

"What?" His voice scaled up with surprise, but a search of her face told him she meant it. He said evenly, "Mary Ann, I didn't make people fools. If they choose to put a loop on that horse when they or their gear aren't fit, that's not my fault."

"It's only that I love you, Webb. I don't like to see you set a lot of store by things that don't really count."

He didn't like that. After they were married, she'd be telling him the Dipper didn't need this or that because it didn't really count.

He said crisply, "The stallion counts to me, Mary Ann. He's the best-looking horse I've ever seen."

Mary Ann blinked. She's going to cry, Webb thought tiredly. She said in a small

toward the valley, he found comfort in the thought, she's a good, sensible girl; if anybody can talk Jim out of it, she can.

He found the camp at the base of the hills on the west side of Blue Water Valley, and his experienced eye ran over the herd a half mile below the camp. Except for one or two animals, they were bedded down and quiet. Two mounted figures slowly circled the herd; that would be Warren and Hardy on night guard. He dismounted stiffly at the campfire. Abe Ellis moved toward him from the shadow of trees and brush, and spoke worriedly.

"The remuda's restless, Webb. That stallion's been snooping around here all night."

"No!"

Webb's pulse rose as his eyes went to the



SPOUSE GROUSE

By S. OMAR BARKER

For a new garage or a pantry shelf,
The fashion today is "do-it-yourself."
My wife has the bug. I wouldn't much rue it
If I could just leave it to "herself" to do it!

voice, "And you won't change your mind, Webb?"

"No, I won't. There's not enough reason to." He'd softened the answer as much as he could, but he knew from her face that it still hurt. Remorse pricked him, and he leaned down to pat her cheek. "Cheer up, now. Jim won't go after the horse. He's just talking. You'll see."

She didn't believe it. Well, he wasn't so sure of it himself. He thought with annoyance, Jim of all people! He had worries enough without Jim acting up; O'Brien's scaring off good men with his talk of a killer stallion, then McQuarry's beef, now this. And if he didn't get to the herd before sun-up, he'd get no sleep tonight.

He squeezed Mary Ann's cold little hand and said a hasty good-by. Heading briskly

dark wooded hills above the camp. That was where he'd be, wary, high headed, waiting the chance to steal the mares in the remuda. It was a challenge Webb hated to let go, but his sorrel had been pushed to the limit and his own legs were all but buckling with lack of sleep. And to get a rope on that stallion called for a good clear head.

He forgot it regretfully, and glanced at the two blanketed figures on the ground. "You alone on the remuda?" he asked Abe.

"Yes."

"Well, keep your eyes open. Give me a couple of hours' sleep and I'll relieve you."

"Right."

ABE moved back to the remuda. Webb wearily picketed the sorrel and spread his bedroll. Mary Ann's small con-

cerned face haunted him as he fell asleep, and his last conscious thought was a weary protesting—not Jim Donovan.

He couldn't tell how long he'd slept when he woke to the sounds of animal unrest. Abe's voice bawled from the darkness, "Remuda's going! Hit the saddle!"

He struggled to stand up, still stupefied with sleep, seeing the forms of Hinman and Riley fling off their blankets and come to their feet, running, shouting. His own boots struck out clumsily for the sorrel, rearing against the picket fifty feet from the campfire. He freed the reins, mounted, and sent the sorrel plunging past the fire and through the brush after the scattering remuda.

Once in the saddle, his head cleared. Already he'd begun to shake out his rope. The stallion wouldn't get away this time. Even jaded as the sorrel was, he could do it. The stallion was on the far side of the remuda, using it as a barrier between himself and the camp. Webb swung the sorrel around the drag of the remuda and lined it up with the racing black shape, three hundred feet ahead.

The stallion was working hard to keep his prize, urging the remuda down the slope toward the valley floor. The cattle began to mill, and Webb knew Warren and Hardy were barely holding the herd. The gap between the sorrel and the stallion had closed by fifty feet when Webb overtook Abe, who was riding hard, nursing his rifle. Webb had pulled a little ahead when he saw from the tail of his eye that Abe was leveling the rifle.

Webb didn't need to look twice. Abe was drawing a bead on the stallion. There wasn't even time to shout at him. Webb pulled hard on the sorrel's reins, throwing it into the path of Abe's horse, hearing the solid slap of flesh as the horses collided shoulder to shoulder. Abe's horse fell, spilling him from the saddle and sending the rifle spinning from his hand.

Webb slid from the sorrel's back. He was shaking with rage. The foremost horses in the remuda had thundered onto the valley floor. They'd get away now, but that didn't matter as much as the stallion's getting away. Abe had picked himself up, and Webb hit him in the mouth. Abe stumbled back.

Webb stood over him and said thickly, "Don't ever do that again, Ellis. You hear me?"

Abe stared up from the ground, amazed and shaken. "But he was taking the remuda! It'll take days to round 'em up in these hills."

Webb said heavily, "Thanks to you, Abe. Now the whole shooting match has gotten away—stallion, remuda and all."

He knew how he wanted to finish up—you're fired. But he couldn't spare the man, out here in the hills with McQuarry's beef on his hands and no mounts for the crew.

Abe's lip was bleeding, and he wiped it with the corner of his neckerchief. Webb turned away from him and looked down the slope. The last of the remuda was flying past the restless frightened herd into the valley bottom. The stallion was beside them, neck arched, tail straight out, handsome, wily, all but invisible in the distance. Webb's hands clenched with the intensity of his will. He'd never wanted anything for the Dipper more than he wanted that stallion.

Behind him, Abe got to his feet. His voice came guardedly. "They say that horse is a killer, Webb."

Webb's anger had left him spent. He had no strength to tell Abe that if it were true, the stallion would have trampled Abe when he was on foot at the remuda. He satisfied himself with a weary, "Hogwash," and walked to the sorrel. Warren and Hardy, he knew, had done a first-rate job of holding the herd while the remuda was stamping past them not more than seventy yards away. He'd see to it there was an extra ten apiece in their pay next month.

He recalled them from the herd. They'd had enough for one night. Hinman and Riley went out to relieve them, and Webb and Abe wearily rolled into their blankets. There was no need for a camp guard now, Webb had decided tiredly; there was nothing left to guard.

They started the search for the horses at sunup, on the four mounts left. The men, Webb knew, were cursing the stallion heartily, but he wasn't. The stallion had out-foxed them, out-run them, beaten them all around. In spite of the fact that Webb knew there were mares in the remuda he'd never see

again, he couldn't withhold his admiration for the horse.

They had recovered four of the horses by noon, and Webb called a halt. They could get the beef to the basin now. They ate hard-tack and jerked beef, then changed mounts and got the herd moving.

The moon was rising when they reached Bent Knife Basin that night. At daylight the next morning, Webb left Hinman and Riley with the herd and he, Warren, Hardy and Abe rode for the Dipper, stopping to comb the brush for more of the runaway horses. When they'd picked up four more, they kept steadily to the trail. The rest of the horses, Webb acknowledged out of fairness to the crew, would have to be let go until the men had had a good hot meal and a decent night's sleep at the home ranch.

Late that afternoon Webb found himself riding beside Abe. He studied Abe covertly, reflecting that when he'd first hired him seven years ago, nothing under the sun could have induced him to hit him. Well, maybe it wouldn't hurt to apologize. He considered it, then wrote the incident off with the thought, the stallion wasn't around then.

The shadows were climbing the hills when they neared Porcupine Valley and Dipper. Webb wondered if the stallion had come back through the valley with his mares. They'd seen no tracks, but Webb would have been surprised if they had. The stallion was too cunning to run in the center of the valley, where man's scent had tainted the trails. He'd keep high on the valley sides, in the cover of brush and gully.

If he had come back this way, he'd have crossed Jim's land. Webb swallowed. He thought he'd faced up honestly to the consequences of Jim's going after the horse, but it seemed he hadn't. There was a knot in his stomach, and his hands were cold. He didn't want Jim to go after that horse. He liked Jim too well, liked him as a neighbor, a friend, and a future unce-in-law. If anything happened to Jim, Webb's conscience would whisper for the rest of his life.

HE GLIMPSED Jim's place through a break in the hills and his eyes probed into the distance. He made out the

steady column of smoke from the chimney. It reassured him. If anything had gone wrong at Jim's place, Mary Ann wouldn't be wasting time with a supper fire.

Webb felt better then. The hill rose to block the view, and he settled back in the saddle. He'd go see Jim tonight, talk to him, reason with him. If he had to, he'd even buy him that saddle and stove to keep him out of mischief. But the reward for the stallion stayed. With it still in force, there'd be maybe twenty men trying to catch the stallion. With only himself and his crew, there'd be six at most.

He could stop worrying about McQuarry's beef, too. There'd be a tidy profit when the sale was made, and it would go into the bank toward the thousand dollars Webb wanted to have before he took on a family. He frowned, and wiped grit from his face with his neckerchief. He hadn't mentioned to Mary Ann his wanting to wait for the thousand dollars, but she'd accept it because it was sensible. That was Mary Ann; under her pixie-like ways, she was a good, sensible girl.

He smiled slowly with a sudden pleasant thought. Mary Ann had little enough as a young girl, but that would change when she was mistress of Dipper.

Twilight was mantling the hills when they came in sight of the Dipper buildings. They filed through the gate toward the main house and bunkhouse, dispirited and drained of strength. The Chinese cook came out of the cookshack, waving his arms and talking in an excited spate of dialect.

Webb couldn't make out what the cook was saying. He was probably put out because he'd have to fall to and rustle up supper for the men on short notice. Warren and Hardy dismounted in front of the bunkhouse, and Abe took the reins to feed and water the horses. Webb rode on toward the house, wondering what ailed the cook to make him dance along beside the horse like a monkey on a string.

When he rounded the corner of the bunkhouse, he could see the main corral. He knew then what ailed the cook. A powerful black horse snorted and plunged in fury in the stout log enclosure, rearing to paw with

long reaching forelegs at the rope that held him to the stake. Somebody'd brought in the stallion.

Webb hauled his sorrel up short. "Hardy! Warren!" he roared. In the sweetness of the moment he even forgave Abe. "Abe! Look what's here!"

He spurred the sorrel across the empty yard. Whoever'd brought the stallion in had gone, but the cook would tell him who it was. Webb wanted to shake the man's hand; he'd proved the horse was no killer. And two hundred well-earned dollars of Dippér's money was waiting for him.

Webb dismounted at the corral and feasted his eyes on the stallion. He'd never seen anything like it; the spirit and physical strength of the animal brought a grin to his face. Wall-eyed, the stallion screamed his rage. Webb mounted the logs of the corral for a better look.

Abe, Warren and Hardy came on the run and joined him. Webb was gratified, listening to the unstinting praise of the men for the horse. He was pleased with Abe's generosity, "Sure is a mighty fine animal, Webb!"

Then something moved in the corral to Webb's right, taking his eyes from the stallion. He thought at first it was a bundle of old clothes that had been dropped inside the fence, until it stood up stiffly. Webb froze, his fingers digging like a terrified cat's into the log he was straddling.

Mary Ann's small straight figure moved along the logs toward him. He slid stupified from the fence. She'd worn a leather mackinaw and chaps, so clawing brambles couldn't fasten into the cloth and unseat her. Her hair had been looped into a compact knot to keep it out of the reach of low branches. The precautions made little difference to Webb. He stood stricken, listening to her boots swishing through the corral's loose earth. The men stopped talking and stared open-mouthed.

Mary Ann took off a rope-scarred leather glove and thrust out a small dusty hand. "I want my two hundred dollars."

She blinked back tears, and swallowed. She'd lost her hat, and the tight knot of hair was coming loose. There'd been a jackpine branch she hadn't seen—or else the stallion

had dragged her into it. The needles had left a ladder across her cheek, and Webb's own skin stung as he sensed the impact of that branch.

He dragged his eyes from her and looked at the stallion. His mouth was dry when his eyes came back to her, and he wet his lips to get the question out. "How did you do it?"

The lift of her chin was defiant. "I just snubbed the rope around the saddlehorn, and Ben did the rest." Ben was her big roan gelding. Her lips trembled, and the corners of her mouth turned down. "Give me my two hundred dollars."

So it had come to this, an out-and-out choice between Mary Ann and the stallion—if for no better reason than because a man couldn't have his neighbors saying behind their hands that his wife had roped the stallion he rode. But there was a better reason, and he knew it.

She'd wanted him to face that choice, because until he did, he'd never know how little he could care about the stallion, when it was measured pound for pound with her. Or, for that matter, with Jim, or even Turner. He could still blame Turner's death on his own foolishness, but he couldn't write him off because of it. If he did, he'd be obliged to write off everyone who acted foolishly under the stimulus of a sizable reward. And he couldn't write off people and keep his self-respect.

The thought went briefly through his head and, now that it was settled, he could deal with the towering anger that came on the heels of relief. He said to Mary Ann, "I've got a good notion of what I'd like to give you!"

He marched to the men lining the fence, and spoke crisply. "Give me your hunting knife, Stan."

Warren gave him the knife, and Webb approached the stallion warily. He shouted, "Open the gates!" and moved in to slice swiftly at the tightening rope as the stallion reared away.

He'd only partially cut the rope, but the horse's weight broke the remaining strands. Webb noted with regretful pride that the stallion didn't need a second look to find the

gate. Mane and tail flying, he streaked through it, flashed across the yard, and sailed over a four-foot fence. Webb's eyes followed him until he disappeared into a nearby ravine. Then he walked briskly back to the corral fence.

He gave Stan the knife and said quietly, "That settles that, fellows. If I ever ride that horse, I'll rope him myself."

He had unfinished business with Mary Ann. For a sensible girl, she'd taken the most reckless way he could think of to teach him a lesson. She'd cried a little while he'd been cutting the horse loose; there was a clean track down each dusty cheek that hadn't been there before.

He said briefly, "No more reward. It's withdrawn as of now."

"I want my money, Webb Hyatt!"

Fresh anger warmed the back of his neck. He said gruffly, "Jim'll get the money. He'll need it. He'll have to buy a new suit if he's going to give you away. The check from McQuarry's beef'll take care of your wedding dress, and anything else you need, too."

"Webb! You mean—"

"Yes, I mean. About the middle of the week after next."

He watched her face closely. He found delight in it, but no surprise. She didn't even pretend to be surprised. He pushed his hat back and grinned, while she hugged him gleefully. A sensible girl? He'd underestimated her. Smart was the word. And smart she had had to be, to get the better of that stallion.

KNOW YOUR WEST



1. The Gallatin, Madison, and Beaverhead Rivers, rising in and near Yellowstone Park, come together in Montana to form what large and famous Western river?

2. To what do the names Mandans, Nez Percés, Hunkpapas, Papagos, Mescaleros and Gros Ventres refer?

3. In cowboy talk, "to snail" and "to snake" mean the same thing. What?

4. What did the oldtimers mean by "the gunman's sidewalk"?



5. In what Northwestern territory, now a state, occurred the battles or fights with Indians that became known as Wolf Mountain, Rosebud, Little Big Horn, Lame Deer, Hayfield, Two Moon's Village and Chief Joseph's Last Fight?

6. If you heard an oldtime cowboy say "the range boss sure read me the Scriptures," what would he mean?

7. How could a scout or another Indian tell at a glance from some distance whether a teepee village belonged to the Crow or the Sioux tribe?



8. What were the stockades of frontier trading posts often called even when in no way connected with the military?

9. In cowboy language, "taking to the tules" means going into hiding or on the dodge. How is this Spanish word pronounced and what does it mean?

10. Buffalo hide hunters considered about how many killed buffalos as a fair minimum quota for two professional skinners to skin per day: 15, 20, 25, 30, or 40?



—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 79. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.