

# THE SKY LOVE SIGN

## A Story of Central Oregon

By Irv Franklin

### CHAPTER I

(Continued from last week)

TROUBLE was brewing for two days, but Billie did not realize the full extent of their jealousy, so was taken unaware. It all happened on Thursday afternoon. The "separator" broke down just before noon. They had to send to town, fourteen miles away, for a new part, which meant that the crew would be laid off for the rest of the day. The chance the men had been wanting was now offered.

In a small pasture adjoining the barn was a bunch of horses just rounded up on the fall ride. The boss wanted some of them broke to ride, anyway, so why not persuade the Southerner to try his limited skill as a "broncho buster" on one of these wild brutes?

While Billie was peacefully resting on a pile of sacked wheat new from the thresher, the crew was secretly plotting against the only man in the crowd that was making any progress towards winning the teacher. They laid their plans well amid sneers and subdued, but sarcastic, laughter. When all was done the plotters were content to sit in the shade of the barn and wait for the time for their intended victim to appear again, but the Southerner slept on innocent of the fate that awaited him. His lithe, slender body lay in the attitude of peaceful repose. A faint smile wreathed his much tanned face, as though he were dreaming a sweet dream. Was he dreaming of the "home" for which he had hoped and worked these long four years on the spot he had learned to love—"Dixie Ranch"? But there was the girl—the idol of his thoughts! And he well understood that it took more than a ranch and horses and cattle to make a "home." So he may have been dreaming—probably was—of a winsome girl with a bloom on her soft cheeks that made him think of the roses he used to see in the Southland, and lips that reminded him of the red rosebuds in May. And because of her the jealous crew had plotted against the Southerner.

Tiring of waiting longer for him, they decided to arouse the Southerner. One of the men went into the barn and caught the slumberer by the feet, dragging him to the edge of the pile of sacked wheat. The Tennessean took this in good humor and joined the crowd for another smoke. Presently one of the men remarked, "This is a slow bunch."

"Well, let's have a little excitement or sport of some kind," put in another.

Then several together, "That's what I say! What'll we do!"

"Let's have a bucking contest!" shouted an innocent looking fellow. All but the Southerner enthusiastically shouted a hearty approval. What a happy suggestion! But who would ride first?

Several looked towards Billie, who was now standing erect in the midst of the pressing plotters. He was coolly twisting his carefully trained mustache to a needle point at the ends. He wore sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a big, bright-blue silk scarf loosely arranged about his neck. He looked the men straight in the eye, as if he read their vicious intent, but his mien was that of reckless abandon.

"Sure! Billie's the man to ride first! He's a 'buckaroo'! He'll ride!" they shouted in a chorus.

Thus they began, but of course the Southerner saw into the game at once. One might have thought the jealous harvest hands were Lilliputians to see his annoying indifference; but the pent-up resentment of the plotters knew no bounds on this hot October afternoon. They coaxed and flattered him; they teased and taunted him with patient determination.

Now, the Southerner had been through the initiation period that the tender-foot usually has to pass through before he learns that the wild horses of Eastern Oregon are not like other horses. He had learned his lesson from pretty dear experience four years before. He had found from that dear experience that all his past knowledge of riding well-trained horses, even the spirited, hot blooded Blue Grass horses, that he had attained in the South, availed him little when it came to breaking a "bunch-grass" horse. He knew, too, that he had come West too late in life to learn to take the punishment and master the fascinating art (as it is) of broncho-busting. So he had been content to allow the younger men to make the art a specialty and win the championships. However, he had ridden enough to have the reputation of having nerve, though he was still in the beginners' class. But on the one essential point of "nerve" he was a master horseman. Of this he was conscious himself, and he was sensitive to any hint that indicated doubt on this point.

There was another point about which the Southerner had some very firmly fixed opinions—fair play. When the thresher hands were trying to persuade him to ride—and merely for revenge—they found him obstinate. But they finally ran a big, clumsy mare of the draught type into the corral, thinking to get Billie to try this awkward animal as a beginning. Half of them agreed to ride next if he would only try riding this clumsy mare. This began to sound like fair play, so the Southerner got out his "riggin." They furnished him with a pair of spurs—something he had found quite unnecessary with the willing, nervy range horses—and he prepared for the ride while they saddled the mare.

When all was ready Billie climbed aboard, put the spurs to the frightened animal and "fanned" her with his big hat; but the best he could get out of her was a few "sheep jumps." After getting the mare wet with sweat he dismounted.

He hadn't more than hit the ground till the bunch began to taunt him and coax him to try another, saying, "That's getting off too easy." But the Southerner paid little attention to this. He walked over to the faucet at the watering trough and quenched his thirst. He then deliberately pulled off the spurs and chaps and stretched out comfortably in the shade of the barn to rest.

The bunch kept tantalizing him, however. After awhile they ran a young gelding into the corral. Then they began to flatter the Southerner on his "fine riding" and solemnly swore he could easily ride this one "if he rides him as well as he did the mare." Seeing that there was only one way to end this nagging, he finally agreed to ride on the specific condition that it would be the last time they would ask him to ride. To this the crowd readily agreed, too readily in fact to impress him that they were sincere, but there was no backing down now.

The slender Southerner once more donned his chaps and adjusted the big, awkward spurs to his boots. The gelding was a trim, active looking animal. Billie knew it meant a hard ride for him. Indeed, the horse proved so hard to saddle that they finally had to get their rawhides and throw him. It took a number of trials to bring the wily animal down. When the saddle was adjusted and the stirrups ready Billie coolly seated himself on the prostrate horse. At the word "Ready!" they took off the blind and released the scared horse.

The rider went up with the horse amid shouts from the spectators. This was beginning to suit them. For about twenty minutes Billie dug the long rowels into the horse's sides, determined to make the animal do his worst and have it over. The crowd continued to laugh and yell and crack jokes at the omesteader's expense for "pulling leather," though they had given him this special privilege. And they were determined, also, to make the horse do his worst. Those on the top of the corral were yelling and waving their hats; those inside were throwing hats at the bucking horse or lariats across in front of or behind the rider as the frightened horse circled and turned. Though he didn't do any fancy riding, and had to "pull leather" more than once, the rider was not unseated.

The crowd had evidently enjoyed this ride, but the Southerner was puzzled and not a little annoyed to plainly read an expression of disappointment in all faces. He hesitated to dismount. He did not yet realize the full extent of their animosity.

After giving the horse a chance to get his wind, the tormentors once more started the nervy animal around the corral. They laughed and shouted again, and threw hats and lariats at the tired horse. Billie saw their determination, and dug the long rowels into the horse's bleeding sides, against his own conscience, but to make the weary animal buck some more, if possible, to satisfy the jealous men; but only a few jumps was their reward for this added punishment. The Southerner had conquered his mount.

Again he dismounted, pulled off the big spurs and chaps, and went over to the faucet to moisten his parched mouth and quench his craving for water. He then stretched out in the shade of the barn to cool off and rest his now very tired legs; but this time he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had not only done very well for a man of his experience, but that he had also defeated the ill design of his rivals. The nagging would surely stop now, but he noticed that nothing was being done or said further about doing any riding themselves. He felt that this was an ill omen, but he was altogether too hot and tired to care much.

(To be continued)

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