

# SKETCH

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## Winning a Wife-Woman

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**B**UCK banged his impatient heels against Crow's Rest, the big rock where he sat watching the V-shaped valley below.

Taulbe's sure'd come 'fore long! First he'd see that yellow cur-dog, then Zanny. Droopin' along behind 'd be ol' Pap Taulbe leadin' a bony mare.

You c'd always tell Zanny a long ways off by the way she moved—strong like she was facin' into a ridge wind. Closer up you'd see her gold-yellow hair and the deep red under her skin like dew sheen on ripe wild plums.

Some folks said she was a might too pert. He'd tame her

when she was his wife-woman. He'd see her every day then, batterin' up corn pone, pourin' it in the black skillet; totin' water from the spring, carryin' the full buckets light as empty ones; choppin' wood, whackin' out the chips big as a man could do; lyin' up at night in the poster bed that had been his mammy's, while the big wanderin' star in the southwest laid a slim finger of light across the kiver. The wind in the moany pines and the creaky noises in the rafters wouldn't be lone-some sounds if a fella was winterin' with Zanny.

**T**HEY'D prosper, too. He'd get one horse just by marryin' Zanny. Lonzi Heller must shore be crazy to've bet his prancy bay agin Buck's copper still that Buck couldn't marry Zanny Taulbe during 'Sociation! Those gambling Hellers kept pore as whip-poor-wills, betting on things dead sartin.

Buck reached in his shirt and pulled out a signed-up license paper he'd had the deputy sheriff at the mouth of Twelve Pole bring back on his last trip to Wayne Courthouse. The stiff new paper crackled under his shirt when he moved. There was her name with his, penciled in black scrawls. 'Twas handy havin' the preacher at 'Sociation; he wouldn't get back up Twelve Pole until after spring thaws. Buck smudged another crease in the license and stuck it in his hip pocket.

The trees under him were showing the light undersides of their leaves, curling from the heat. His tongue felt that way, too.

Too hot to sing! Should of brought a drink along. Had to be careful about drinking strange water in dog days! Some good shine-likker'd skin the dust off your tongue. It took the heat out of your blood and put it all in one spot in your middle where it felt good.

Three horses were tied down there at the hitching rail back of the church already. Soon there'd be fifty or sixty nags there, chomping down the sun-crisped grass.

The horse-swappin' was as exciting as the singin' and prayin' that would fill the church-house. They'd wrangle over the horses when no one wanted to sing or pray, anyhow.

Funny, about prayin'—it was like shine-likker—just didn't taste good too near after sun-up. When dark covered a black lid over the valley, it seemed more fitten to shout, and pray.

God was right there, then, real as the floor that waved, or the flicky lantern with its sick green smell.

**S**OMEONE was making a fire down there on the church yard, now. Hot meat would soon be on spits over the coals, spattering fat down in the fire.

Zanny'd likely not give her promise right off, just to get him riled. She'd laugh and smile a slow smile—the kind he'd always wanted to stop, half-way, with a hard kiss. When she had him stirred up till he was daft with the wanting of her, she'd say, "I reckon, I might, Buck," like it was of no matter whether they made marriage or not.

They all better treat him fitten then. He'd be a proper man with a horse to trade and a wife-woman of his own.

There was old man Taulbe now!

Pap Taulbe was tying his faltering nag to the hitching rail when Buck panted his way into the church yard.

"Fine horse you got there." Buck patted her skinny rump. "Reckon?"

"Shore! Chaw?" Buck extended a yellowed brown tobacco pouch of rotting leather. "It's store-bought."

"Naw! Save your cash money to git yourself a horse like any proper man." Pap Taulbe spat.

**B**UCK stalked away. He'd find Zanny himself. Beneath an overhanging creek bank he found Zanny sitting beside Lonzi Heller. Lonzi was pattin' Sorry's yellow ears and sayin', "Nice ol' gal." The dog looked sleepily through half-closed eyes and nuzzled Lonzi's arm.

"Nice ol' gal, huh?" Then Zanny looked up at Buck and smiled her slow smile. "How come you're not horse-tradin' like the other men, Buck?" He stalked away to the church-house to do some heavy thinking.

When he came out into the bright sunlight some time later, Buck noticed that Zanny had taken her place at the gritting bench under the sugar maple.

Sis Heller was standing next to Zanny. Sis was a long, sniffly girl with strings of rust-colored hair and watery blue eyes that simpered at Buck.

“Like all the Hellers, only thinned down pretty weak,” thought Buck.

Sis held her gritting board up to the light, critically.

“THIS gritter’s got rusty,” she observed looking at the foot square of tin with its close spattering of sharp-rimmed nail-hole punctures. Two splintery cleats held the sheet of rough metal off the back-board. Rusty trickles stained the milk of the soft grated corn which she raked off the back-board with a bony forefinger.

“Why don’t you make me a new gritter, Buck?”

“Get Lonzi to do it,” Buck growled. Zanny rubbed the stubby ear she held against her gritter until pieces of the roughed-up cob glubbed down into the pulpy mass in the iron kettle.

Buck strode over to the fire and whacked off a hunk of the roasting meat. It was red under the rind, and blood oozed behind the knife. He wrapped the meat in some sycamore leaves and stuck it in his hip pocket. He heard the rub-glub-glub of the gritters stop, and he knew the girls were all staring at him as he walked past the maple and into the woods. He could feel their glances on his bulging hip pocket. Sis’ mouth’d be gaped wide. Zanny’s eyes’d only get darker blue like storm clouds.

He heard Sis say something to Zanny about Suzy Mose as he passed. Likely, Sis was telling agin how Suzy’d been bed-sick for days, and then died, from eating raw hog meat.

Some said raw pig meat had bristle ends in the rind that turned into worms no bigger than warp threads, just as shore as horse hairs turned into snakes!

When you ate the rind before the fire had blackened it, the little worms, with heads like needles, hatched out inside you and threaded their way all through you and then you died.

Zanny likely was thinking already how he’d look stretched out under a clump of bushes in some hollow, dead-sick.

Buck patted the meat in his greasy hip pocket and planned the next twenty-four hours.

He’d sneak back to camp that night when everyone was inside the church and get Old Sorry. The cur’d like him better when he brought her back! It’d take most the night to make the run

at his still. He'd have to keep away from his cabin tomorrow. Zanny'd surely be out looking for him.

Buck remembered a mossy cave up near Crow's Rest. It'd be a cool place for him and Old Sorry to spend tomorrow. From the back end you could crawl out between the rocks and up to Crow's Rest. That'd be a handy way to keep a wary eye on the valley.

**I**T WAS nearly dawn when Buck finished the run at his still. He filled a small sack with some of the fermented mash and took it with him. He stopped by his cabin for a jug of water, some hunks of left-over corn pone, and the sleepy dog. He built a fire and stuck part of the meat from his hip pocket on a stick to finish roasting it. It tasted good with the corn pone. He stamped out the fire before the day was light, made sure Old Sorry was well tied, and slept.

A little after noon Buck roused and climbed up out of the coal-dark cave to the sun-baked boulders. When his eyes became used to the noon-bright glare, he watched the figures lazing about down in the church yard. The women were cleaning up the remains of the dinner from the long tables. A few men were pacing horses up and down the dusty road, inviting offers to trade.

Darkness came at last. When Buck could see the figures on the church yard only as they passed in front of the leaping supper-fire, he fed Old Sorry and loosened her. She crawled to him on her stomach, and licked his greasy hand. "Liked your supper, eh? I thought you would. Now let's get back to 'Sociation."

As he neared camp Buck picked up Old Sorry and stepped clear of stray twigs that might crackle.

Zanny must'a' just got back to camp. She stood near the fire. Several women were talking to her and lookin' at her shredded dress.

Some of the men not far from Buck said that it shore were like a Taulbe to carry on so over a dog.

Pap Taulbe called out to Zanny to know where Buck or Lonzi were that they couldn't go look for the dog if she was goin' to carry on like this and git herself all briar-gougued.

Zanny replied that Lonzi was out looking for Sorry, and Buck— Here she shivered into long sobs.

**T**HE preacher-man then approached Zanny and said in his loud pulpit tone that it was a sin to carry on so over a soulless brute, and that if she didn't hush he'd call her out for it tonight in his sermon on "Light and Heavy Sinnen'."

Zanny paid him no mind but sobbed over and over with her face buried in her hands, "Please, Lord Godie, don't let 'im die."

Things had gone far enough! Buck let go of Old Sorry whispering, "Zanny! Go find Zanny!"

The dog took a few steps toward the fire. Some one saw her and called out the news. Everyone came running into a circle around the dog. Sorry reeled forward a few steps with her head swiveling in a circle. Then she fell, one leg folded up. Some slimy mucus oozed out between her stubby un-hound-like teeth. She rose, looked dazed, slumped again.

"Sorry! Sorry!" Zanny tried to break through the tight crowd that had formed around the dog. "Zanny's comin', Sorry!"

Hands grabbed at Zanny.

"She's mad, gal."

"She'll bite you, fool!"

The circle sent out hands to clutch Zanny and hold her tight.

"Let me go! She's my dog. Let go!" Zanny bit, scratched, kicked . . . She clawed a groove in the preacher's face while he tried to pin back one of her arms.

Lonzi had clutched her by one of her fat yellow braids.

"We'll hold the gal," he shouted. "Someone git my rifle gun and we'll kill that dog 'fore we're all bit."

"Let go my gal," demanded Pap Taulbe. "That dog can't walk. How kin it bite anyone?" No one paid any attention to Pap.

Buck decided his time had come.

**W**HAT'S goin' on here?" Buck boomed the crowd into silence and strode to the center of the circle. He picked up Old Sorry by the loose skin on her neck. She retched and kicked.

"Now where's the rifle-gun?" demanded Buck.

“No! Buck! No! No!” screamed Zanny, kicking at Lonzi and the preacher, who were trying to hold her sweaty, slippery body.

Someone handed Buck the gun. He transferred the writhing dog to his left hand, and took the gun in his right.

“Now, Pap Taulbe, will you take that there paper out o’ my rump pocket, seein’ my hands are full?”

Silence! Old Sorry tried to turn in her hide, and moaned. Zanny’s pap pulled a grease-smear’d paper out of Buck’s pocket.

“This hyar’s a license paper, Zanny Taulbe, all signed up, and proper. You gonna make marriage with me?”

He woggled the gun at Old Sorry, who was quiet now.

“Stand about hyar, and let go my arm,” Zanny demanded of the preacher. “You’re doin’ some marryin’!”

She turned to Buck. Then she smiled, her slow smile.

“Yo’ shore went to a pack o’ trouble, Buck. Put down that rifle-gun! I’ll have no shootin’ irons at my marryin’!”

**L**ATER Buck took Old Sorry down to the creek and splashed water over her head.

“It’ll feel big for a day or two, ol’ gal, and it’ll ache you behind the eye-balls. You kin allays eat the mash out’n my still, but there’ll not allays be roast hog meat mixed through it.

“We’re goin’ home tomorrow with a prancy bay, you and me, and my wife-woman—a proper man! Nice ol’ gal!” Buck patted her small dingy ears. The dog looked sleepily through half-closed eyes and nuzzled Buck’s arm.

