

"THE MAVERICK"

By R. E. SHAFF
FIRST INSTALLMENT



Roy Ashley draped the harness over the back of a dun-colored bronco, slipped the heavy iron bit in its mouth, and turned. He grasped the tie rope of its mate to swing them across the pole of a buckboard with the skill of an expert.

Sunlight was beginning to bathe the claim buildings as he mounted the seat. Grasping the lines, he waved goodbye to Carolyn and Bobby. Soon he was lost from sight around the bend of a low hill.

Golden heads of wheat waved in the trace of a breeze that moved slowly across that broad expanse of rolling prairie—wheat that must soon be cut and later threshed. Extra help must be had to carry on the work—extra cooking would soon be needed so that those coming from the outside might be fed. Extra hands were available only at the railroad.

The swinging trot of the horses brought Ashley nearer the elevators, rearing their heads above the small cluster of houses beside the railroad tracks, where for a short time each year, harvest hands might be hired.

Changes had been fast in the last few years for Ashley. He had been contentedly pursuing his studies at an eastern college, when he was abruptly called by the death of his uncle in the timber country, to leave his further education and take up the overseeing of a sawmill and getting out the logs that kept his hungry maw appeased. Carolyn Hays had become Mrs. Ashley. They had spent their honeymoon in the fastness of the forest, which was soon to become more of a prison than a home to the fair-haired nurse who had given up everything to become Mrs. Roy Ashley. A year later Robert had been born in the crude camp—robust and full of health.

All this time, the mother had pined for the open reaches of the prairie where she had been born and brought up. The climax came when Bobby, as Robert was known by all, wandered off up the knoll one day.

He saw a young bobcat enjoying the sun from the top of a rock and called "Nice kitty." The lad had followed it to a crevice under a rock and knelt down and reached in for it. As he did this, something had smitten his arm. From three deep gashes in his forearm blood had begun to drip. There his mother had found him as she rushed about in search. That had been the beginning of the end.

The mill had been sold and the Ashleys found peace and contentment on the open reaches of the prairie that rimmed their claim shack in the wheat belt of the north. The bloom came to Carolyn's cheeks once more. Bobby, now a lad of three, played in a hollow in the great hay pile by the foot of the stacker boom, which reached its long upright and mighty arm out into space and was held. Beneath this outstretched arm, the wild prairie grass had been heaped up in a pile that the horses were fed from thru the long winter. "Deck," the dog, and Bobby spent many hours here in the den left at the foot of this boom, playing at their little games.

The July sun rose higher on the claim shack, with its smooth shiplap sides. The breeze had given way to heat waves that shimmered and danced out across the wheat. Not long after, Bobby got up from his nap, taken after the noon meal and he and the dog started forth, the dog in the lead, racing and plunging with the joy of adventure.

The house work advanced under the expert hands of Mrs. Ashley. She hummed tunes as she deftly set the long row of pans filled with freshly-kneaded dough to rise on a shelf by the window. Glancing out as she completed the task, she noticed that the skies off to the northwest had taken on a brownish hue and something rumbled in the distance like thunder. She crossed to the door and called to the boy. She saw little breezes beginning to pick up spirals of dust and whirl them about. She got no answer so started out in quest of the boy.

A short distance from the end of the house a sod cellar in the shape of a monster sea elephant, reared its head with a door in its teeth, which was held open by a huge plank. As she looked, something stirred in the doorway, and she thought it might be her boy. Great clouds of dust were shrieking by before she had gained the opening, calling as she dashed down the few short steps that led to the dark cavern beneath the level of the ground. Groping her way about, she made a circle of the interior, but there was no answer to her call.

She turned and dashed up the steps. As her head came above the opening, the heavy plank that held the door open crashed down on her head, crushing her to the dirt steps. At the same instant the door made of heavy material swung shut with a terrific force, casting the senseless body to the floor below.

The first Ashley thought that there was anything wrong at home came to him when he rounded the

low hill to see the smoke still spiraling up from the ruins where the house had been. Raising up, he stung the jaded bronchos with the lines. Covering those few hundred yards took only seconds. His heart sank. Now all that remained of those new buildings were the barn door hinges, some burned nails, various pieces of metal furniture and dishes. The huge stacker boom no longer reared its proud head to the skies; it was a great mound of blackened hay showing deep pits of crimson fire which still sent forth stinging wisps of smoke.

Ashley sat there trying to collect his thoughts and poise. The extra help had climbed down and started to inspect the ruins, before he seemed to sense what had taken place. His gaze centered on the twisted iron framework of the cot in the house ruins. He climbed slowly down and walked to the side of one of the men, head bowed, and gazed at the ashes. Across the ruins, the sod cellar drew his attention; the door was shut. Either he strode his horse rising as he advanced. Swinging open the door, he stared into the dark depth and saw the form of his wife move toward him from the bottom, her face strangely white against the pool of blood that had oozed down over one cheek from the gash in her temple.

He gasped "God," dashed to the floor below, grasped her in his arms and as the men came up, started for the buckboard with his limp burden.

He was sure her heart still beat as he placed her upon the blankets in the rear of the wagon. He turned and raced for the cellar again, but there was no answer to his lusty call for Bobby. He was shouting now at the men clustered around the buckboard, directing one of them to see that she did not fall off and leaped for the seat. Lashing the bronchos into a run, they headed out across the fields four miles to the nearest neighbor.

The only one who remembered much about that ride perhaps, was the hired hand who rode the rear of the careening vehicle, trying as best he could to keep himself and their charge aboard.

After they arrived, a lad was sent for a doctor while willing hands carried Mrs. Ashley into the house. Everyone asked questions at once.

After seeing his wife in the hands of his neighbor's wife, Ashley turned to the panting team and was about to mount the seat when a hand restrained him. Turning, he saw his neighbor pointing to the bronchos.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

"My God, man, I can't find my boy," Ashley shouted.

"No?" the neighbor gasped in amazement. "Now, you just take things cool, and I'll get out some fresh horses and we'll go with you. We'll find him all right."

Thus they returned to the ruins to be met by the help. No trace had been found of the boy. Far into the night they circled the place, calling to him, but there was no answer to their calls. At last Ashley called them to stop. Word had come that the doctor was convinced that Mrs. Ashley was suffering with a slight fracture of the skull. The scalp wound was not dangerous and aside from the shock, she would soon be herself.

Only because he well knew the task ahead, was he persuaded to take some hot coffee and rest a little while. Every time he had come close to the remains of the stacker he sat there astride the horse and gazed into the smoking inferno at the foot of the pile where the stacker pile had been.

Dawn found them riding up and down the draws, scrutinizing the sides, but they were no longer calling out for Bobby. Ashley passed the old wolf-den, and then turned and came back to scrutinize the brush-lined sides once more. At last he headed back for the ruins. He might as well know the worst at once, he thought.

It was plain how the thing had come about. Lightning had struck the pole of the stacker and followed down to fire the hay. The burning hay had been strewn about, setting fire to the buildings. Carolyn had been looking for Bobby when she was knocked out by the door of the sod cellar.

The thing that had drawn him back to the hay stack each time was the knowledge of that play house at the foot of the boom, the den where Bobby and the dog were wont to play their games. He had already gone over the ruins of the house and barn, but the stack still was a heap of red hot ashes. The horses were out in the pasture and had been saved. Until the stack burned itself out it was impossible to search there, so he rode back across the fields to his neighbor's.

Carolyn was conscious when he came in the room, her cheeks were flushed more than usual, dark red formed crescents under her eyes; it was plain that she had been crying.

Ashley dropped to one knee at the side of the bed. Her hand stole to the side of his head—her fingers gently ruffling his hair. Not a word was spoken for several minutes. She placed her hand under his chin and raised her eyes so that they were nearly level with his own. Two pairs of eyes held each other for a fleeting instant—one pair pain-wracked and swollen with grief, the others were tired, yet frightened and filled with strong determination not to show what they had seen. The dogged determination to keep the worst from her, availed him not a whit.

"You are tired to death, Roy; why don't you get some rest and let the others look at the stack?" she asked miserably.

He remark nearly astounded him. "Carolyn, who has told you this?" he asked.

"No one, dear; I just know. That's all," and tears started to gush from her eyes.

Kind hands tenderly pulled at his shoulders as he leaned there, his face pressed against those feverish cheeks of his wife. With an effort he stood erect and followed the woman of the house outside. The doctor asked to have her kept as quiet as possible.

"We feel terrible about it all and are ready to do anything. I do wish you might go to bed and rest for a little while," the mistress of the house said kindly.

"Can't do that, got a lot to do over to the place right now. Tell Carolyn I have gone over with the team; will be back by evening. As much as possible must be kept from her."

Soon he was again approaching the one place that he most dreaded—the stack end. But whether he was willing or not, the neighbors had delved in the stack-end with a crude rake. Bones had come to light, bones that were small and short, and burned to a whitish crisp ash. They had scarcely got them collected when he came. His usually ruddy face was white as a ghost's, staring at the small collection there on the ground. This time strong hands led him away.

Already the hands from outside were busy with shovels by the side of the house ruins. Ashley sat there on the seat of the wagon, while they carried the burlap bundle to their new resting place, placed them in a small wooden box and shoveled the dirt back over them.

Finally, one of the hands came close. "Mister, if you like, I will put a piece of this plank at the head of the grave." Ashley hesitated a moment. "Well, I guess you can. We'll find something else to hold the storm cellar door open."

As Bobby left his mother after his nap, he and Deck had started for the hay stack, making a detour of the small garden as they came around the end, Deck bouncing ahead. They had surprised a brood of prairie chickens, and like all her kind, the mother hen had fluttered along the ground, helplessly out of reach of the dog. They started in hot pursuit down over a knoll, then into a draw, the dog in the lead. Soon the bird soared into the air and was out of sight. The ground sloped away from them and so they kept on, the hunting instinct strong within them both. Unconscious of the fact that home was a long way off, they merrily played tag with a gopher and Deck tried to dig him out.

They were thus engaged when it grew dark. The dog pricked up his ears and bolted at the first sound of thunder and disappeared over the first raise of ground. Bobby tried to follow, but when he reached the top he was blown over by a gust of wind. He screamed with fright as the terrific force tore at him. Each time he tried to get to his feet he was pushed farther from the direction of home. Then the rain poured down. Luckily, he had nearly reached the bottom of the draw in his tussle with the wind.

The force of the storm rushed by overhead, thunder and lightning roared and flashed about the mite, frightened, could not express his condition, he was terrified.

So soon do those storms come to the prairie in summer, so suddenly do they stop. And the sun came out to bathe the endless sweep of soil and vegetation. The flood gates of Bobby's heart were loosed and he ran and screamed for "Mamma." But "Mamma" was nowhere to hear and comfort him. All this time, he was running farther in the wrong direction.

So as he did, and scream until there was no sound to come from his raw and torn throat, the long slanting rays of the setting sun found him worn out on the side of a shallow draw. His clothes were so nearly dry now and he was oh—so tired.

Near at hand was a large black hole in the earth, that is, large to the lad of three and one-half years. It had served as the home for a coy-

ote family. Somewhere out in the open a cry went up and he started. His hand came in contact with the edge of the hole and in he scrambled feet first until he came to a turn and there he crouched. The hole was too large for him and some of the water had run down inside the hole. He was bruised and his face and hands were torn, the mud soothed him and there he crouched and whimpered.

Out upon that lonely stretch of prairie fared forth another wanderer. The storm had come upon her several miles from her family. She craved in a recess under the small overhang of the bank of the draw. Drenched by the rain, she had resumed her return journey from a hunting trip that had only netted her one grass frog.

Nose in the air, snuffing every eddy breeze carrying their tidings of information came a small shepherd dog—but it was not Deck. This dog, left to shift for herself when a wandering family had moved from their cabin and deserted the sod shanty that had been their home for some two seasons of unsuccessful dry farming. Cast upon her own resources, she had managed to get thru the winter by matching her wits against those of the little brush rabbits that inhabit the draws of the Northwest. Half wild now, she had whelped a litter of coyotes in under the overhang, as she neared the den where those four furry balls had been left.

The smell of a fresh badger track came to her nose. Dropping the frog, the hair rising on her back, she closed with the marauder. Her fangs ripped at the loose skin and back of the badger as she passed over it, but there had been no damage. As she checked herself, the short-legged digger came at her hissing fiercely. Standing her ground, she lashed out with all the ferocity of the fighting instinct born of mother love.

Here she had met one of the fiercest animals of its size. In close combat, armed with sharp cutting teeth and long heavy claws, the badger could give punishment and at the same time, the loose hide protected it from the teeth of the dog. It was impossible for the dog to reach a vital spot except by hanging on, and that gave the badger a chance to grasp hold and at the same time get in several tearing thrusts with those heavy claws at the throat of the dog. After several rushes on the part of the dog, she changed her tactics. Instead of rushing in each time, she snapped at the face of the badger as it rushed at her. Time wore on and the dog began to slow up in her assault while the digger seemed to mind the

affray not a bit. Soon the badger became emboldened by the diminishing rushes of the dog and charged, hissing at her, turning not the least. As they closed, they rolled upon the grass, biting and tearing at each other.

The badger began to give out a snuffing sound as it held up its head and backed about. Blood was flowing from the base of its nose where the dog had met the rush and had held fast while the badger had thrashed about tearing the throat of the dog with its claws at every swing; her hold tearing loose had been the only thing that had caused them to separate. To make a badger's nose bleed is to do the one thing that will in time strangle it, and that was the thing that was now weakening her enemy. The dog stood there watching the badger as it continued to roll on its side on the ground. Turning, the dog trotted up to the lifeless body of one of the puppies—nuzzled it around,

smelled each little form in turn and then returned to worry the almost lifeless badger. When she knew that the digger was dead, she started off down the draw, satisfied.

A new smell came to her nostrils as she stopped to lick the wounds which were beginning to annoy her. This new smell was human tracks. Usually she had shunned human smell but her curiosity had the best of her, so she kept on, sniffing tracks now and then. They led to the old coyote den which had been a source of annoyance to her the former spring, because the occupants had cut in on the game of her range heavily. She was near the entrance of the den now. Sniffing, she slowly approached the entrance, pulled there by an unknown force.

Thrusting her head into the mouth of the hole she cleared her nose with a low snuffle. Instantly she reared back as a childish voice cried "Decky." (CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

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