gods his Sage King was the swiftest horse in all that wild upland country of wonderful horses. He swore the great gray could look back over his shoulder and run away from any broken horse known to the riders.

Bostil himself was half horse, and the half of him that was human he divided between love of his fleet racers and his daughter Lucy. He had seen years of hard riding on that wild Utah border where, in those days, a horse meant all the world to a man. A lucky strike of grassy upland and good water south of the Rio Colorado made him rich in all that he cared to own. The Indians, yet unspoiled by white men, were friendly. Bostil built a boat at the Indian crossing of the Colorado and the place became known as Bostil's Ford. From time to time his personality and his reputation and his need brought horse-hunters, riders, sheep-herders, and men of pioneer spirit, as well as wandering desert travelers, to the Ford, and the lonely, isolated hamlet slowly grew. North of the river it was more than two hundred miles to the nearest little settlement, with only a few lonely ranches on the road; to the west were several villages, equally distant, but cut off for two months at a time by the raging Colorado, flooded by melting snow up in the mountains. Eastward from the Ford stretched a ghastly, broken, unknown desert of canyons. Southward rolled the beautiful uplands, with valleys of sage and grass, and plateaus of pine and cedar, until this rich rolling gray and green range broke sharply on a purple

horizon line of upflung rocky ramparts and walls and monuments, wild, dim, and mysterious.

Bostil's cattle and horses were numberless, and many as were his riders, he always could use more. But most riders did not abide long with Bostil, first because some of them were of a wandering breed, wild-horse hunters themselves; and secondly, Bostil had two great faults: he seldom paid a rider in money, and he never permitted one to own a fleet horse. He wanted to own all the fast horses himself. And in those days every rider, especially a wild-horse hunter, loved his steed as part of himself. If there was a difference between Bostil and any rider of the sage, it was that, as he had more horses, so he had more love.

Whenever Bostil could not get possession of a horse he coveted, either by purchase or trade, he invariably acquired a grievance toward the owner. This happened often, for riders were loath to part with their favorites. And he had made more than one enemy by his persistent nagging. It could not be said, however, that he sought to drive hard bargains. Bostil would pay any price asked for a horse.

Across the Colorado, in a high, red-walled canyon opening upon the river, lived a poor sheep-herder and horse-trader named Creech. This man owned a number of thoroughbreds, two of which he would not part with for all the gold in the uplands. These racers, Blue Roan and Peg, had been captured wild on the ranges by Ute Indians and broken to racing. They were still young and getting faster every year. Bostil wanted them because he coveted them and because he feared them. It would have been a terrible blow to him if any horse ever beat the gray. But Creech laughed at all offers and taunted Bostil with a boast that in another summer he would see a horse out in front of the King.

To complicate matters and lead rivalry into hatred young Joel Creech, a great horseman, but worthless in the eyes of all save his father, had been heard to say that some day he

would force a race between the King and Blue Roan. And that threat had been taken in various ways. It alienated Bostil beyond all hope of reconciliation. It made Lucy Bostil laugh and look sweetly mysterious. She had no enemies and she liked everybody. It was even gossiped by the women of Bostil's Ford that she had more than liking for the idle Joel. But the husbands of these gossips said Lucy was only tender-hearted. Among the riders, when they sat around their lonely camp-fires, or lounged at the corrals of the Ford, there was speculation in regard to this race hinted by Joel Creech. There never had been a race between the King and Blue Roan, and there never would be, unless Joel were to ride off with Lucy. In that case there would be the grandest race ever run on the uplands, with the odds against Blue Roan only if he carried double. If Joel put Lucy up on the Roan and he rode Peg there would be another story. Lucy Bostil was a slip of a girl, born on a horse, as strong and supple as an Indian, and she could ride like a burr sticking in a horse's mane. With Blue Roan carrying her light weight she might run away from any one up on the King—which for Bostil would be a double tragedy, equally in the loss of his daughter and the beating of his best-beloved racer. But with Joel on Peg, such a race would end in heartbreak for all concerned, for the King would outrun Peg, and that would bring riders within gunshot.

It had always been a fascinating subject, this long-looked-for race. It grew more so when Joel's infatuation for Lucy became known. There were fewer riders who believed Lucy might elope with Joel than there were who believed Joel might steal his father's horses. But all the riders who loved horses and all the women who loved gossip were united in at least one thing, and that was that something like a race or a romance would soon disrupt the peaceful, sleepy tenor of Bostil's Ford.

In addition to Bostil's growing hatred for the Creeches, he had a great fear of Cordts, the horse-thief. A fear ever

restless, ever watchful. Cordts hid back in the untrodden ways. He had secret friends among the riders of the ranges, faithful followers back in the canyon camps, gold for the digging, cattle by the thousand, and fast horses. He had always gotten what he wanted—except one thing. That was a certain horse. And the horse was Sage King.

Cordts was a bad man, a product of the early gold-fields of California and Idaho, an outcast from that evil wave of wanderers retreating back over the trails so madly traveled westward. He became 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. Cordts rode into this wild free-range country, where he had been heard to say that a horse-thief was meaner than a poisoned coyote. Nevertheless, he became a horse-thief. The passion he had conceived for the Sage King was the passion of a man for an unattainable woman. Cordts swore that he would never rest, that he would not die, till he owned the King. So there was reason for Bostil's great fear.

CHAPTER II

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Bostil went toward the house with his daughter, turning at the door to call a last word to his riders about the care of his horses.

The house was a low, flat, wide structure, with a corridor running through the middle, from which doors led into the adobe-walled rooms. The windows were small openings high up, evidently intended for defense as well as light, and they had rude wooden shutters. The floor was clay, covered everywhere by Indian blankets. A pioneer's home it was, simple and crude, yet comfortable, and having the rare quality peculiar to desert homes it was cool in summer and warm in winter.

As Bostil entered with his arm round Lucy a big hound rose from the hearth. This room was immense, running the length of the house, and it contained a huge stone fireplace, where a kettle smoked fragrantly, and rude home-made chairs with blanket coverings, and tables to match, and walls covered with bridles, guns, pistols, Indian weapons and ornaments, and trophies of the chase. In a far corner stood a work-bench, with tools upon it and horse trappings under it. In the opposite corner a door led into the kitchen. This room was Bostil's famous living-room, in which many things had happened, some of which had helped make desert history and were never mentioned by Bostil.

Bostil's sister came in from the kitchen. She was a huge person with a severe yet motherly face. She had her hands on her hips, and she cast a rather disapproving glance at father and daughter.

"So you're back again?" she queried, severely.

"Sure, Auntie," replied the girl, complacently.

"You ran off to get out of seeing Wetherby, didn't you?"

Lucy stared sweetly at her aunt.

"He was waiting for hours," went on the worthy woman. "I never saw a man in such a stew.... No wonder, playing fast and loose with him the way you do."

"I told him No!" flashed Lucy.

"But Wetherby's not the kind to take no. And I'm not satisfied to let you mean it. Lucy Bostil, you don't know your mind an hour straight running. You've fooled enough with these riders of your Dad's. If you're not careful you'll marry one of them.... One of these wild riders! As bad as a Ute Indian! ... Wetherby is young and he idolizes you. In all common sense why don't you take him?"

"I don't care for him," replied Lucy.

"You like him as well as anybody.... John Bostil, what do you say? You approved of Wetherby. I heard you tell him Lucy was like an unbroken colt and that you'd—"

"Sure, I like Jim," interrupted Bostil; and he avoided Lucy's swift look.

"Well?" demanded his sister.

Evidently Bostil found himself in a corner between two fires. He looked sheepish, then disgusted.

"Dad!" exclaimed Lucy, reproachfully.

"See here, Jane," said Bostil, with an air of finality, "the girl is of age to-day—an' she can do what she damn pleases!"

"That's a fine thing for you to say," retorted Aunt Jane. "Like as not she'll be fetching that hang-dog Joel Creech up here for you to support."

"Auntie!" cried Lucy, her eyes blazing.

"Oh, child, you torment me—worry me so," said the disappointed woman. "It's all for your sake.... Look at you, Lucy Bostil! A girl of eighteen who comes of a family! And you riding around and going around as you are now—in a man's clothes!"

"But, you dear old goose, I can't ride in a woman's skirt," expostulated Lucy. "Mind you, Auntie, I can RIDE!"

"Lucy, if I live here forever I'd never get reconciled to a Bostil woman in leather pants. We Bostils were somebody once, back in Missouri."

Bostil laughed. "Yes, an' if I hadn't hit the trail west we'd be starvin' yet. Jane, you're a sentimental old fool. Let the girl alone an' reconcile yourself to this wilderness."

Aunt Jane's eyes were wet with tears. Lucy, seeing them, ran to her and hugged and kissed her.

"Auntie, I will promise—from to-day—to have some dignity. I've been free as a boy in these rider clothes. As I am now the men never seem to regard me as a girl. Somehow that's better. I can't explain, but I like it. My dresses are what have caused all the trouble. I know that. But if I'm grown up—if it's so tremendous—then I'll wear a dress all the time, except just WHEN I ride. Will that do, Auntie?"

"Maybe you will grow up, after all," replied Aunt Jane, evidently surprised and pleased.

Then Lucy with clinking spurs ran away to her room.

"Jane, what's this nonsense about young Joel Creech?" asked Bostil, gruffly.

"I don't know any more than is gossiped. That I told you. Have you ever asked Lucy about him?"

"I sure haven't," said Bostil, bluntly.

"Well, ask her. If she tells you at all she'll tell the truth. Lucy'd never sleep at night if she lied."

Aunt Jane returned to her housewifely tasks, leaving Bostil thoughtfully stroking the hound and watching the fire. Presently Lucy returned—a different Lucy—one that did not rouse his rider's pride, but thrilled his father's heart. She had been a slim, lithe, supple, disheveled boy, breathing the wild spirit of the open and the horse she rode. She was now a girl in the graceful roundness of her slender form, with hair the gold of the sage at sunset, and eyes the blue of the

deep haze of distance, and lips the sweet red of the upland rose. And all about her seemed different.

"Lucy—you look—like—like she used to be," said Bostil, unsteadily.

"My mother!" murmured Lucy.

But these two, so keen, so strong, so alive, did not abide long with sad memories.

"Lucy, I want to ask you somethin'," said Bostil, presently. "What about this young Joel Creech?"

Lucy started as if suddenly recalled, then she laughed merrily. "Dad, you old fox, did you see him ride out after me?"

"No. I was just askin' on—on general principles."

"What do you mean?"

"Lucy, is there anythin' between you an' Joel?" he asked, gravely.

"No," she replied, with her clear eyes up to his.

Bostil thought of a bluebell. "I'm beggin' your pardon," he said, hastily.

"Dad, you know how Joel runs after me. I've told you. I let him till lately. I liked him. But that wasn't why. I felt sorry for him—pitied him."

"You did? Seems an awful waste," replied Bostil.

"Dad, I don't believe Joel is—perfectly right in his mind," Lucy said, solemnly.

"Haw! haw! Fine compliments you're payin' yourself."

"Listen. I'm serious. I mean I've grown to see—looking back—that a slow, gradual change has come over Joel since he was kicked in the head by a mustang. I'm sure no one else has noticed it."

"Goin' batty over you. That's no unusual sign round this here camp. Look at—"

"We're talking about Joel Creech. Lately he has done some queer things. To-day, for instance. I thought I gave him the slip. But he must have been watching. Anyway, to my surprise he showed up on Peg. He doesn't often get Peg

across the river. He said the feed was getting scarce over there. I was dying to race Buckles against Peg, but I remembered you wouldn't like that."

"I should say not," said Bostil, darkly.

"Well, Joel caught up to me—and he wasn't nice at all. He was worse to-day. We quarreled. I said I'd bet he'd never follow me again and he said he'd bet he would. Then he got sulky and hung back. I rode away, glad to be rid of him, and I climbed to a favorite place of mine. On my way home I saw Peg grazing on the rim of the creek, near that big spring-hole where the water's so deep and clear. And what do you think? There was Joel's head above the water. I remembered in our quarrel I had told him to go wash his dirty face. He was doing it. I had to laugh. When he saw me—he—then—then he—" Lucy faltered, blushing with anger and shame.

"Well, what then?" demanded Bostil, quietly.

"He called, 'Hey, Luce—take off your clothes and come in for a swim!'"

Bostil swore.

"I tell you I was mad," continued Lucy, "and just as surprised. That was one of the queer things. But never before had he dared to—to—"

"Insult you. Then what 'd you do?" interrupted Bostil, curiously.

"I yelled, 'I'll fix you, Joel Creech!'... His clothes were in a pile on the bank. At first I thought I'd throw them in the water, but when I got to them I thought of something better. I took up all but his shoes, for I remembered the ten miles of rock and cactus between him and home, and I climbed up on Buckles. Joel screamed and swore something fearful. But I didn't look back. And Peg, you know—maybe you don't know—but Peg is fond of me, and he followed me, straddling his bridle all the way in. I dropped Joel's clothes down the ridge a ways, right in the trail, so he can't miss them. And that's all.... Dad, was it—was it very bad?"

"Bad! Why, you ought to have thrown your gun on him. At least bounced a rock off his head! But say, Lucy, after all, maybe you've done enough. I guess you never thought of it."

"What?"

"The sun is hot to-day. Hot! An' if Joel's as crazy an' mad as you say he'll not have sense enough to stay in the water or shade till the sun's gone down. An' if he tackles that ten miles before he'll sunburn himself within an inch of his life."

"Sunburn? Oh, Dad! I'm sorry," burst out Lucy, contritely. "I never thought of that. I'll ride back with his clothes."

"You will not," said Bostil.

"Let me send some one, then," she entreated.

"Girl, haven't you the nerve to play your own game? Let Creech get his lesson. He deserves it.... An' now, Lucy, I've two more questions to ask."

"Only two?" she queried, archly. "Dad, don't scold me with questions."

"What shall I say to Wetherby for good an' all?"

Lucy's eyes shaded dreamily, and she seemed to look beyond the room, out over the ranges.

"Tell him to go back to Durango and forget the foolish girl who can care only for the desert and a horse."

"All right. That is straight talk, like an Indian's. An' now the last question—what do you want for a birthday present?"

"Oh, of course," she cried, gleefully clapping her hands. "I'd forgotten that. I'm eighteen!"

"You get that old chest of your mother's. But what from me?"

"Dad, will you give me anything I ask for?"

"Yes, my girl."

"Anything—any HORSE?"

Lucy knew his weakness, for she had inherited it.

"Sure; any horse but the King."

"How about Sarchedon?"

"Why, Lucy, what'd you do with that big black devil? He's too high. Seventeen hands high! You couldn't mount him."

"Pooh! Sarch KNEELS for me."

"Child, listen to reason. Sarch would pull your arms out of their sockets."

"He has got an iron jaw," agreed Lucy. "Well, then—how about Dusty Ben?" She was tormenting her father and she did it with glee.

"No—not Ben. He's the faithfulest hoss I ever owned. It wouldn't be fair to part with him, even to you. Old associations ... a rider's loyalty ... now, Lucy, you know—"

"Dad, you're afraid I'd train and love Ben into beating the King. Some day I'll ride some horse out in front of the gray. Remember, Dad! ... Then give me Two Face."

"Sure not her, Lucy. That mare can't be trusted. Look why we named her Two Face."

"Buckles, then, dear generous Daddy who longs to give his grown-up girl ANYTHING!"

"Lucy, can't you be satisfied an' happy with your mustangs? You've got a dozen. You can have any others on the range. Buckles ain't safe for you to ride."

Bostil was notably the most generous of men, the kindest of fathers. It was an indication of his strange obsession, in regard to horses, that he never would see that Lucy was teasing him. As far as horses were concerned he lacked a sense of humor. Anything connected with his horses was of intense interest.

"I'd dearly love to own Plume," said Lucy, demurely.

Bostil had grown red in the face and now he was on the rack. The monstrous selfishness of a rider who had been supreme in his day could not be changed.

"Girl, I—I thought you hadn't no use for Plume," he stammered.

"I haven't—the jade! She threw me once. I've never forgiven her Dad, I'm only teasing you. Don't I know you couldn't give one of those racers away? You couldn't!"

"Lucy, I reckon you're right," Bostil burst out in immense relief.

"Dad, I'll bet if Cordts gets me and holds me as ransom for the King—as he's threatened—you'll let him have me!"

"Lucy, now that ain't funny!" complained the father.

"Dear Dad, keep your old racers! But, remember, I'm my father's daughter. I can love a horse, too. Oh, if I ever get the one I want to love! A wild horse—a desert stallion—pure Arabian—broken right by an Indian! If I ever get him, Dad, you look out! For I'll run away from Sarch and Ben—and I'll beat the King!"

The hamlet of Bostil's Ford had a singular situation, though, considering the wonderful nature of that desert country, it was not exceptional. It lay under the protecting red bluff that only Lucy Bostil cared to climb. A hard-trodden road wound down through rough breaks in the canyon wall to the river. Bostil's house, at the head of the village, looked in the opposite direction, down the sage slope that widened like a colossal fan. There was one wide street bordered by cottonwoods and cabins, and a number of gardens and orchards, beginning to burst into green and pink and white. A brook ran out of a ravine in the huge bluff, and from this led irrigation ditches. The red earth seemed to blossom at the touch of water.

The place resembled an Indian encampment—quiet, sleepy, colorful, with the tiny-streams of water running everywhere, and lazy columns of blue wood-smoke rising. Bostil's Ford was the opposite of a busy village, yet its few inhabitants, as a whole, were prosperous. The wants of pioneers were few. Perhaps once a month the big, clumsy flatboat was rowed across the river with horses or cattle or sheep. And the season was now close at hand when for weeks, sometimes months, the river was unfordable. There were a score of permanent families, a host of merry, sturdy children, a number of idle young men, and only one girl—Lucy Bostil. But the village always had transient inhabitants

—friendly Utes and Navajos in to trade, and sheep-herders with a scraggy, woolly flock, and travelers of the strange religious sect identified with Utah going on into the wilderness. Then there were always riders passing to and fro, and sometimes unknown ones regarded with caution. Horse-thieves sometimes boldly rode in, and sometimes were able to sell or trade. In the matter of horse-dealing Bostil's Ford was as bold as the thieves.

Old Brackton, a man of varied Western experience, kept the one store, which was tavern, trading-post, freighter's headquarters, blacksmith's shop, and any thing else needful. Brackton employed riders, teamsters, sometimes Indians, to freight supplies in once a month from Durango. And that was over two hundred miles away. Sometimes the supplies did not arrive on time—occasionally not at all. News from the outside world, except that elicited from the taciturn travelers marching into Utah, drifted in at intervals. But it was not missed. These wilderness spirits were the forerunners of a great movement, and as such were big, strong, stern, sufficient unto themselves. Life there was made possible by horses. The distant future, that looked bright to far-seeing men, must be and could only be fulfilled through the endurance and faithfulness of horses. And then, from these men, horses received the meed due them, and the love they were truly worth. The Navajo was a nomad horseman, an Arab of the Painted Desert, and the Ute Indian was close to him. It was they who developed the white riders of the uplands as well as the wild-horse wrangler or hunter.

Brackton's ramshackle establishment stood down at the end of the village street. There was not a sawed board in all that structure, and some of the pine logs showed how they had been dropped from the bluff. Brackton, a little old gray man, with scant beard, and eyes like those of a bird, came briskly out to meet an incoming freighter. The wagon was minus a hind wheel, but the teamster had come in on three

wheels and a pole. The sweaty, dust-caked, weary, thin-ribbed mustangs, and the gray-and-red-stained wagon, and the huge jumble of dusty packs, showed something of what the journey had been.

"Hi thar, Red Wilson, you air some late gettin' in," greeted old Brackton.

Red Wilson had red eyes from fighting the flying sand, and red dust pasted in his scraggy beard, and as he gave his belt an upward hitch little red clouds flew from his gun-sheath.

"Yep. An' I left a wheel an' part of the load on the trail," he said.

With him were Indians who began to unhitch the teams. Riders lounging in the shade greeted Wilson and inquired for news. The teamster replied that travel was dry, the water-holes were dry, and he was dry. And his reply gave both concern and amusement.

"One more trip out an' back—thet's all, till it rains," concluded Wilson.

Brackton led him inside, evidently to alleviate part of that dryness.

Water and grass, next to horses, were the stock subject of all riders.

"It's got oncommon hot early," said one.

"Yes, an' them northeast winds—hard this spring," said another.

"No snow on the uplands."

"Holley seen a dry spell comin'. Wal, we can drift along without freighters. There's grass an' water enough here, even if it doesn't rain."

"Sure, but there ain't none across the river."

"Never was, in early season. An' if there was it'd be sheeped off."

"Creech'll be fetchin' his hosses across soon, I reckon."

"You bet he will. He's trainin' for the races next month."

"An' when air they comin' off?"

"You got me. Mebbe Van knows."

Some one prodded a sleepy rider who lay all his splendid lithe length, hat over his eyes. Then he sat up and blinked, a lean-faced, gray-eyed fellow, half good-natured and half resentful.

"Did somebody punch me?"

"Naw, you got nightmare! Say, Van, when will the races come off?"

"Huh! An' you woke me for thet? ... Bostil says in a few weeks, soon as he hears from the Indians. Plans to have eight hundred Indians here, an' the biggest purses an' best races ever had at the Ford."

"You'll ride the King again?"

"Reckon so. But Bostil is kickin' because I'm heavier than I was," replied the rider.

"You're skin an' bones at thet."

"Mebbe you'll need to work a little off, Van. Some one said Creech's Blue Roan was comin' fast this year."

"Bill, your mind ain't operatin'," replied Van, scornfully. "Didn't I beat Creech's hosses last year without the King turnin' a hair?"

"Not if I recollect, you didn't. The Blue Roan wasn't runnin'."

Then they argued, after the manner of friendly riders, but all earnest, an eloquent in their convictions. The prevailing opinion was that Creech's horse had a chance, depending upon condition and luck.

The argument shifted upon the arrival of two newcomers, leading mustangs and apparently talking trade. It was manifest that these arrivals were not loath to get the opinions of others.

"Van, there's a hoss!" exclaimed one.

"No, he ain't," replied Van.

And that diverse judgment appeared to be characteristic throughout. The strange thing was that Macomber, the rancher, had already traded his mustang and money to boot

for the sorrel. The deal, whether wise or not, had been consummated. Brackton came out with Red Wilson, and they had to have their say.

"Wal, durned if some of you fellers ain't kind an' complimentary," remarked Macomber, scratching his head. "But then every feller can't have hoss sense." Then, looking up to see Lucy Bostil coming along the road, he brightened as if with inspiration.

Lucy was at home among them, and the shy eyes of the younger riders, especially Van, were nothing if not revealing. She greeted them with a bright smile, and when she saw Brackton she burst out:

"Oh, Mr. Brackton, the wagon's in, and did my box come? ... To-day's my birthday."

"'Deed it did, Lucy; an' many more happy ones to you!" he replied, delighted in her delight. "But it's too heavy for you. I'll send it up—or mebbe one of the boys—"

Five riders in unison eagerly offered their services and looked as if each had spoken first. Then Macomber addressed her:

"Miss Lucy, you see this here sorrel?"

"Ah! the same lazy crowd and the same old story—a horse trade!" laughed Lucy.

"There's a little difference of opinion," said Macomber, politely indicating the riders. "Now, Miss Lucy, we-all know you're a judge of a hoss. And as good as thet you tell the truth. Thet ain't in some hoss-traders I know.... What do you think of this mustang?"

Macomber had eyes of enthusiasm for his latest acquisition, but some of the cock-sureness had been knocked out of him by the blunt riders.

"Macomber, aren't you a great one to talk?" queried Lucy, severely. "Didn't you get around Dad and trade him an old, blind, knock-kneed bag of bones for a perfectly good pony—one I liked to ride?"

The riders shouted with laughter while the rancher struggled with confusion.

"'Pon my word, Miss Lucy, I'm surprised you could think thet of such an old friend of yours—an' your Dad's, too. I'm hopin' he doesn't side altogether with you."

"Dad and I never agree about a horse. He thinks he got the best of you. But you know, Macomber, what a horse-thief you are. Worse than Cordts!"

"Wal, if I got the best of Bostil I'm willin' to be thought bad. I'm the first feller to take him in.... An' now, Miss Lucy, look over my sorrel."

Lucy Bostil did indeed have an eye for a horse. She walked straight up to the wild, shaggy mustang with a confidence born of intuition and experience, and reached a hand for his head, not slowly, nor yet swiftly. The mustang looked as if he was about to jump, but he did not. His eyes showed that he was not used to women.

"He's not well broken," said Lucy. "Some Navajo has beaten his head in breaking him."

Then she carefully studied the mustang point by point.

"He's deceiving at first because he's good to look at," said Lucy. "But I wouldn't own him. A saddle will turn on him. He's not vicious, but he'll never get over his scare. He's narrow between the eyes—a bad sign. His ears are stiff—and too close. I don't see anything more wrong with him."

"You seen enough," declared Macomber. "An' so you wouldn't own him?"

"You couldn't make me a present of him—even on my birthday."

"Wal, now I'm sorry, for I was thinkin' of thet," replied Macomber, ruefully. It was plain that the sorrel had fallen irremediably in his estimation.

"Macomber, I often tell Dad all you horse-traders get your deserts now and then. It's vanity and desire to beat the other man that's your downfall."

Lucy went away, with Van shouldering her box, leaving Macomber trying to return the banter of the riders. The good-natured raillery was interrupted by a sharp word from one of them.

"Look! Darn me if thet ain't a naked Indian comin'!"

The riders whirled to see an apparently nude savage approaching, almost on a run.

"Take a shot at thet, Bill," said another rider. "Miss Lucy might see—No, she's out of sight. But, mebbe some other woman is around."

"Hold on, Bill," called Macomber. "You never saw an Indian run like thet."

Some of the riders swore, others laughed, and all suddenly became keen with interest.

"Sure his face is white, if his body's red!"

The strange figure neared them. It was indeed red up to the face, which seemed white in contrast. Yet only in general shape and action did it resemble a man.

"Damned if it ain't Joel Creech!" sang out Bill Stark.

The other riders accorded their wondering assent.

"Gone crazy, sure!"

"I always seen it comin'."

"Say, but ain't he wild? Foamin' at the mouth like a winded hoss!"

Young Creech was headed down the road toward the ford across which he had to go to reach home. He saw the curious group, slowed his pace, and halted. His face seemed convulsed with rage and pain and fatigue. His body, even to his hands, was incased in a thick, heavy coating of red adobe that had caked hard.

"God's sake—fellers—" he panted, with eyes rolling, "take this—'dobe mud off me! ... I'm dyin'!"

Then he staggered into Brackton's place. A howl went up from the riders and they surged after him.

That evening after supper Bostil stamped in the big room, roaring with laughter, red in the face; and he

astonished Lucy and her aunt to the point of consternation.

"Now—you've—done—it—Lucy Bostil!" he roared.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" exclaimed Aunt Jane.

"Done what?" asked Lucy, blankly.

Bostil conquered his paroxysm, and, wiping his moist red face, he eyed Lucy in mock solemnity.

"Joel!" whispered Lucy, who had a guilty conscience.

"Lucy, I never heard the beat of it.... Joel's smarter in some ways than we thought, an' crazier in others. He had the sun figgered, but what'd he want to run through town for? Why, never in my life have I seen such tickled riders."

"Dad!" almost screamed Lucy. "What did Joel do?"

"Wal, I see it this way. He couldn't or wouldn't wait for sundown. An' he wasn't hankerin' to be burned. So he wallows in a 'dobe mud-hole an' covers himself thick with mud. You know that 'dobe mud! Then he starts home. But he hadn't figgered on the 'dobe gettin' hard, which it did—harder 'n rock. An' that must have hurt more 'n sunburn. Late this afternoon he came runnin' down the road, yellin' that he was dyin'. The boys had conniption fits. Joel ain't over-liked, you know, an' here they had one on him. Mebbe they didn't try hard to clean him off. But the fact is not for hours did they get that 'dobe off him. They washed an' scrubbed an' curried him, while he yelled an' cussed. Finally they peeled it off, with his skin I guess. He was raw, an' they say, the maddest feller ever seen in Bostil's Ford!"

Lucy was struggling between fear and mirth. She did not look sorry. "Oh! Oh! Oh, Dad!"

"Wasn't it great, Lucy?"

"But what—will he—do?" choked Lucy.

"Lord only knows. That worries me some. Because he never said a word about how he come to lose his clothes or why he had the 'dobe on him. An' sure I never told. Nobody knows but us."

"Dad, he'll do something terrible to me!" cried Lucy, aghast at her premonition.

CHAPTER III

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The days did not pass swiftly at Bostil's Ford. And except in winter, and during the spring sand-storms, the lagging time passed pleasantly. Lucy rode every day, sometimes with Van, and sometimes alone. She was not over-keen about riding with Van—first, because he was in love with her; and secondly, in spite of that, she could not beat him when he rode the King. They were training Bostil's horses for the much-anticipated races.

At last word arrived from the Utes and Navajos that they accepted Bostil's invitation and would come in force, which meant, according to Holley and other old riders, that the Indians would attend about eight hundred strong.

"Thet old chief, Hawk, is comin'," Holley informed Bostil. "He hasn't been here fer several years. Recollect thet bunch of colts he had? They're bosses, not mustangs.... So you look out, Bostil!"

No rider or rancher or sheepman, in fact, no one, ever lost a chance to warn Bostil. Some of it was in fun, but most of it was earnest. The nature of events was that sooner or later a horse would beat the King. Bostil knew that as well as anybody, though he would not admit it. Holley's hint made Bostil look worried. Most of Bostil's gray hairs might have been traced to his years of worry about horses.

The day he received word from the Indians he sent for Brackton, Williams, Muncie, and Creech to come to his house that night. These men, with Bostil, had for years formed in a way a club, which gave the Ford distinction. Creech was no longer a friend of Bostil's, but Bostil had always been fair-minded, and now he did not allow his

animosities to influence him. Holley, the veteran rider, made the sixth member of the club.

Bostil had a cedar log blazing cheerily in the wide fireplace, for these early spring nights in the desert were cold.

Brackton was the last guest to arrive. He shuffled in without answering the laconic greetings accorded him, and his usually mild eyes seemed keen and hard.

"John, I reckon you won't love me fer this here I've got to tell you, to-night specially," he said, seriously.

"You old robber, I couldn't love you anyhow," retorted Bostil. But his humor did not harmonize with the sudden gravity of his look. "What's up?"

"Who do you suppose I jest sold whisky to?"

"I've no idea," replied Bostil. Yet he looked as if he was perfectly sure.

"Cordts! ... Cordts, an' four of his outfit. Two of them I didn't know. Bad men, judgin' from appearances, let alone company. The others was Hutchinson an'—Dick Sears."

"DICK SEARS!" exclaimed Bostil.

Muncie and Williams echoed Bostil. Holley appeared suddenly interested. Creech alone showed no surprise.

"But Sears is dead," added Bostil.

"He was dead—we thought," replied Brackton, with a grim laugh. "But he's alive again. He told me he'd been in Idaho fer two years, in the gold-fields. Said the work was too hard, so he'd come back here. Laughed when he said it, the little devil! I'll bet he was thinkin' of thet wagon-train of mine he stole."

Bostil gazed at his chief rider.

"Wal, I reckon we didn't kill Sears, after all," replied Holley. "I wasn't never sure."

"Lord! Cordts an' Sears in camp," ejaculated Bostil, and he began to pace the room.

"No, they're gone now," said Brackton.