

RODEO FOOL

By
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They thought he'd been selling out at the rodeos. Somebody was playing him for a fool, but he had to be sure before he played his hand.

BIG JIM FARNOL leaned his hundred and ninety pounds of bronc-toughened sinew slightly forward. His fists knotted at his sides. The lines around his wide mouth were cut deep, and there was a cold, hard anger that set lights flickering in his blue eyes.

Standing where he was, he couldn't have helped hearing the voices of the men on the other side of the empty mounting-chute in the Jackson Hole rodeo park. It was dark, but he didn't need light to know who those men were—one of them, anyway.

"Pierce, there's goin' to be hell to pay if Farnol finds out his girl is playin' him for a fool. I tell you—"

It took Jim a minute to identify that voice as belonging to Whitey Long, a roper. But it was the other voice that made the fires of anger and bitterness lick out in Farnol's

brain.

"Think so, Whitey? Well, Eloise will do what I tell her to, understand? It's me she wants, not Jim. If I say, 'Break Jim Farnol,' then she'll break him, understand?"

Jim heard Pierce Lambrech laugh, low and taunting. Something snapped in Jim's mind, and he began to move silently to where the two men were standing.

Jim had made Pierce Lambrech what he was in the shows. When Lambrech had been barred for doping a horse, it had been Big Jim Farnol who had fought Pierce's case with the rodeo association and won him another chance. But he knew now Lambrech would never be anything but a glory buster.

"We didn't really need the girl here at Jackson," Lambrech went on. "But we may down at the War Bonnet. We'll make a killing there. We can get two to one odds on

Farnol, and we'll have enough on hand to take them. How much did Steymer collect here?"

Whitey's voice was a whine, "Around five thousand I reckon it was. Well split it four ways, and that'll leave—"

"It'll leave twenty-five hundred for me and twenty-five hundred for Steymer," Lambrech snarled.

Jim could see the two men then. He caught the glitter of a knife in Whitey's hand when Whitey sprang at Lambrech. Lambrech stepped back. His hand dropped to his side. His gun was sliding from the holster when Jim threw himself at the two men.

LAMBRECH heard him coming. He whirled, and Jim could see the gun racing up. Whitey must have seen turn at the same time, because he made a dive for the shelter of the mounting chute.

Jim knew that he couldn't reach Lambrech before the gun blasted. He had been crazy to force the play then, but Big Jim Farnol had always been a man who did his acting first and his thinking later. He was still a dozen feet from Lambrech when the gun leveled.

A lot can pass through a man's head while he is looking into the muzzle of a six gun. Jim thought of Eloise Mason and his boot heels dug into the dust of the rodeo grounds.

Jim had been with the shows since he was seventeen, and he was twenty-six now. He had seen rodeo girls, lots of them, girls who had the dust and the noise and the excitement that went with the shows in their blood, the same as the men, and they had never bothered him. Not until he met Eloise Mason.

At first it was her riding that attracted him. She was a trick rider, and she attempted stunts that most men would have avoided.

After that, he supposed it was her eyes that made him notice her. They were hazel,

with a half eager, half wistful look about them. They went with her slender face, and boyish yet feminine figure, but they did not go with a rodeo girl. She didn't belong with the shows, not then anyway, and she knew it.

She hadn't the underlying hardness. Her nature hadn't been made brittle yet. But that would come, and Big Jim Farnol had been afraid of it.

He couldn't have said when they first began planning for a ranch back in the Blue Mountains of Oregon. It had been a year, anyway, and the ranch was no closer.

Now Eloise was mixed up with Pierce Lambrech at framing shows! A red cloud of hatred settled over Jim's mind and blotted out everything but what he had just learned.

Lambrech stepped back, thumbing the hammer. Jim's boot heels bit into the earth. He couldn't reach Lambrech before the first bullet tore him back, but the weight of his body would carry him on.

He had but one thought. To get those calloused hands of his at Lambrech's throat and choke the life from the glory buster. Jim heard a girl's voice behind him. It was low, but there were undertones in it that cut into his mind.

"Pierce, don't pull that trigger."

It seemed funny to Jim that his one thought then was that most girls would have screamed, but Eloise had courage in her slender, softly curved body.

Lambrech jerked to one side. His face, usually a little pale and good looking, wasn't good looking then. It was twisted in a snarl, like a trapped weasel.

Lambrech hesitated a moment, and that moment was long enough for Jim to reach him. Big Jim Farnol's iron fingers closed over the wrist that held the gun.

Jim's left fist came out in a blow straight from his shoulder that lifted Lambrech from his feet and sprawled him back. Lambrech came up like a cat, and Jim was waiting for him.

There was a killing fury behind Jim's fist that lashed into Lambrech's soft face. He had one thought—to finish the man quickly.

Lambrech went down again, and Jim grabbed for him. He felt the girl's hands on his arms, pulling him back.

HE turned to face her. Her eyes seemed unnaturally large and the Wyoming moonlight made her look pale. But there was no weakness in her. The fingers on Jim's arms dug into his flesh, as Eloise put all her strength against his to keep him from reaching Lambrech.

"Jim," her voice was pleading. "Let him go."

"Let him go so that you can marry him, eh?" Jim panted. "Let him go so that you can help spend the money he's made fixing shows, eh? Damn him—"

"Jim."

"Yeh," he rasped. "I got the play. The crowd bets on me because they know I'll give them a square ride. Well, the last two shows I lost out. Up at Billings, it was a horse shot so full of dope he couldn't buck. Down here it was a busted latigo. If those tricks don't work, that's where you come in, eh?"

"Jim," she blazed, "if you think that—if you think I'd do that—"

He put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back. Love is a funny thing. Sometimes it can make all of the latent brute that there is in any man come to the surface. Jim's wide, prematurely battered face was white under the brick red tan.

"I don't have to do much thinkin'." He kept his voice low and stony. "You made me promise I wouldn't ride at the War Bonnet. You said if I rode there, I'd ride at the Stampede and I'd keep on. You said we'd never get back to the Blue Mountains if I did that. Well, I get the drift now."

BIG JIM FARNOL turned abruptly and strode toward the park gate. If he had stayed there at the chute another moment he would either have killed Lambrech or he would have been as completely in love with Eloise Mason as he had ever been.

She had made him promise to quit the shows after the Jackson rodeo. He had already mailed the letter that would withdraw his entry papers at the War Bonnet. He had turned that show over to Pierce Lambrech.

He wouldn't have believed that Lambrech was playing a crooked game unless he had heard him admit it himself. Lambrech had made a mistake once when he had doped a horse at Pendleton, and Jim had saved him from it. He would never make a first class bronc peeler, but Jim had trusted him. He had trusted Eloise, too.

He went to the hotel. No one spoke to him when he passed through the smoke heavy lobby. He could understand that, then. Those men thought that he had sold out and deliberately thrown away his chances of taking first money.

A man might have bad luck at one show; that was not uncommon. But to lose out twice after reaching the finals, when betting was top-heavy for him, looked suspicious at least. He couldn't blame the men, buckeroos, ropers, and bulldoggers there at the hotel, for what they thought.

He would even the score at the promised War Bonnet, though. He promised himself that. He had promised Eloise he wouldn't ride again, but he would break that promise. He would break Pierce Lambrech and Whitely Long, and the gambler Steymer and their betting ring if he had to top backers the rest of his life.

He kicked open the door of his room went in and let his body sag into a chair.

HARDNESS had been ground into Jim Farnol as long as he could remember.

His father had staked out a dry farm claim in the Blue Mountains. Jim couldn't remember his mother. Until he was fourteen, he had worked on the claim and carried a gun because dryfarmers were unpopular in the Blues.

He had been fourteen when his father had been killed in a runaway, and Jim had saddled his cayuse horse and left the mountains. He didn't like to think of the next few years, knocking about from one cow camp to the next. His muscles weren't filled out and solid then, and he had taken a lot of beatings. After that he took to bronc riding in the rodeos.

At twenty-six he had a name for himself. Most riders agreed that year he would ride to world championship at Madison Square if his luck wasn't all bad. That hadn't mattered much though when Eloise had asked him to withdraw from the War Bonnet show.

A hand tapped on the door, and he jerked the door open. Eloise stood outside. Her eyes met his levelly.

She came in without his asking her. He left the door open and followed her into the room.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

She sat down. The wistfulness was almost gone from her face and determination had replaced it. Her lips were pressed firmly together until she spoke. Then he noticed that they trembled a little.

"Don't ride at the War Bonnet show Jim," she whispered. "It won't be Pierce Lambrech you will break. It will be you."

"Meanin'?"

"Jim, I'm not asking you to—trust, me any more. If you don't think you can, then you can't. They've been putting a quarter of the money they made betting in the bank in your name. In case anything goes wrong, they'll make it look as though you're the one who framed the shows."

"I suppose Pierce Lambrech told you that." Jim's voice was as sharp as a knife

edge.

She nodded without answering for a moment. "I knew what was happening for a long time. I thought—I thought you were doing it."

Jim picked up his hat from the bed. He rolled a cigarette, jabbed it into his mouth and gulped smoke into his lungs while he studied the girl.

"I'm going down to the telegraph office and send a wire to the War Bonnet rodeo committee," he told her finally. "I don't know just how you're in this. If you're in love with Lambrech, I hate to break him, but there's times a man has to do things he hates like the devil to do."

She stood close to him for a moment. Her fingers rested on his arm. "Jim," she said, very low, "I don't love Pierce Lambrech. Whatever else you believe, I want you to believe that."

SHE followed him downstairs to the lobby. There were men lounging about the desk. One of them laughed when he saw Eloise. He whispered something to the other men, and they grinned smugly.

Jim turned toward them. His face did not change expression, and his arms dangled straight at his sides. But he might have had smallpox the way they melted out of the room. He did not look at Eloise when he pushed out of the door and turned down the street toward the telegraph office.

His boot heels made steady clicking sounds on the board sidewalk. Men stepped out of his way and turned to look at him when he passed.

He could be framed the way Eloise had told him Pierce Lambrech was doing. If he took the War Bonnet show, Lambrech would demand the rodeo committee to investigate the shows he had lost. There would be trouble, and when that was over, he would find himself disqualified by the association, barred from ever riding in another show.

Eloise would be dragged into the committee's investigation too. Wherever shows were held, men would know about the girl who had broken Big Jim Farnol.

He could turn back to the hotel then. Eloise had said she didn't love Pierce Lambrech. He couldn't understand why she had gotten mixed up with Lambrech's crowd, but Jim and she could leave then and go back to the Blue Mountains.

He almost turned back when he reached the telegraph office. If he sent the wire he intended to send, he might be losing the only girl he had ever cared for. He would be laying himself open to whatever charge Lambrech wanted to bring against him.

But if he quit the shows then, there would always be the suspicion that Big Jim Farnol had quit because he was crooked and didn't dare to face exposure. Down at the War Bonnet there were men who were depending on him to ride, ranchers who were his friends and would back him with every dollar they had.

He had already registered, and his registration would be posted. His letter of withdrawal wouldn't reach the committee until the show began. He knew how the betting would be over there on the Snake in Idaho. Lambrech and Steymer would be taking all the money they could get laid on Jim Farnol.

Jim's fingers were nerveless when he scribbled a telegram, left it with the agent to file, and paid for it. He had known what he had to do, and he had done it. Whatever else happened after that, he would at least know in his own mind that he hadn't turned loose from his stirrups when the fighting got tough.

THE rodeo crowd already filled the town when Jim arrived the night before the show began. Hotels were overflowing. There were tents and chuck wagon camps along the river. There were whole outfits from

Wyoming and Montana down to see the three-day War Bonnet show.

Jim could not feel the same fellowship toward the crowd that he had in other years. The year before, Eloise had been with him when he had jostled his way from the livery stable to the rodeo headquarters to verify his entry papers. Now he missed her excited laughter at the crowd that the names on the entry sheets had drawn.

When he went into the rodeo headquarters, the clerk nodded to him. The nod wasn't friendly. Decidedly it wasn't.

"I think the chief wants to see you, Jim," He took his cigar out of his mouth just long enough to speak, and he didn't offer to shake hands. "You can sign the papers when you're through talking to him."

Big Jim Farnol's face was impassive when he strode into the back room where the head of the rodeo committee had his desk. He nodded to the committee head and waited.

Doc Chandler, the committee head, was an old man with eyes that seemed to bristle out of his face. The War Bonnet show was his one pride. It was an honest show, and he kept it that way.

He unhooked the gold toothpick from his watch chain and tapped a stack of papers in front of him with it.

"Jim," his voice boomed dryly through the narrow room. "There's been some talk about your ridin' this summer, so I got reports on you from Billings and Jackson. I got some bank reports on you here, too. They look bad."

Big Jim Farnol pulled a chair up to the desk and rolled himself a cigarette. "Do they look bad enough to bar me?" he asked almost indifferently.

Doc Chandler shook his massive head. "That's up to you, Jim. It all depends on this show. I'm goin' to get to the bottom of this, and the association will get my report. It's goin' to hurt somebody, and that somebody

might be you.’

Jim studied the older man’s face before he answered. “You mean,” he spoke evenly, “that if I don’t take the War Bonnet or if there’s anything looks funny about my riding, I’ll be barred. If I do take it, you figure on findin’ out why I didn’t take those other two?”

Doc Chandler nodded. “That’s about it. There’s talk about a girl bein’ mixed up in this. If you’ve been framed, I’ll give you a chance to prove it. If you haven’t, the best thing I can tell you to do is to get out of town, and stay out.”

“Thanks,” Jim picked up his hat. He stopped in the doorway.

“Doc,” he said, “you’ve seen a lot of names as big as mine, so maybe you’ll understand this. I don’t need the money there is in the shows. Me and that girl you mentioned could leave here tonight and you could bar both of us from ever signing for another show, but that’s all you could do.

“On the other hand, though, Doc, I don’t reckon we’d make much of a go of it if folks figured we was both crooked and if each of us kind of doubted the other one. I guess we’ll just let this hand ride as it’s dealt right now.”

THE rodeo park was crowded even on the opening day. People knew that any show Doc Chandler ran would be honest, or as near honest as any men could make a show. Horses would go high and the rider who took first money would be the rider who topped them.

He saw Eloise when she stunted her horse in front of the grandstands. He didn’t go over and hold her stirrup for her as he usually did before she mounted. The less they saw of each other until the show was over, the better it was likely to be for both of them.

She took the fire jump that most men in the rodeo business would have avoided. He

wondered how a girl with the courage she had would get herself mixed into anything like framing shows. Something was pretty much wrong there.

Jim rode twice that day, and his luck was bad both times. He drew easy horses. They were horses that bucked straight, and any man who could stay in a saddle could ride. Each time when he rode back to the chutes with the pick up men he was cursing under his breath.

A man had to have worse horses than that to ride if he took the War Bonnet show, and Jim Farnol was not even sure he wanted to take that show.

He wondered where the committee investigation would lead if he took the show. He knew where it would lead if he didn’t.

It was after the final event and the crowds were leaving the stands that he saw Eloise pushing toward him through the ropers and “doggers” who clustered around the chutes. There were white spots in her cheeks, and her eyes were puzzled and angry at the same time.

“Jim,” she accused him. “Are you trying to throw this show? That last ride you almost pulled leather, and the horse wasn’t bucking either. If you are—”

He slowly unstrapped his kidney belt. “If I am, would it matter much?”

“Yes.” For a moment he had thought she wasn’t going to answer. “Maybe some time you’ll believe me when I tell you why I was mixed up with Lambrech. But I couldn’t believe you if you threw a show. You’ve always ridden high, and I want you to do that now. Do it for me.”

His hand dropped onto hers. “Girl, you’re talkin’ straight with me, and I’ll give you the same kind of talk. I don’t care why you got into that deal. We’re goin’ to bust this show no matter who it hits. If I’m throwed, it’ll be by a horse I can’t ride.”

THE unpredictable luck of drawing vicious horses that goes with all rodeos changed for Jim Farnol next day. His horse was a broom-tailed bay that had cockle burrs in its mane and hell in its heart.

The bay bucked with a twisting lunge that snapped him back against the cantle of the saddle with each twist. Jim fought as viciously as the horse fought. He was riding high, and he knew it. The old Jim Farnol was back in the saddle.

No matter what the outcome of the show was, Eloise wanted him to take it. No matter who was disqualified, no matter what people thought wherever rodeos were held, they would know they had played the game straight. That was what counted.

When the pick up men closed in, Big Jim Farnol waved them back. He kicked loose from his stirrups and let the horse buck out from under him. That was Jim's way. He could hear the roar of the crowd beating on his ears. They weren't talking about his throwing shows then.

He saw Pierce Lambrech watching him from one of the chutes, and Jim tipped back his head and laughed. Lambrech might be a gambler and glory-buster, but he wasn't a buckaroo.

The crowd was whooping it up, and the whole town was roaring with shouting men when a bartender pulled Jim to one side and motioned to a back room. Jim nodded slowly. He knew what that meant. He had ridden to the finals that day, and Steymer and Lambrech were worried.

Jim nodded to the men around the poker table in the back room. Lambrech was there, as sullen and as pale as usual. Whitey Long, the roper, straddled a chair and watched Jim through shifty eyes.

Steymer leaned back from the table. He was oily, with a pudgy face and long slender hands. He had a sheaf of bills on the table in front of him, and he ran his fingers through them idly.

"There's two thousand dollars here, Farnol." His voice held no expression. "It's yours if you leave town tonight. If you don't, when the committee investigates, that girl will be in it as well as us—and you."

A crooked grin spread over Jim Farnol's battered face. "It's no good, Steymer. I just got the judges' report. I'm ridin' in the finals tomorrow, and so is Lambrech there. A lot might depend on luck, but I don't think so."

Steymer grunted up from the chair, and his hand unconsciously slipped into his coat. Jim's hand met his puffy face and shoved him back.

"I wouldn't do it," Jim warned. "I suppose you know I could strew you all over this room, but I'm goin' to hit you where it hurts. Right in the middle of that money you've got bet on framing this show."

HE didn't wait for Steymer to reply when he left the room. When Jim had left, Steymer turned to Lambrech. There was a dangerous softness in the gambler's voice.

"You damn' sucker, you thought that girl wanted you instead of Farnol. She knew something was wrong, and she played you to find out what. Want to know who tipped off Chandler and asked for this investigation? Well, she did."

"Well, by God, I'll square things with her," Lambrech spat the words at Steymer.

Steymer let his coat sag open until it showed the shoulder holster under his left arm. "No you won't. Farnol isn't going to ride tomorrow. You and Whitey are going to hold a little party for him down at the livery barn. Get what I mean?"

JIM FARNOL studied the note the desk clerk at the hotel handed him next morning. Eloise wanted him to meet her before the show. Something important had happened. She would wait for him at the livery stable when she went down to take her horse out. He turned the paper over slowly in his hands.

At Billings it had been a doped horse that had beaten him. At Jackson it had been a broken latigo. Steymer and Lambrech might intend something like that again, and Eloise had some way found it out. He tucked the note into the pocket of his Levis and turned down the street toward the livery stable.

The stable was deserted. People were streaming to the rodeo park, and rigs had already been taken out. The stable boy did not seem to be around. Jim puzzled. That was peculiar.

Jim called Eloise's name, and there was no answer. The stable was dark inside. He could see the empty stalls where horses had stood the night before. Eloise kept her big white gelding in a stall in the rear. He whistled to himself while he walked down the dark alleyway toward the stall.

He stopped suddenly. The horse was gone. There was no one waiting there in the stall. He heard a noise behind him and whirled. The snaky coil of a lariat dropped over his shoulders.

Things seemed to happen at once then. A man dissolved out of the stall close to where Jim was standing, and Jim caught the blue sheen of a gun barrel. He threw himself at the man, and the rope around his arms jerked him back.

He saw the gun barrel swing up and arc down. He tried to twist to avoid the blow, and the gun cracked down on his head.

Through a blurr of sounds and lights he heard Lambrech's voice. "All right, Whitey, work him over."

Jim couldn't move for the rope that was wrapped around his body. He felt a boot crash into his ribs while he fought for consciousness. There was no pain. His mind was too numb for that. The boot rose and fell again. He couldn't keep track of the number of times.

Without knowing how he knew it, he knew what would happen. Lambrech and Whitey would leave him in a stall where

there was a horse. When he was found, people would think he had been trampled by the horse. They wouldn't tie him. They would make sure he was unconscious and let the horse do the rest.

He fought to get the fog out of his mind, and it grew deeper. He could hear voices without associating them with men. He could feel a dull ache in his chest and then he couldn't feel or hear anything.

THE next thing he knew, water was sloshing over him, and he looked up into the white, scared face of the stable boy.

It took him minutes to get his muscles and breathing coordinated so that he could speak.

"Lord, Mr. Jim," the stable boy kept saying over to himself. "That blue horse sure did tromp you. I knowed I shouldn't go out to the show even when them fellers give me a ticket. That's why I come back early."

"Shut up," Jim's voice sounded wrong. He could feel the pain in his chest then, the gouging tearing sort of pain that means broken ribs. "Get a horse. I got to get out there, boy."

The stable boy shook his head. "The show's most over. They'll be ridin' for top money pretty quick now. I'll fetch a doctor."

Jim didn't object when the boy scampered out of the stable. He didn't have time to argue. That would be the quickest way.

He never knew how he got the blue roan that had trampled him saddled. The latigoes were like strips of iron in his hands. He had to brace himself against the horse and drag his body into the saddle.

He hadn't been on hand for the drawing, but he knew his horse would be in the chute waiting for him. He wouldn't be disqualified if he was at the park when he was called to ride. If he wasn't though—He didn't think about that.

One part of his mind kept saying that a

man couldn't ride with broken ribs. Every sway of the cow pony he was riding seemed to wrench his body in two. That would be only a sample of what a buckner could do. He couldn't stay in the saddle one jump.

The other part of his mind kept telling him he had to ride. He knew what would happen if he didn't. He might not know why Eloise had ever joined in with Lambrech, but he could see the results. If he didn't ride, when the investigation came, he and Eloise would be the ones who would face it.

The rodeo park was a blur in Big Jim Farnol's memory. He knew he was at the chute when his name was called from the announcer's box. He saw faces without knowing or caring who they belonged to.

He saw a rodeo judge coming toward him and saying, "This man is no shape to ride. Then he remembered driving his fist into the judge's face when that man tried to keep him from climbing the mounting chute.

Then he was on the mounting chute and looking at the horse underneath him. He didn't need eyes to know that that horse would buck.

It was a big sorrel animal with a square head and cropped ears. The horse was short through the back and thick through the chest. Even though it was blindfolded it fought when chute men tightened the cinches.

As something disassociated from everything else he saw Pierce Lambrech coming across the rodeo park toward him. He saw Eloise talking to the judge he had knocked down and saw them both start toward Lambrech.

Then he was in the saddle and shouting for the gate to be swung open.

BIG Jim Farnol tipped back his head and waved to the crowd when the sorrel gelding mucked clear of the chute. He was making his last ride, and he knew it.

He didn't need a doctor to tell him that he would never ride another buckner. He

didn't need anyone to tell him that he ran the risk of never riding anything again.

That was his last show. Whether he quit rodeos because he was barred by the association or whether he quit with men still calling him a top buckner depended on that ride.

The sorrel seemed to explode beneath him. He felt the horse sunfish, and he took the slash of the cantle in his back when his body twisted with the horse. It jarred him, and it left him fighting to keep his feet in the stirrups.

The sorrel was wily. He stopped dead, then spun and plunged. Jim Farnol was ready for that. He had ridden buckners too long not to know their tricks. The sorrel reared and pivoted on its hand feet.

Nine men out of ten would have turned loose from the saddle then. If a horse goes over backward, a rider has no chance to keep the weight of the horse from crushing him. Jim fought at the sorrel's head. The horse seemed to shiver then to go over on its side.

Jim turned loose from one stirrup then. Everything seemed to be slipping about him. He couldn't get into the saddle again and come up riding, but he had to if he rode that sorrel. A reride wouldn't help him. That sorrel was his last rodeo horse.

The crowd, the horse, everything dissolved into a blur of dust and noise. Jim wasn't on the horse any longer, but on the ground and a pickup man was helping him back to the chutes.

Jim shook his head. He tried to make his voice sound casual as though he didn't care. It was hard to do.

"Well," he heard himself saying. "I guess that's finished me for a buckner. I just couldn't stay with that cayuse, but people ain't apt to believe that."

The pickup man stopped. "Are you clean loco? You stayed twelve jumps and nobody could get near you. Man, you rode that sorrel till all the jump was out of him. Say-y, you

don't mean you was out cold in the saddle, do you? I've heard of it, but I ain't seen it before. Lord a'mighty, man, people'll remember that ride as long as there's shows."

Jim grinned when he saw Eloise bending over him back at the chute.

"I had to know, Jim," he could hear her tell him. "I thought at first—that you were framing shows. That's why I joined in with Lambrech—to find out. That's why I asked Doc Chandler to investigate. Don't you see, Jim, I couldn't marry a man I didn't trust."

Doc Chandler's dry old voice cut in from somewhere behind them. "Couldn't make a charge against Big Jim hold water now.

Reckon we'll just float those three rannies out of town, though, when the boys get through collecting the bets that was laid out. They'll darn near have to sell their shirts to pay up, and the way the town's feelin', it ain't healthy for them not to pay."

"Yell?" Jim wasn't listening. "Do you know, girl," he told Eloise. "All the time that sorrel bucked, I could see them old Blues gettin' closer. I could sort of see a valley, out there with dogie cattle in it, and a few broomtail cayuses. It sort of seemed like we was there, too, and had our brand on those things. Do you reckon maybe that sorrel knowed he was buckin' me into everything a man could ever want?"