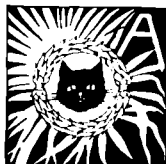


Branded in the Valley.

BY MARTHA PIERCE.



AS the day died, three horsemen rode down from the mountain and struck into the trail that leads across the mesa. Once clear of the descent, the horses broke into the long, swinging gallop which the cowboy loves. The fine gray alkali dust flew backward from the flying feet in little clouds which looked in the half light like puffs of smoke. They rode in silence, save once when the leader half turned in his saddle and spoke to the rider nearest him.

"How far is it, Jim?"

Jim lifted his bridle-reins, and his horse sprang alongside the big gray of the leader.

"'Bout thirty miles yet," he said briefly; "we'll make it by nine o'clock."

Silence fell again and nothing was heard on the wide, desolate plain, as the darkness deepened, but the muffled thud of the horses' feet on the soft soil, and now and then, faint and far off, the long-drawn, dismal howl of a coyote.

The moon climbed up over a high bluff and looked down upon a little valley where a small, swift stream ran through green meadows. Beyond, the barren hills stood, bleak and gaunt, against the sky, terrible in their unutterable loneliness. In the midst of the valley one tree stood like a sentinel near a low log house set a stone's throw from the brink of the stream.

A fire that leaped upon the hearth and flung its ruddy light through the small windows served to light the rude interior, its uncertain gleams half revealing, half concealing the rough uncouthness of a man who sat before the fireplace holding a child upon his knee. She was not a beautiful child to him, if you except the long, light curls which hung like a misty cloud about her

small, round face. The father twisted one long curl about his horny finger as they talked.

"Now tell me," he was saying, "why you didn't go home with Mrs. Potter to-day, when she rode all the way over here on purpose. I met her out beyond Four Mile, and she told me she was comin' over to get you to come home with her and visit for a spell, till I could get time to look round a little. I thought 'twas real kind and good of her, and I told her to tell you I said you could go. I give her my jack-knife to show you, so you'd know she'd seen me. Didn't she tell you?"

"Yes," said the child, snuggling down contentedly in the circle of his arm, "she told me, but I didn't want to go over to the Bar H. to live."

"But," he began argumentatively, "Mrs. Potter's right about it bein' too lonesome for you to stay here when I'm out in the hills. It is mighty lonesome for a little girl like you. You better let me take you over to-morrow." She shook her head until her misty hair flew out like an oriole.

"Who'd keep house for you?" she asked, as if that question settled the whole matter.

He laughed weakly. "You do take pretty good care of your dad, don't you? And you're all the housekeeper he's had for a good spell now."

"Since ma went to heaven," said the child gravely.

He started and looked at her curiously.

"Who told you that?" he said, almost roughly.

"Told me what?"

She was looking at the fire intently, and had a half-absorbed expression. "That ma went to heaven? Oh, she told me herself, before she went, and she made me promise I'd come, too. She told me all about the angels and God and everything. She said the angels was all around, every place, and since she died I know it's true, 'cause I've seen 'em. There's one right there in the fire now. I've been seeing it ever so long. A little baby angel with its wings spread out to fly. See, pa? Right there, in the middle of the brightest — see?"

"No," said the man slowly, "I can't quite make it out." Suddenly he started.

"What's that?"

"Nothin' but a coyote," derisively. "You ain't afraid of a coyote?"

"No," he said, putting her down from his knee, "I ain't, but I thought I heard something else, a horse snortin', maybe."

He opened the door and looked out. Three men on horseback confronted him. He was covered instantly.

"We're onto you," said one laconically, "say your prayers."

He grew pale beneath the bronze, but he faced them resolutely, and stood a trifle straighter.

"What does this mean, men?" he said. "What have I done?"

The leader laughed grimly.

"When a man's too handy with his brandin' irons he's apt to run up against trouble some day. You've got about two minutes to make your last will and testament."

His troubled eye moved from one to another of his menacing foes, seeking in vain for the pity he never would have asked for himself. The child had crept to his side, and looked wonderingly and with terror upon the three strangers.

At last, after a minute as long as years, he spoke stumblingly, as if words of entreaty came hardly to his lips.

"You have homes, men, and little ones, maybe. Think of the child, and have mercy." He caught her up suddenly and held her before them.

Startled by the sudden movement, the big gray reared and pawed the air. There was a sharp report and a shrill scream through the stillness of the valley; then the father stood looking stupidly at the limp and senseless thing he held in his arms, and the swift red stream that dyed his shirt sleeve.

The big gray had bolted, and after a moment of horrified waiting the two who were left wheeled their horses and rode away through the night, with the child's scream ever pursuing them, leaving the outcast alone with his dead.

The sun climbed up over the high bluff and looked down on the green valley where the one tree stood by the low log house. Under the tree a man was stooping over a little mound by the

side of a long one, patting it softly and babbling to himself about his baby, and the little angel in the fire. After awhile he wandered away hatless and coatless toward the mountain.

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No one lives in the house in the valley. They say that when the moon is full fire leaps upon the deserted hearth and flings a ruddy glow through the windows, and he who listens may presently hear the shrill scream of a child, and the clatter of fleeing horsemen across the mesa. But others say it is a myth, and one can see nothing but the moonlight reflected from the windows, and hear nothing save the dismal and long-drawn cry of a coyote.

