

BLACK COW

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The fall roundup on Bluebird Flats. Hot and cloudless. The cows in the corral crowded around the branders, pawing the earth, bellowing, snorting, driven mad by the smell of fresh blood. Occasionally one charged the men. Then there was a shout of warning from the iron-tender and a mad scramble for the top rail of the corral. And if someone were too slow and were not hurt when the cow hooked him, hilarious laughter.

One cow in particular was the troublemaker, a big-boned black, dry, fat, and hornless. She crowded and pushed herself all over the enclosure, fighting cows, men and horses. Twice she put the branders on the fence. Then she ran against Ross's rope, as it snaked out, spoiling his throw. It was his first miss of the day and ruined his disposition.

"You black trouble-maker," he yelled, and lashed her with the rope end.

Ross, fat-faced, heavy bodied, of unmistakable Swedish descent, and Serious Pete, old-timer and foreman, were trying to swamp the brander with calves. The brander was a young cowboy, Lee Camay, slim as a reed, dark, agile, in his own opinion reckless as a Sioux warrior, vain as a red rooster. He had taunted the ropers for their slowness, their misses, so that they had determined to get ahead of him. But the ornery black cow was keeping them back.

When the rope hit her Black Cow jumped ahead, almost colliding with Pete's horse. Pete kicked her on the nose. She swerved towards the fence. Lee, with a glowing branding-iron, was running from the fence to the calf that Ross had just dragged out. Black Cow dashed behind him and as she went by kicked. Spat! Her hoof caught Lee on the hip and lifted him clear off the ground. He dropped the iron and sprawled over the calf.

Ross laughed.

Dark-faced and angry, Lee got up, hurling curses at the cow. He recovered the branding-iron and limped toward the fence. Before he got a fresh iron Pete was ready with another calf. Lee was swamped, and he could not work at his usual speed for need of watching the Black Cow. She finally came close to him; he jabbed her viciously on the hip with the red-hot iron.

"Take that, damn yuh; that's how my rear fender feels."

This is the last of four stories written by Merle T. Haines and published in The Frontier, A Magazine of the Northwest.

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Finally the last calf of the bunch was brought up; the men were glad of it, because they now were rid of Black Cow. Serious Pete twisted his mustache and allowed himself a satisfied smile, for he had shown up Lee and beaten Ross on throws. These youngsters sure couldn't stand up with the old-timers!

A week later Ross and Lee, combing the north side of the range for beeves, rode into Quartz Gulch and lunched there. While they were eating, a small bunch of cattle came down for water, Black Cow among them.

"There's that black rip. Let's take her in," said Ross.

"Sure," Lee scrambled to his feet. "Maybe we'll have some fun with her."

They mounted and drove the herd out into the open, cutting out Black Cow and the four-year-old steers, heading them towards the corrals where they were holding the beeves until they were all rounded up. They had hardly started when Black Cow decided to go back. Lee headed her off.

"Still makin' trouble, eh? Take *that*, an' *that*!"

The rawhide quirt lashed Black Cow's nose until it stung like fire. She turned back to the bunch and for about ten minutes behaved herself.

The trail from Bluebird into Clancy Gulch drops suddenly from the edge of the flats and zigzags down a steep, grassy hillside spotted with firs. To the right and left are rock breaks.

The six cowpunchers were having plenty of trouble trying to start the herd of eighty beeves over the rim. It was hot, slashing work, hard on muscles, nerves and tempers. The steers crowded up to the drop-off time and again, Black Cow always in the lead. At the edge she would suddenly turn and try to get away, the excited steers following her.

The men dug in the spurs until the sides of their horses were flecked with blood. They swung their quirts till their arms numbed, and their throats were raw from cursing.

Several times Black Cow got free, only to be brought back again, the quirt hitting her at every jump.

"Is this the fun you were talkin' about?" Ross asked Lee once when he brought the cow back.

Lee didn't answer.

As a last resort Pete roped a small steer and dragged him over the rim and down the trail. Others followed until the whole herd was spilling over-sliding, falling, jumping, zigzagging, down and down.

The hillside gradually leveled out. Two hundred yards to the right of the trail Clancy creek struggled thru the thick willows, the beaver dams and the swamps. Red-eyed and sullen, Black Cow trailed behind now, licking her stinging nose and watching the riders out of glinting eyes. When Ross swung to the left around a fir thicket she wheeled straight back and plunged thru the trees, head down, snapping branches in her rush.

"There she goes again," Lee yelled to Ross. They spurred after her.

Fifty yards ahead was a small park and beyond that the creek with its thick brush and mud-holes. Instinctively Black Cow headed for the creek. The horses couldn't follow her there. A fallen tree was before her. She leapt over it, came down, nose first, legs buckling, floundered up to her feet and went on. But as

she reached the park Lee flashed by, swinging the quirt. Black Cow turned her head away, shutting her eyes.

“Hold on,” Ross shouted, “I’ll fix her.”

His rope was ready and as Lee turned aside it slipped out with a hiss, circling Black Cow’s neck. The next instant it tightened with a snap as Ross’s horse sat back on his haunches. Black Cow turned a somersault, landing on her back with a deep grunt.

Ross threw the rope to Lee. “Snub her to a tree while I get a club,” he said.

Lee took two turns around a small, dead pine that was the closest tree, while Ross cut a green alder as thick as his arm.

Black Cow floundered up and glared at the men with inflamed eyes, shook her head and pawed the ground. When Ross got close, grasping the club in both hands, she charged. Thud! The heavy club caught her on the side of the head just as she took up the slack in the rope. The stick broke off with a loud snap and Black Cow fell to her knees. Then she was up again, between Ross and the horses.

“Look out! She’s loose!” Lee yelled shrilly, grabbing for the trailing rope and missing it by a foot.

With a bellow Black Cow lowered her head and charged. Dropping the stump of the club, Ross spun round and ran for the timber. Stiff leather chaps and riding boots aren’t conducive to speed; in fact, they are a great hindrance to a stout man with short legs. Ross didn’t cover the ground as rapidly as he wanted to.

In about ten jumps Black Cow caught up with him, shut her eyes, stuck her nose close to the ground, and with a jerk brought up her head. Ross sailed thru the air, legs and arms clawing; but he came down running, without missing a step. He turned his head back to look at Black Cow. He didn’t thank her for the lift, and wasn’t courting another.

Lee was left behind. He gave up trying to catch the bobbing rope-end. As Black Cow hit Ross again Lee decided that the show was worth watching, and stood still, laughing.

“Help!” Ross yelled. “Help—”

He lost his breath and the ground at the same moment—Black Cow hit him a third time.

“Ha, ha, ha,” Lee roared. The more he laughed the funnier the situation seemed.

Black Cow stept on the trailing rope, jerking herself to a momentary stop, and Ross ducked back for his horse. He puffed by Lee, mouth open, eyes bulging, face red, and Black Cow hot on his trail. Again she stept on the rope and just as she passed Lee stumbled.

Reaching his horse, Ross scrambled into the saddle. Clinging there weakly, he looked back just in time to see Black Cow wheel on Lee and bowl him over.

It wasn’t so funny, now. Lee wasn’t laughing. He was on his hands and knees, trying to get away from Black Cow. Every time he got started she bumped him down. Lee got up on all fours and *bunt!* went Black Cow, sprawling him flat

on the ground, his arms and legs outspread, and *bunt!*—over and over. Ross was laughing now.

“Hey, Ross! For God’s sake, get her,” he pleaded.

Ross rode behind the cow, leaned down and caught up the rope. He threw a hitch on the horn, and dragged her back. She fought stubbornly, then as the rope slowly cut off the air braced her legs wide to keep from falling.

Taking advantage of the situation, Lee got upright on his legs and hurried to his horse.

Ross grinned. Lee swore at him, the cow, and the world in general.

“You’re the one that wanted some fun, ain’t yuh?” Ross jeered.

“Wait till I get my wind and I’ll show her somethin’,” Lee promised savagely.

“Goin’ to teach her a lesson in etyquette? She sure needs it. Teach her not to bunt from behind. It ain’t polite.”

The sound of a running horse brought them round with a start. Pete, the foreman, rode up, buzzing like a hornet.

“Hey, what’s all the racket about?”

“A circus,” said Ross, wiping his grimy face.

“Circus, hell,” Pete shouted. “Cut out the play.”

He looked at Black Cow. “Turn her loose.”

“Turn her loose yourself,” said Ross, winking at Lee.

Lee scowled back.

“What’s the matter? Yuh ’fraid of a muley cow?” Pete demanded scornfully.

“I’ll give you five dollars if you go in there on foot and take that rope off.”

“I’ll add another,” said Lee, brightening a little.

Pete looked at the cow again. She appeared ready to drop.

“Huh? I’ll just call your bluff. I’ll show yuh what a *man* can do.”

He dismounted and walked toward Black Cow, sliding his hand along the taut rope. When he was fairly close to her Ross gave out slack so that she got a gulp of fresh air. As Pete glanced around to see what was happening, Black Cow charged, hitting him in the middle and lifting him clear over her shoulder. He landed with a grunt.

Lee doubled over the saddle-horn. Ross’s eyes sparkled.

“Gosh, are you hurt?” he asked. “I didn’t think she’d dare attack a *man!*”

Pete scrambled out of danger.

“Why didn’t yuh tell me she’s on the fight?” he yelled, shaking his fists. “Yuh damn fools. I got a notion to fire yuh both.”

“Aw, don’t get mad, Pete,” said Lee. “I’ll show yon how to take the fight out of her. I’ll ride the son-of-a-gun.”

“You?” Pete tried to wither him with a look. “We can’t fool around here all day. We got to get them steers down to McPhee’s tonight.”

“Let him ride her,” Ross urged, winking. “I’ll bet five dollars he can’t.”

Pete thot seriously for a moment. If he didn’t humor them they would ride the devil out of him for weeks and tell all over the country how he got thrown by a muley cow! Maybe they would anyway, but release was worth trying for.

“Oh, all right, all right,” he said, and added. “I’ll make it another five.”

As Pete had the best snub horse, he took the rope that was attached to Black Cow and gave his lariat to Ross. Then Ross roped her hind legs and they stretched her out. Lee got on. Ross took off his rope.

The lariat around Black Cow's neck slackened. The sting of Lee's quirt brought her to her feet with a rush. Swish! The quirt bit deep. Sharp spurs raked her sides. The demon on her back yelled shrilly.

"Br-r-raw-aw-ww," she bellowed, and bucked crookedly across the park, twisting her back, throwing her hind quarters from side to side, head down, legs stiff.

Pete kept to one side, giving her plenty of rope. Following close behind was Ross, shouting encouragement and laughing. "Ride her, boy!" he shouted.

Lee had his left hand clasped in the short, slippery hair on Black Cow's shoulder and with his right he swung the quirt. He was riding prettily. He turned his head to laugh derisively at Pete. The foreman had visions of losing five dollars.

Then Black Cow stumbled and Lee, unprepared, pitched forward, landing on his back, right under Black Cow's nose. As he fell his left foot got tangled in Pete's rope. Both riders jerked their horses to a halt.

Black Cow looked surprised for a second and Lee, pale faced, stared at his foot. If the cow ran she would drag him to death. The hot, stinking breath from her nostrils blew damply across his face.

Ross began to uncoil his lariat and Pete stupidly pushed on his rope, like a farmer pushing his old Ford up a steep hill with the steering wheel.

"Br-r-r-a-aw-w. Br-r-a-aw-w!" Black Cow's bellow echoed up the canyon as she lunged forward, plunging her head into Lee's stomach. Eyes rolling, tongue out, head twisting, she stamped and milled around him.

Lee thot sure he was a goner. He squirmed and yelled frantically.

"Get away you--! Help--Ross--Pete! O-o-oh, God--save me. (Umph!) Hey, you black--! God--pray God. Help. (Whoof!) Ross--damn you--get her--away!"

As long as Lee could yelp like that he wasn't being hurt, Ross thot, and hung up his rope, deciding not to stop the fun. When Lee began to pray, he threw back his head and roared.

Lee, white-faced, arms and legs waving, looked like an up-turned spider. The cow danced around him, her tail brandished like a waving flag. Black Cow bawled and Lee yelled. Ross rocked in the saddle and made all kinds of funny noises. Serious Pete licked his lips and pushed harder on the rope. The din split his ears. He turned to Ross, wishing for a rock, a club or anything to throw that would knock him into sensibility.

"Hey!" he bellowed. "Yuh got a rope; pull her off, yuh crazy fool."

"Sure I have," Ross said weakly, and chuckled some more. "I thot Lee was takin' the fight out of her."

Slowly uncoiling his rope he made a loop and still gurgling inanely threw it under Black Cow's feet and snapped it up, jumping his horse away at the same time. Black Cow, losing her balance, toppled sideways.

Lee jerked the rope off his foot, leapt up, and scuttled for his horse. Safe in the saddle he regained both his wind and his courage.

When Ross took off the ropes Black Cow lay still, except that her sides went up and down jerkily.

“Well, I took the fight out of her, anyway,” Lee bragged.

“An’ she sure as hell took it out of you,” laughed Ross.

Pete twisted his mustache and almost grinned. Then he scowled at the cow.

“She’s all in,” said he. “C’mon. We’ll have to come back after her in the mornin’.”

They started down the hillside, Ross coiling his lariat as he rode.

“What church you belong to, Lee?”

“Huh?”

“I was wonderin’ where you learned to pray. You got any preacher beat a mile.”

“Aw, shut up,” Lee growled.

He couldn’t argue because he had never heard a preacher pray and, besides, he chose to forget that he had called on God. “I’m goin’ to bring a gun tomorrow. She’ll only try to break away once,” he threatened.

There was a sudden crackling of brush off to the right.

“What’s that?” Pete asked.

“Didn’t see anything. A stray, probably,” said Ross.

A little farther on they caught up with the herd. They had hardly settled to work when there was a commotion up front. The lead steers were heading up the hillside, going fast. The foremost came into view.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” said Lee, weakly.

He drove his tired horse slantingly along the hillside to head them back.

Black Cow was in the lead.