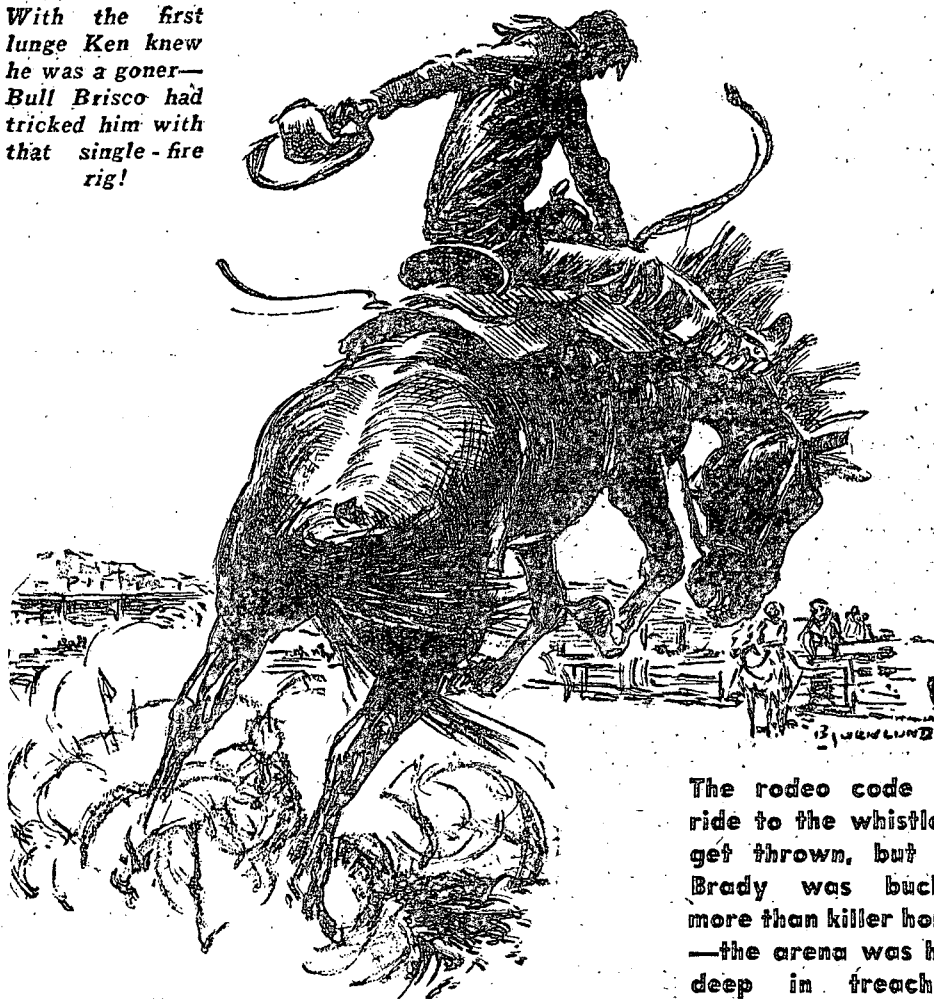


*With the first lunge Ken knew he was a goner—Bull Brisco had tricked him with that single-fire rig!*



The rodeo code was ride to the whistle or get thrown, but Ken Brady was bucking more than killer horses—the arena was hock deep in treachery.

## BRONCBUSTER'S LUCK

BY ROLLAND LYNCH

THE dust in the rodeo arena had settled. The Wyoming sun hung low. A knot of men, the judges, were huddled on the platform there between the bucking horse and wild steer chutes. The announcer, megaphone trailing in his hand, kept walking around the group and peering over their shoulders as they tal-

lied the points. The stands sat white and tense. They were recovering from the ride just finished.

The rider had left the chute on Gray Dynamite, lighting the fuse to that explosive bundle of sinew with high-raking spurs. And he never touched a bit of leather except with the seat of his pants. He had kept

that glued to the saddle as he scratched the plunging animal from withers to flanks. It had been a magnificent exhibition. So reckless it had left the stands breathless and limp. And the way the rider lit down after the ten-second whistle and deliberately turned his back on the wild applause!

The announcer's voice bellowed through the megaphone: "The winner and new all-around champion—Ken Brady!"

The spectators stood again, their hands and throats sending thunderous waves of sound across the hoof-churned bowl. Broncbusters, steer riders and ropers pounded Ken on the back. Ken grinned a little, but something inside him kept his generous lips from expanding their fullest. He went to the judges' stand and got his prize money and turned quickly away. It took an hour for him to go down Lookout's main street to his hotel. Crowds kept stopping him, offering to buy drinks, congratulating him. Women blushed when he looked at them and cast their eyes down. Some stared boldly, but he paid them no heed. More bruised from the back-slapping than from his ride, Ken made the lobby of the Laramie House.

Patrick Matson came out of his chair and met Ken just inside the door. He was a big man, with iron-gray hair. "My mind's made up, Ken. Partners, you and I," he said. "You've designed the best bucking rig in the business. Pendleton doesn't make an Association saddle that's any better or conforms more closely to the rules."

"Thanks," said Ken quietly. "I've looked forward to this for some time. When do we start?"

Matson worried his sun-blistered nose with his thumb. "We can't be ready for about two weeks. I want

you to go to the show at Medicine Bow. It's the most important one in the State. It won't hurt the sales of the saddles if you win again."

But it wasn't just winning for the sake of saddle sales that was behind Matson's words, and Ken knew it. There was something else in Medicine Bow Matson wanted him to beat before they started this saddlery together. It was a piece of Ken's life that had been left undone. Matson had to find out if Ken could take it before investing his money in the youngster.

Ken nodded. "I'll see you in Medicine Bow," he said, and went up the stairs to his room.

As Ken took the steps slowly, things welled up from years long gone. The acrid smell of dust rising under pounding hoofs. The cries of the stands and the picturesque swearing of rodeo hostlers as they harried fresh outlaw horses into the chutes. The glistening beauty of Blacksnake, that writhing bundle of steel that shot off at all angles like an unpredictable Roman candle. That day the Big Horn Kid had been up—champion of champions. He had missed the bulge of a shoulder muscle. As clearly as if it had happened today, Ken could see it. That huddled, twisted form in the dirt; the hoofs upraised like sledges. Then the sickening sound of breaking bones.

Ken had been in the little tent behind the bucking-horse pen with the Big Horn Kid as the applause rolled out for the new champion. Through lips bloodless from pain, the Kid mumbled: "Broncbuster's luck, son. It trails everyone that follows the shows. You either ride to the whistle or you get thrown. Remember one thing—don't take it too seriously when you win, and you won't have to when you lose."

Ken was thinking of those words as he turned into his room and got out of his sweaty clothes. They'd fit when he returned to Medicine Bow. The mirror over the wash-basin showed him a rock-ribbed torso topped by a face dyed mahogany by sun and wind. Most of that muscle had been developed behind a plow. He had had a hard row to hoe to get where he was. He had suffered a lot to make it, but he was there now. He didn't take it too seriously as he bathed and put on fresh clothes. He was thinking about Medicine Bow.

AS Ken pulled up on the rise and looked down on the town there on the south bank of the Medicine Bow River, nostalgia held him. The mountains behind the town were barren under the summer heat, but he saw them as he had first seen them—snow-covered, the rocky scarps like ivory teeth snarling up at the heavens. There had been a girl then. She was gone now, but another face still remained. The flat features of it stirred Ken a little.

He was in the Shoshone Bar when he saw him. Bull Brisco came in with some town cronies. They were laughing and talking, and had plainly visited other saloons before this one. Bull hadn't changed. Broad-shouldered, thick-necked, he had a booming voice that immediately singled Ken out.

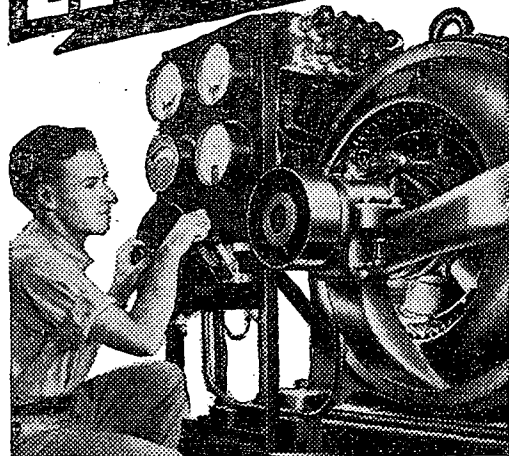
"It's the 'champ, boys. Ken Brady! How's the rutabagas growing, kid?"

Ken felt his face grow hot as patrons turned and stared at him. Bull Brisco was the same. Noisy, careless of everyone's feelings but his own. He came up with his men and they fanned out about Ken, grinning.

"I was lucky," said Ken. He couldn't think of some of the things he had planned to say. Bull was

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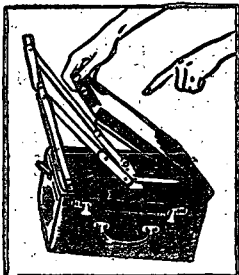


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laughing at him, had everybody laughing at him, and Ken could think of no way to stop it.

"Luck?" echoed Bull. "Why, the way you build a saddle would keep a dottering old man on the back of the worst horse alive!"

Ken shrank a little as laughter swept through the saloon. Bull was a saddle maker, and these patrons were cattlemen. They never missed a chance to rub it into a man who had been the son of a nester.

Bull went on: "I got an order for ten rigs, Brady. I'll give you a dollar a tree to do the stitching on 'em." He threw back his dark curly head and laughed at the ceiling. Everyone else hoorawed, too. It was funny, Wyomin's rodeo champion, who was famous for his special-designed saddles, being offered a job stitching leather at a ridiculous price.

"I don't need the money," said Ken. It was all he could think of saying. He wanted to swing a fist into that grinning face, but he was a nester's son among cowmen. Before he could think it all out the moment was gone as Bull waved to his men.

"C'mon," he said. "This place smells of rutabagas." He swaggered out.

Ken downed his drink in a gulp, looking at himself in the bar mirror. He was showing his anger and hurt. Tugging his hat brim down and hanging his head, he left the saloon. As he went down the street, he abstractedly saw the bunting and posters bearing his name and telling the date of the coming show. On one of the twelve sheets bearing his likeness someone had drawn with a pencil a ridiculously long mustache beneath his nose. Ken turned into his hotel and went to his room. He threw himself onto the bed.

Things had been just like this years and years ago. Ken had been

a nester's son from straw hat to ankle-high brogans then. But his love wasn't in the rows of tilled soil; it was in saddles and the fine artistry of designing them. Every chance he had, Ken went to neighboring ranches and watched the rough strings being topped by itinerant broncbusters. He sought their company in town and asked questions about their kaks. A small Medicine Bow leather worker did some saddle making, and Ken helped to stitch and tool some of the rigs—anything to learn the mechanics of this craft he loved. Gradually he learned he had to be with horses and the men who rode them to gain his end.

Ken was small and freckled and gangly the day he had horned into a cowman's barbecue. A girl had smiled at him and talked with him, and a strange warmth had run around inside of Ken. Bull Brisco and his cronies had found them beside the creek, tossing pebbles into the water, and stealing shy looks at one another.

"Lookit the clodhoppers on that nester's feet," Bull had pointed out. "He's got a turnip for a head, too."

The boys all laughed, for Bull was the son of a big saddle maker in Medicine Bow. Some men coming up to slake their thirst had laughed, too. Shamefacedly, the girl had giggled. Aflame with tingling blood, Ken had run, hearing the laughter getting louder and louder behind him.

His father had found him out in the barn, face down in the hay, cheeks tear-wet. He had pulled the boy to his feet, and then stared off into space after hearing the story. Finally, he said: "You've got to take what comes along, son. Poor folks all have a hard time of it—nester or squatter. But don't let the brand

of a name stop you from what you want to be. You just close your ears and work along. You try hard enough and you'll get what you want."

That sounded right to Ken until the first day of the Medicine Bow Rodeo and Barbecue. He had run into Bull Brisco in back of the bucking pen. Ken was in overalls, and Bull was in fancy chaps and boots and sombrero. Bull was bigger, but Ken figured if you tried hard enough you got what you wanted. He wanted to whip the smugness out of this saddle maker's son.

Ken tried as hard as he could. He kept picking himself out of the dust and rushing in again. He closed his ears to the names the onlookers called him. When it was all over, and he couldn't get up again, he lay weakly against the corral post and watched them walk away.

His lips were thin when he explained to his father that night. He said: "I did what you said. I closed my ears and tried as hard as I could, but I didn't do what I wanted to."

His father nodded. "No man wins until after he first loses, son. When things are easy to beat, they're worthless to have. You'll find you have to keep tackling the hard things over and over before you whip 'em."

Ken packed his things the next day and started out. He soaped up his saddle, the Association rig he had fashioned himself, and cinched it down on the pony his father had bought him. He shook hands with his dad and turned northward. He had things thought out. If you want to be known as a saddle maker, go where rigs are the main topic of conversation.

He made a name for himself up around the Oregon Wild Horse

Heaven country. Over in the Montana Bitterroots, too. Horsemen all looked at his work and said it must be good, or he couldn't be a top rider. He won the rodeo at Haverty, and wrote his father. He got a letter from a neighbor, saying that six months ago the plow share had struck a rock and shoved the handle through old Bart's chest. If Ken ever came back home, he'd find the grave by the cottonwoods with a little wooden cross over it.



Ken stayed with the shows then, following them, winning, placing or showing—and making a saddle here and there. He met Patrick Matson and Patrick became interested in starting up a saddlery. Now Ken had won the Lookout show, and was all-around State champion. He had tried hard, as his father had counseled. And he wasn't taking it too seriously, as the Big Horn Kid had warned.

**H**E got up off the bed as Patrick Matson came into the room. Matson pulled out a big cigar and said perfunctorily: "I see you got

here. Show opens tomorrow, maybe you ought to make the rounds of the town and talk saddles with the boys. I broke the news that buckin' saddles aren't all we'll make. That regular range tree of yours is a mighty beautiful kak to sit, too."

Matson was really sending him out against Bull Brisco, Ken knew. It was Bull who would show Patrick, one way or another, whether Ken would be a good partnership investment.

Ken grunted, refreshed himself by whooshing his face in the room's basin, and went down to the street. Over his meal at the restaurant, one of the punchers who followed the shows came up and said: "I want to place my order now, Ken. Association rig to conform with all regulations. I want a fourteen-inch swell and a five-inch cantle with very little dish. Me, I'm like a slat, so the seat's gotta be small."

Ken took the figures down and promised it the moment he got into production. Then he was going from bar to bar, talking saddles. How he glued his trees together and the way he thonged the rawhide on wet and let it dry for a glovelike fit. But it was abstract talk—he was wondering when Bull Brisco would show his colors. When he walked into the River Casino, his brows drew together. Bull stood at the far end of the bar with Patrick Matson, and Bull was drunk and talking loud.

"There never was a day a nester could make a saddle for a cowman," Bull was booming out. "If I was tied onto a horse like his rig ties you on, I could ride the orneriest critter made of hide and bones."

Everyone's eyes narrowed a little when they saw Ken.

Patrick Matson said: "Half of the

men following the shows ride saddles Ken made personally. Yet he beats them."

"He's a nester shot with luck," swore Bull. "Once he gets his knees locked under that swell of his, dynamite wouldn't jerk him loose. He belongs behind a plow."

Ken strode the length of the bar and placed himself before Bull. "I can hear you better if you'll lower your voice," he said. "I'm sure everyone else in the saloon can, too."

"I been telling Matson, here, that you haven't the right to ride with cowfolks," Bull thundered. "Without that saddle of yours—"

"Maybe you think I couldn't beat you with one of your own?" said Ken coldly.

"Never. If you'd ride against me without that rockin'-chair you designed, I'd get you laughed back into homesteading."

"Any time you say. You use my saddle—I'll use yours."

"Tomorrow afternoon," said Bull loudly. "Special event of the show. A round robin. Three calf ties, three steer dogs, and three broncs—each man riding to judges' points."

"Suits me," Ken replied shortly.

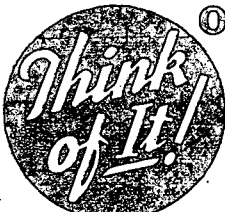
"For how much?"

"Name it."

"The loser to acknowledge the other saddle's the best, and a thousand dollars."

Ken nodded. "Tomorrow afternoon." He turned and went out of the saloon.

THE arena was packed. Dust beat up as riders fought for day prizes. A facsimile of Custer's last stand was staged by Indians. There were numerous races; a Pony Express run for cowgirls, and a men's relay affair. The gathering was enthusiastic, but it was holding plenty in reserve for the treat of the day.



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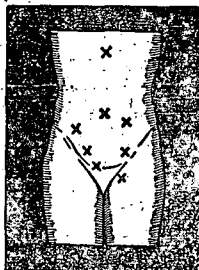
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Ken Brady showed up at the judges' stand with his saddle over his arm. Old Hub Keown, shriveled and wizened hostler, was at his side to see personally to saddling his mounts. Ken handed his saddle over to Bull and took the one offered.

Hub started to swear. "That there's a single-fire rig, and Ken ain't never rid nothin' but a center—"

"It'll do," Ken interrupted evenly.

One of the judges leaned over the railing and said: "You'll tie calves first. The three times will be added together with the lowest man getting credit for five hundred points. One thousand will be a perfect score for each event. We'll deduct points for bad form. You ready?"

Ken nodded and walked toward the calf chute. Hub strode alongside, saying: "Snow him under, kid!"

The twisting, dodging calf shot from the pen and in a second Bull Brisco appeared. His horse came at a killing gallop. Bull carried his pigging strings in his mouth. His loop built and shot out and landed true. While his mount held the calf, Bull lit running and slapped the ties on its churning feet.

The announcer bawled: "Seven seconds." Applause rippled through the stands.

Ken mounted back in the pen and tested the saddle. This single-fire rig didn't feel natural. Bull had done this on purpose. He knew what Ken rode. With a shrug, Ken settled heavily into the leather, ab-

sently fingering his pigging strings looped under his trousers' belt.

He got the signal and spurred forward. The calf was a bobbing, lunging bundle of brown before him. He built his loop and let fly. He missed! It was the anger in him, blurring his eyes and stiffening his muscles. He coiled quickly and cast again.

When he stood up from his tying, the announcer bawled: "Fourteen seconds!" The stands were silent.

Then came the rapid announcements: "Brisco—nine seconds."

"Brady—six seconds."

"Brisco—eight seconds."

"Brady—seven seconds."

The point score went up on the board:

	Calf Pts.	Steer Pts.	Bronc Pts.	Total
Brisco	780			780
Brady	620			620

There were those who cheered wildly; those who groaned. The Indian maiden who had been wagered against the horses shrank back against her father's tepee, her dark eyes a little wide with fear.

Ken calmly inspected Hub's cinching up of the saddle on the fresh horse, as the steers were made ready. Hub hauled tight on the cinch and threw his hitch. He shot a stream of fine cut into the dust and said: "He took advantage of you, son, when he handed you this single-fire rig. It ain't gonna feel so good when you get to scratchin' 'em high."

"I'm getting used to it," said Ken tightly.

Then he was climbing up and taking the signal to leave the chute. He raced out parallel to the frightened steer. His eyes never left those needlelike horns as he drew alongside and let go of the reins. Then he had the snorting animal's horns,

his heels were digging into the ground, and his teeth bared as he twisted and lay his weight against that corded neck. With a thud the steer went down.

Ken didn't watch Bull make his ride. He concentrated on his own. He was remembering his father's words: "Try hard enough and you'll get what you want." And remembering what the Big Horn Kid had said: "Don't take it too seriously."

When the scores were again posted a mighty roar went up from the stands.

	Calf Pts.	Steer Pts.	Bronc Pts.	Total
Brisco	780	650		1430
Brady	620	810		1430

Over by the tepee, the Indian girl wet her rich lips.

**K**EN was grinning a little as he went to the bucking chute. The looseness was back in his shoulders and he regained the feel of things. That was all that mattered. He noticed, too, that those six grueling rides had tightened Bull's lips a little, and there were lines running away from the corners of his eyes. He spoke jerkily and harshly, showing that fatigue and anger had him. A man had to be in pretty good condition mentally and physically to stand this sort of pounding.

Ken and Hub Keown went to the corral and looked at the six horses that had been chosen for the rides. They were the top show horses of the rodeo. A man could look as good as his ability would allow, once he threw a leg over them. Ken rubbed the noses of the three he would ride. Out of habit, he stroked the mole-soft nostrils of the others. Old Hub did the same thing, lingering by Brisco's mounts as Ken went to the gate.

Ken was first out on Madcap. He kept his spurs raking from neck to flank, and kept waving his big hat. His britches stayed glued to the foreign saddle, and when the pick-up men helped him down after the ten-second whistle had blown, he bowed stiffly to the roar of acclaim.

From the top rail of the bucking chute, he watched Bull Brisco on Stormcloud. Bull couldn't handle the animal at all, despite Ken's saddle. The horse put on a great show of frenzy, and Brisco fought all the way to stay in the leather. When he lit down and came walking back, his thick lips were thin lines, and he was shaking with anger.



Old Hub Keown chuckled at Ken's elbow. "He's fightin' within himself, son. He's gone."

"Quiet," said Ken brusquely.

On the next two rides, Ken gave the judges and stands as good a show as they'd ever seen. He showed his complete mastery of the plunging animals he sat. Even those who had bet against him grudgingly joined in the tribute. The Indian girl smiled wanly.

Brisco fought himself out of the picture. His rannicky animals were just too much for him. They seemed like they were mad and frightened and he couldn't do a thing with them. He quit before the whistle on the last ride, and angrily slapped at his horse with his hat. The score board showed the results:

	Calf Pts.	Steer Pts.	Bronc Pts.	Total
Brisco	780	650	500	1930
Brady	620	810	1000	2430

Bull planted himself in front of Ken and croaked hoarsely: "Shot with luck." That was all he said, then he turned away.

**K**EN avoided the main street as he returned to town. He went to his hotel and cleaned up. As he looked into the mirror to comb his hair, he saw the faint signs of triumph etched on his face. He stood still and battled that expression until it was gone. Then he jammed on his hat and sought out Patrick Matson. Patrick was at the far end of the River Casino bar. His face was set and hard, and his greeting gruff and strained.

Ken was puzzled, but only for a moment. A roar was shearing the saloon as Bull Brisco came through the swinging doors with several men, two of them rodeo judges. "A yellow nester would do anything," he was bellowing. "Brady, you're the worst tinhorn that ever came out of a rutabaga patch."

Ken swung slowly, his eyes clouding and fists balling. This time he would take Brisco apart with his hands.

Bull strode up, his florid face working, and shoved a fist beneath Ken's nose. "Ever smell that before?" he demanded.

Ken caught Patrick Matson's ex-

pression out of the corner of his eye. The oldster was staring oddly at him. "Cougar fat," said Ken.

"You're damn right it is!" Bull's voice had an insane pitch. "You rubbed it on the noses of my bucking horses, and they damn near went crazy with fear. It's a nester trick, Brady, the only way you can beat a real rider without that saddle of yours!"

Ken's shoulders settled as he put up a hand to silence Bull. There should be something to say, but this man before him always robbed him of speech. Ken could see it all now. Old Hub Keown had rubbed that grease on the nostrils of Bull's mounts; had done it after Ken had stroked them there in the bucking pen. The smell of cougar almost drove a horse to killing frenzy. Old Hub had figured Bull had taken advantage of Ken by giving him that single-fire rig. He couldn't tell them Hub had done it. They wouldn't believe it.

Ken fished into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He counted out a thousand dollars. "The bet," he said tersely. "That's a fine saddle you make, Brisco." He turned out of the saloon then amid the hush.

In the darkness of his hotel room, Ken sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. His dreams of partnership in saddlery with Patrick Matson were gone. But they couldn't take the skill out of his hands, no matter what else they took away from him. Yet, he knew that was not true. It was gone. This tale would spread, and the boys following the shows wouldn't be caught dead on one of his Association rigs. He was right back where he started—a nester. Plows and seeds and dawn-until-dark labor. No more swinging chute gates, the acrid smell of dust welling from beneath a

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plunging outlaw's hoofs, the swelling roar of spectators at a daring ride well done, the arguments pro and con about the merits of his special designs for saddles.

It was nearly midnight when he stirred himself and rolled his pack. With it under his arm, he kept to the shadows as he went down the street to the corral for his horse.

As he turned into the black void of the barn, a figure moved out to meet him. Patrick Matson said: "I figured you wouldn't leave without your mount."

Ken didn't say anything, just stood there holding to his worldly belongings.

Patrick's hand fell on the youngster's shoulder. "I couldn't believe it," he said, "even when you didn't deny it. I found Hub Keown and had a talk with him. Everything got straightened out, kid, after Hub talked. The judges are satisfied. They ruled that you would have won even if Bull had ridden well. They awarded you the match, but called off the bet between you. I got your thousand dollars back and a written testimonial from Bull that your saddles are best. You want to start for Silver City this time of the night to begin getting the shop in shape, or do you want to wait until tomorrow morning?"

Ken's throat was dry, but he managed to say: "If it's all the same to you, I'll leave tonight."

"All right, son," said Matson. "I'll wire power of attorney to you, and you do whatever you need to do to get into production. Hub Keown will show up in a few days to go to work."

Ken moved into the darkness, saying over his shoulder: "Hub's a good man. He knows as much about my designs as I do."

THE END.

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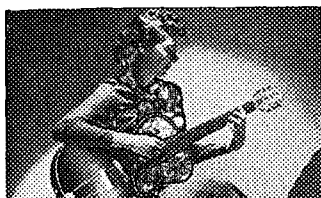
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