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***DARK HORSE -  
A STORY  
OF THE FLYING U***

**Bertha Muzzy Sinclair**

# **Dark Horse - A Story of the Flying U**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE LIGHTNING STRIKES

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Loping along the trail that scalloped over foothill ridges between Meeker's ranch and the Flying U, Big Medicine sweated and cursed the month of April for arrogating to itself the sultry heat of July. The cigarette he had rolled and lighted before mounting for the homeward ride was smoked to its stub. It did not seem worth while to light another. What Big Medicine craved most was a quart bottle of cold beer. Failing that, his thoughts kept recurring to the trickle of cold spring water down his gullet. Following that thought his head swung involuntarily to the left, where a faint stock trail angled down a barren ridge into One Man Coulee. And without any command to do so, his sorrel horse, Cheater, turned in response to the glance and began picking his way through rock rubble on that trail. A trivial incident on an unimportant ride; yet such are the inscrutable ways of destiny that the turning aside to drink from a certain spring he knew was not the small matter it seemed to Big Medicine. He was not the man to shy from anything in the trail he chose to ride; one glimpse into the future, and even the blatant courage of Big Medicine must certainly have fled the thing before him.

That glimpse was not offered. So Big Medicine and his sorrel horse, Cheater, went down into One Man Coulee and drank with an audible gusto from the spring seeping out

beneath a bulging, moss-covered ledge: Big Medicine lying flat on his belly, mouth and sun-burned nose submerged in the clear pool, Cheater, fetlock deep in the ooze, knees bent while he sucked the cold water avidly through flaccid lips and big yellow teeth. Big Medicine lifted his face to the blasting sun, stared at the heat waves radiating from the rock walls near by, and drank again. Then he pulled off his big Stetson and soused his bullet head three times to his collar. He got up gasping and blowing luxuriously, dragged Cheater back out of the mud where yellow jackets were crawling, made himself a cigarette and heaved himself reluctantly to the saddle.

From the spring his best trail lay down the coulee, following the narrow, brushy water-course to the gravelly road that cut across the coulee's mouth on its way to certain remote ranches and that forbidding wilderness known as the Badlands. Refreshed, the sorrel loped steadily down the grassy trail, rutted here and there with the passing of infrequent wagon wheels—but he could not lope fast enough to escape the thing into which Big Medicine's thirst had betrayed him, for when Destiny chooses to make use of a man, his least act will lead to the task appointed.

As he topped the hill leading out of the coulee, Big Medicine's pale, round eyes sent a startled glance toward the west. In the little while he had been hidden within the high walls of One Man Coulee a storm had rolled up from the sky line over toward Lonesome Prairie. Already a greenish gloom lay upon the land to the westward, and the hot breeze had died into a sinister silence so great that the

cheep of a bird in a bush sent Cheater shying skittishly out of the road.

When Big Medicine's hand dropped to his horse's neck the hair crackled as in winter. His own skin prickled. The air seemed soaked with electricity. He sent an uneasy look around him and his mouth pulled down at the corners. He did not like the sullen way the lightning was lifting and parting the sluggish roll of clouds up there. Deep, that storm was; deep and ugly, full of water. Full of wind too, and thunder and lightning. A ripsnorter, like you'd have a right to expect in July or August.

Big Medicine stopped Cheater, got off and untied his yellow slicker from behind the saddle. Smelled fishy, in all this heat, but he flapped himself into it, buttoned it to his chin, and remounted, pulling the peaked slicker tail well down over the cantle of his saddle and tucking the edges neatly under his legs. Never saw a meaner storm, not even in the Pecos country where cyclones would come and tear the grass right up by the roots. He yanked his big hat down tighter over his pale eyebrows, tilted his spurs to graze Cheater's sweaty flanks and rode grimly forward. No shelter close enough to do any good; he'd have to ride and let 'er rip.

He was a little dubious about Dry Gulch, which lay just ahead. Might come a cloudburst before he got through, and the banks were too shaley and steep to climb. Big Medicine had been caught in a cloudburst once, and the experience had left him leery of low ground in a storm. He'd have to chance it, though; which he did at a swift gallop, watching the approach of the storm he was riding to meet. And for

the first time he wished he had not ridden down into One Man Coulee to that spring. Only for that he'd have this stretch of trail safely behind him, with high level prairie to travel.

Into the smothered stillness of Dry Gulch there came the faint drumming of strange hoofbeats ahead of him on the trail. Coming his way, the fellow was. Between the muttering of thunder he could hear his steady approach, and in another minute a lathery black horse galloped into sight around a bend, his rider jouncing in the saddle, one hand gripping the horn.

Big Medicine snorted his disdain of all pilgrims when there came an ear-splitting crash and a blinding glare. The wide grin wiped itself off his mouth. The black horse fell as if a giant hand had slapped him down. One glimpse he had of the rider pitching headfirst into a clump of weeds, as Cheater squatted and whirled back up the gulch. With an iron hand he fought the sorrel's stark terror, spurring him back to the spot. The stench of brimstone was in his nostrils. Frozen mice were dancing under his hat. His knees buckled under him when he dismounted, but the stern stuff of the Good Samaritan was woven into the fiber of Big Medicine's soul and he went forward, dragging Cheater stiff-legged at the end of the bridle reins.

Shore was funny, the way lightning acted. That one bolt shooting straight down, and the rest playing crack-the-whip up in the clouds till you couldn't hear yourself think. The black horse lay flat and shapeless, every bone in his body crunched, by the look of him. The pilgrim wasn't dead, though. Black as a nigger, except for his light hair, but there

were no marks on him so far as Big Medicine could see, when he bent over the clawing figure in the weeds.

Big Medicine spoke to him, but the man went limp and still, lying on his face. He yelled another question, then stooped and lifted the fellow in his arms and staggered over to where Cheater stood rolling his eyes until the white showed all around.

“Don’t yuh wall yer eyes at me,” Big Medicine bellowed peremptorily. “You gotta pack double, from here to the ranch. Make up yer mind to it right now, by cripes!”

He reached for the dragging reins, caught the inert figure firmly under the arms, and heaved him up to the saddle. At that instant the lightning ripped a blinding rent in the gloom, there came on the heels of it another deafening report, and the big sorrel ducked and was gone, legging it for home with his head held sidewise, so that he would not trip on the reins. Clods of sandy soil hurtled backward from his pounding hoofs.

In the crackle and roar of the storm Big Medicine stood and damned the horse as long as he was in sight. Then, because the stranger was still breathing and no man with a heart would leave him there to die, Big Medicine heaved and grunted and swore until the flaccid body was balanced across his shoulders like a fresh-killed buck. A fool’s job, most likely. The fellow would probably die on the road, but Big Medicine could not help that. Since it was his damnable luck to ride along there and see the lightning strike, he’d have to do what he could to save the man’s life. So he hitched his burden to a more perfect balance and started for home, walking bow-legged under the load and searching his



memory for new and more blasting epithets which he applied to Cheater.

A gust of wind stopped him in the trail until its first fury was spent. Blinding thrusts of swordlike lightning lifted the hair on his bullet head. Thunder crashed above him and rolled sullenly away to give place to the next ear-splitting explosion. Before he had gone ten rods the rain came in a sudden deluge: gray slanting curtains of water blown stiffly against him, blotting out the yellow banks on either side. He, who had so lately craved cold water, walked through rain so dense he felt like a diver ploughing along at the bottom of the sea.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HERO FOR A NIGHT

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Thinking uneasily of cloudbursts, Big Medicine almost trotted the two-mile stretch to the hill that spelled safety. Up the soapy incline he toiled, slipping and sweating and swearing but somehow never falling or stopping until he reached the top. He wished he had thought to take off his spurs before he started—but hell, a feller can't think of everything at once. He wished he had worn his old boots; these new ones made of his heels a flaming agony. But there was a new schoolma'am boarding at Meeker's, and a feller hated to ride in run-over boots.

While he trudged those weary miles, he sent furtive glances this way and that beneath the streaming brim of his big hat. If there were only some cut-bank with an over-hang—if there was a tree or a clump of bushes, even, he would lay the fellow down under shelter and go on after a rig to haul him in to the ranch. But there was no cut-bank, no tree, no clump of bushes on that level prairie.

Anyway, the boys shore would have to hand it to him for nerve, packing a long-geared son-of-a-gun like this feller all the way in from Dry Gulch. He'd bet there wasn't another one in the bunch that would have sand enough to tackle it, even. A growing pride in his strength and big-heartedness steadied his feet as they squashed along the rutted trail.

After that it suddenly occurred to him that a rescue party would probably ride into sight over the next ridge. The minute Cheater showed up at the ranch with an empty saddle the boys would pile onto their cayuses and start right out. They'd think he was struck by lightning or something. By cripes, they shore would bug their eyes out when they saw him walking in with a man on his back, unconcerned as if he was packing a stick of dry wood to the fire. It pleased him to picture the look on the faces of the Flying U boys when they came galloping out to find him. It pleased him to invent careless phrases, telling of his prodigious deed. "Oh, jest a feller struck by lightnin' over in Dry Gulch. Hawse broke back on me—had to hoof it home."

But as he plodded mile after mile and no bobbing horsemen showed on the blurred horizon, his pale, frog eyes hardened perceptibly. By cripes, them lazy hounds had time enough to meet him with an ox team. Time enough to push a wheelbarrow to Dry Gulch, by cripes! Damn a bunch of selfish boneheads that'd set in the bunk-house and let a feller lay out on the range and rot, for all they knew or cared! He'd show 'em up, by cripes! He wouldn't say a word; just the bare fact of what he was man enough to do would show 'em up for what they was. Yellow-livered skunks—there wouldn't be a damn' one that could look him in the eye. He'd ride 'em to a fare-you-well for this.

The thunder and lightning slowly drew off, muttering, to the high canyons of the Bear Paws. When he reached the brow of the hill that formed the north wall of Flying U Coulee, the storm had diminished to a steady drizzle, deepening the murky gloom of early evening. As he toiled

up from the willow-fringed creek, the sight of Cheater standing tail to the storm beside the stable made him grind his teeth in wrath beyond even his extensive vocabulary. One sweeping glare showed him other horses sheltered in the dry strip on the corral side of the stable. Not a saddle missing under the shed; everybody inside, dry and warm—and be damned to them! The light in the bunk-house window, shining yellow through the rain-washed dusk, taunted him like a leering face, but he was too near the end of his strength to do more than grunt at this final insult. With a rocking, sidewise gait he staggered up the path to the cabin, his failing energy gathering itself for one savage kick upon the closed door.

“Hey! Cut that out!” yelled a voice he recognized as Cal Emmett’s.

“Say, wipe the mud off your feet! We scrubbed the floor to-day,” admonished another.

Big Medicine bellowed anathema as he let go the dangling ankle of his load and threw open the door. The Happy Family, humped around a poker game, looked up with casual glances that steadied to a surprised interest. Pink straddled backward over a bench and came forward, his eyes big with questions, though he said nothing.

“Who’s that?” blurted Slim unguardedly.

“Somebody hurt?” Weary swept in his cards and rose, recklessly scattering the piled matches.

“Hully gee!” Cal Emmett exclaimed, kicking over a chair in his haste to come forward.

“Git outa my way!” panted Big Medicine, tottering toward his bunk in a far corner. “By cripes, I wouldn’t ast none of

yuh to go to no trouble—you kin go to hell instid!” He turned himself about, leaned awkwardly to one side and let his limp burden slide to the blankets. With a great sigh born of exhaustion, he stooped creakily and lifted the lax legs to the bed. While the Happy Family stood huddled and staring, he shucked himself out of his slicker and flopped upon the opposite bunk, where he lay on the flat of his back, glaring contemptuously up at them.

“Don’t do nothin’ to save that pore feller’s life,” he implored with heavy sarcasm. “Gwan back and set down on yer damn’ haunches an’ let ’im die!”

Pink and Weary were already at the bunk, feeling the inert figure. Pink straightened from his ineffectual pawing and stared down at Big Medicine.

“What’s the matter with him, Bud? There ain’t any blood nor any broken bones on ’im—what is this; a frame-up?”

“Here, take a look at him, Mig.” Weary stepped aside to make room for the Native Son, who had a certain deftness in ministering to the injured. “Darned if I can see anything wrong with him. Might be pickled, from the looks—only he lacks the breath of a drunk man.”

“His pulse is making good speed,” Miguel announced. “I think he is having one fine *siesta*, no?”

“*Siesta* my foot!” Big Medicine heaved himself to an elbow. “Honest to grandma, the taxpayers uh this county had oughta build ’em an idiots’ home. They’s a bunch uh candidates on this ranch it’s a sin to let run loose. Why don’t yuh *do* something? That pore feller’s been lightnin’ struck, by cripes! Let ’im lay there and *die*, will yuh? Never lift a hand—”

“Lightning struck?” Weary looked blankly from one to another.

“There ain’t been any lightning to amount to anything for a couple of hours,” Cal Emmett pointed out. “Don’t try any Andy Green stunt on us, Big Medicine.”

“No, by golly,” Slim cut in; “one liar’s enough in this outfit.”

Big Medicine let down his feet to the floor and sat glaring from one to another.

“Over in Dry Gulch you kin find his hawse,” he snarled. “If you lazy hounds had of took the trouble to come and see what had went wrong, when Cheater came in without me, I wouldn’t a had to pack that pore feller clear from Dry Gulch on m’ damn’ back. His hawse—”

“Pulled out and left him?” Weary prompted.

“Killed. Busted every bone in his body. You kin ride over there t’morra mornin’ and take a look. There ain’t a feller on the ranch that’s man enough to do what I done, by cripes! Packed that pore pilgrim eight mile, by cripes—”

“How d’you know he’s a pilgrim?” Pink demanded suspiciously. “He ain’t dressed like a pilgrim.”

“No, by cripes, but I seen how he set on a hawse ’fore that streak uh lightnin’ come at ’em. All right,” he snorted disgustedly, as he lay down again, “let ’im lay there an’ die, then! I packed ’im in, by cripes; I ain’t goin’ to nurse ’im back to health!”

“Well,” Weary yielded, “he sure don’t look like a sick man to me, but we’ll take your word for it, Big Medicine. Get his shoes off, boys—we better strip off these wet clothes and roll him in a hot blanket. Happy, you go up and see if the

Old Man's got any brandy—the Little Doctor mighta left some in her medicine chest—and don't sample it on the way back!"

"Yeah, yuh might give me a jolt of it too," said Big Medicine, sitting up again with an eager look. "Shore is a fur piece from here to Dry Gulch—walkin' on foot with a back load like that there."

"Darned right," Weary agreed sympathetically. "Ain't every man could do it. Stick your foot up here and let me pull off them wet boots."

"Be darn careful, then," sighed Big Medicine. "I got blisters the size uh saddle blankets on both heels, by cripes!"

"Hully gee!" breathed Cal, sucking air through his teeth when the blisters were displayed to a sympathetic group of bent faces. "Anybody but you'd 'a' laid on his back and stuck his feet in the air and howled like a whipped pup. We never dreamed you'd get set afoot, Bud. Anybody in the darn outfit but *you*."

"The best a riders has accidents," Big Medicine stated loftily. "It was hard goin', all right—but it was his life er my feet, and any man that is a man woulda done the same, I reckon. I'd 'a' packed 'im twicet as fur if necessary."

"Yeah, that's *you*," Pink gave admiring testimony, eyeing the injured feet with something approaching awe. For a cowpuncher set afoot is the most pitiable sight on the range, and blistered heels are more dreaded than bullet wounds. "You oughta soak them heels in carbolic before you get lockjaw or something."

“Haw-haw-haw-w-w!” chortled Big Medicine, his spirits lifted amazingly by admiration and two fingers of excellent brandy. “I’m the toughest ole wolf that ever howled along the Pecos River, by cripes! And the biggest-hearted. I saved a feller’s life and I’m proud of it. Give ’im a shot uh that there brandy, and then I’ll have another little snort. By cripes, I earnt it!”

The Happy Family agreed with him. With fine loyalty they first inspected the brandy, just to make sure that it was fit for medicinal purposes, and administered it sparingly to Big Medicine and the stranger brought within their gate. They glowed with pride in Big Medicine’s achievement, in the greatness of his heart and in his fortitude. They felt a warm benignity toward the pilgrim, lying there flushed and speechless—but unmistakably alive—in Big Medicine’s bunk. Until long past midnight a light shone into the drizzle through the two square windows of the Flying U bunk-house. Snatches of song, laughter, the cheerful confusion of voices raised in facetious argument overrode the drumming of rain on the low roof.

In a word, the Happy Family were for the time being in complete accord with Big Medicine and his splendid role of Good Samaritan. When at last they laid themselves between their blankets, the brandy flask had been emptied to the last drained drop—for medicinal purposes only—and Big Medicine was still wearing the warped halo of a saint (if one might believe the Happy Family’s sleep-drugged statements). The rescued stranger was a hero also. Though his lips had not once opened for speech and nothing was known of his identity, they were for the time being perfectly



willing to accept Big Medicine's optimistic statements and let it go at that.

Warm-hearted heroes all, they slept in happy ignorance of what the morrow might hold for them. Which was just as well.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FAME IS FLEETING

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Fame is a fickle thing, as has often been stated and as Big Medicine straightway discovered. He went to bed a hero. He rose a man who has boasted overmuch and who must be put in his place and kept there. To a man the Happy Family snubbed him for the thing he had done; or which he claimed to have done. With slightly bloodshot eyes, they watched him ostentatiously salve his blistered heels, sucking his breath in through his teeth in a childish play for sympathy. They refused to be impressed.

"You'd think, by thunder, a man would have sense enough to buy boots to fit," Cal Emmett observed tartly to no one in particular.

"I never seen a man always trying to show off his little feet, by golly, that had a lick uh sense," Slim growled agreement.

"They always suffer for it when they have to walk half a mile or so," Pink yawned.

"Yeah, I betcha Big Medicine never packed that guy a mile," Happy Jack declared sourly. "I've saw grandstand plays before."

"If he did, it was just a mile too far," drawled the Native Son. "Tell yuh right now, I'd feel a darn sight more like booting him away from the ranch than packing him in here. He don't look so good to me, *amigos*."

“Well, damn the hull of yuh fer a hard-hearted bunch of booze hounds!” snarled Big Medicine, screwing his face into agonized grimaces while he slid his feet into his oldest boots. “Lapped up a hull quart of brandy the Little Doctor was keepin’ fer medical cases like me ’n’ that pore feller I brung home on m’ damn’ back! Lapped it up like a bunch uh sheep herders, by cripes! You wait—”

“You wasn’t bashful about swillin’ it down, yourself,” Cal snorted. “We had to take a nip or two so we could stomach your darned bragging.”

“Braggin’! Me? Well, by cripes!” Big Medicine sat on the edge of his bunk and goggled amazedly around at the disgruntled group. “Me brag! Packed ’im a mile, hunh? I dare the bunch of yuh to ride over to Dry Gulch and see where I packed ’im from, and then say ag’in that I packed ’im a mile, mebbby.”

“Don’t worry—that’s right where we’re heading for, soon as we eat,” drawled Weary. “If you packed that man on your back clear from Dry Gulch, my hat is off to you. You can brag about it for the rest of your life, for all me.”

So a truce was tacitly declared for the time being.

“By golly, looks like he done it, all right,” Slim admitted reluctantly an hour later, pointing a gloved finger toward drying footprints in the trail.

“Shore, I done it.” Big Medicine, riding his chastened sorrel at the head of the little cavalcade, twisted in the saddle to glare back at the group. “It don’t take my tracks in the mud to show I done it, either. My word for it had oughta be sufficient, by cripes!” He lifted an arm and gestured accusingly toward the far-away broken line of low ridges

that marked Dry Gulch. "Six mile acrost this bench and two mile down the gulch, and I hoofed it every step uh the way with that pore feller on m' back. And you darned chumps settin' there in the bunk-house lettin' me do it!"

"Yeah, we heard that before," Pink reminded him.

"Hunh?"

"It was mentioned, *amigo*, seventeen times last night, and four times since we left the corral," the Native Son reminded him gently.

"Well, it's the truth, by cripes," Big Medicine bellowed over his shoulder. "When a man's hawse shows up with a empty saddle, it's time somebuddy rode out to see what took place. I coulda laid out here and *died*, by cripes!" His pale stare went from face to face. "That gits me."

"Aw, gwan!" snorted Happy Jack. "There wouldn't nothin' git you. I betcha a double-bitted axe wouldn't only show a few nicks if a feller tried to brain yuh with it. I betcha sparks 'd fly off your head like hackin' at a rock. You wouldn't lay out an' die nowhere!"

"Wonder who that fellow is," Weary tactfully observed. "Not a thing in his pockets to show where he come from or where he was headed for. Cadwalloper and I went through his clothes and we didn't find the scratch of a pen."

"I betcha he's on the dodge," Happy Jack hazarded, with his usual pessimism. "He's got a mean look, to me."

"So'd you have a mean look, if you was struck by lightning," Big Medicine defended loudly. "The pore feller ain't goin' to be pesticated about no pedigree. He's all right—barrin' he don't know how to set a hawse. Pullin' leather with all two hands, and his hawse only in a high lope—but