

ROMANCES OF RANCH AND RANGE

Western Love Trails

An
ACE
Magazine

NOVEMBER 4

10¢

WESTERN
LOVE TRAILS

SEP 9

**DUDE-RANCH
ROMEO**

**ROMANCE ON
THE RANGE**

also a Romantic
SHERIFF SAL story
... plus others

WATCH FOR THESE

Fascinating!

Exciting!

Different!



LOVE COMICS

They're

THE BEST IN ROMANCE

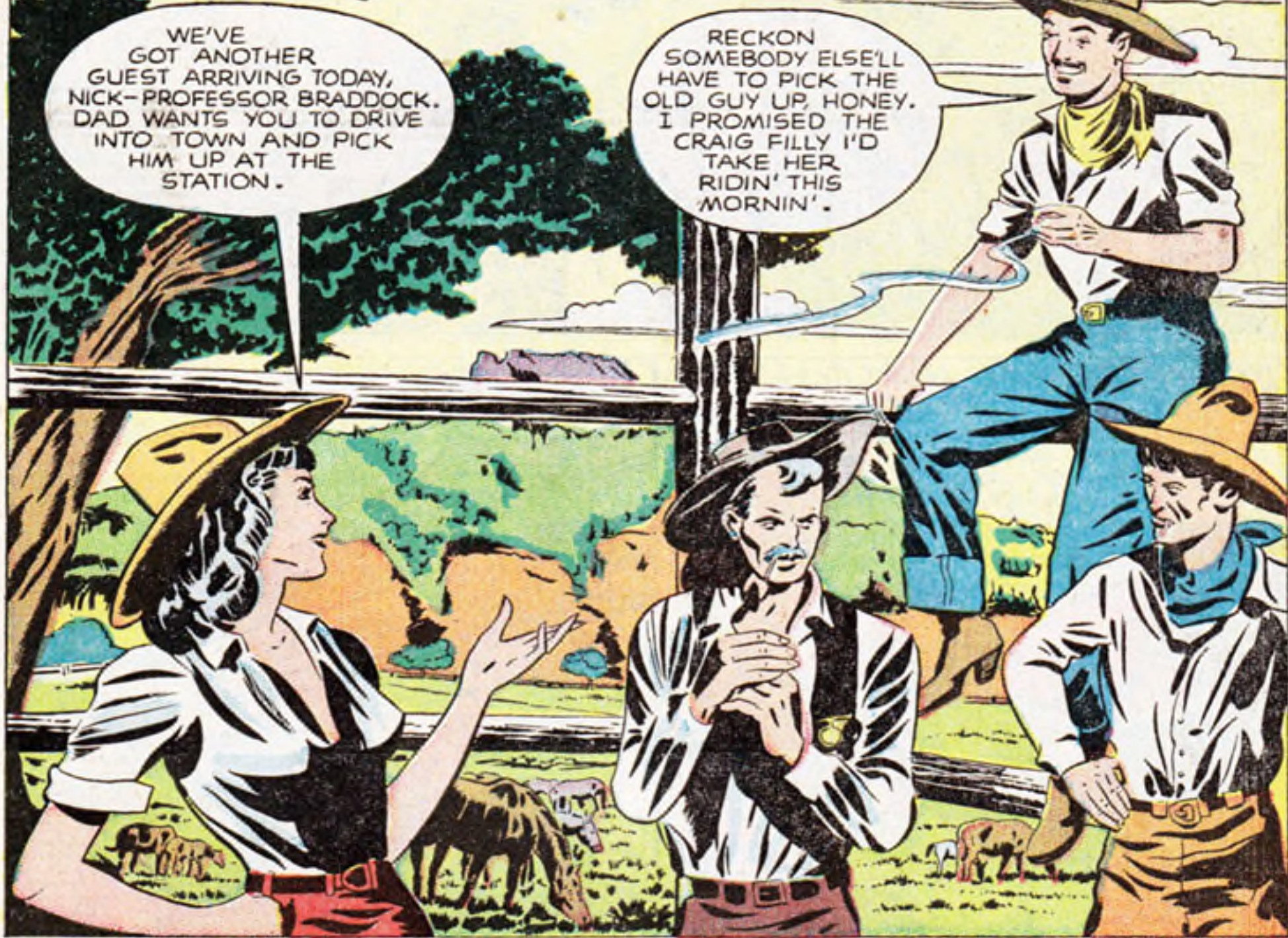


BUY ALL 8 AT YOUR NEWSSTAND!

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DUDE-RANCH

Romeo



WE'VE GOT ANOTHER GUEST ARRIVING TODAY, NICK-PROFESSOR BRADDOCK. DAD WANTS YOU TO DRIVE INTO TOWN AND PICK HIM UP AT THE STATION.

RECKON SOMEBODY ELSE'LL HAVE TO PICK THE OLD GUY UP, HONEY. I PROMISED THE CRAIG FILLY I'D TAKE HER RIDIN' THIS MORNIN'.



DON'T YOU THINK YOU'RE SPREADING ON THE CHARM A LITTLE TOO THICK? AFTER ALL, WENDA CRAIG KNOWS YOU AND I ARE ENGAGED—BUT I GUESS SHE'S THE KIND THAT CONSIDERS THAT A CHALLENGE.

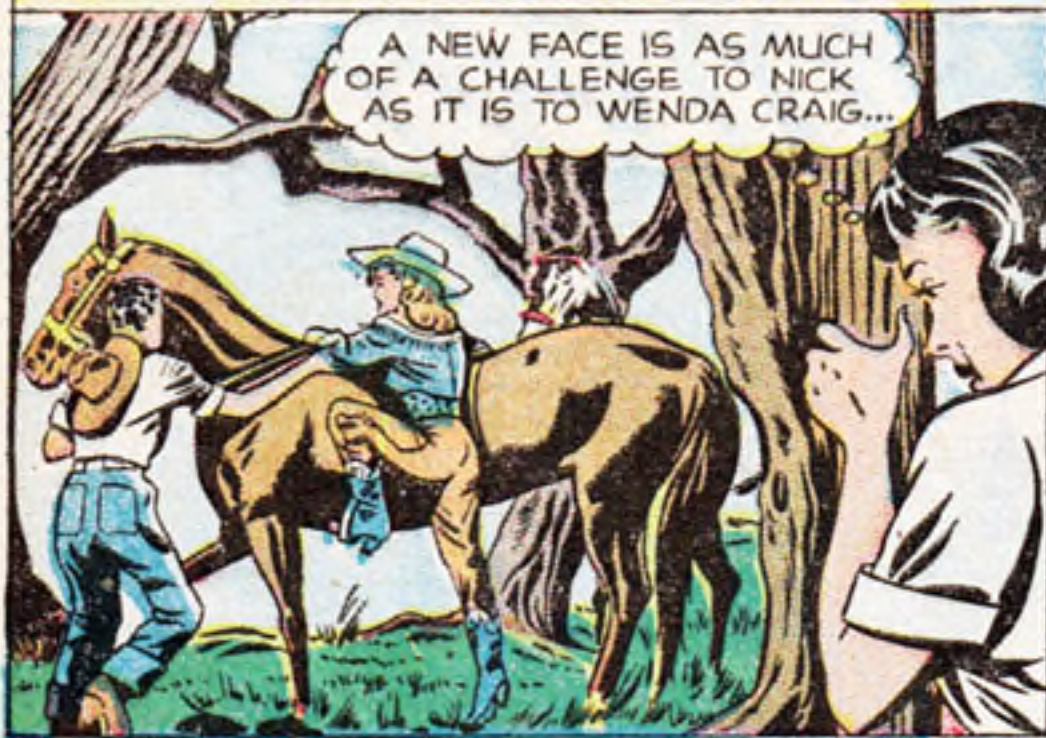
MEOW!... IT AIN'T LIKE YOU TO BE CATTY, SUGAR. YOU MUST BE JEALOUS!



I-I GUESS I AM.

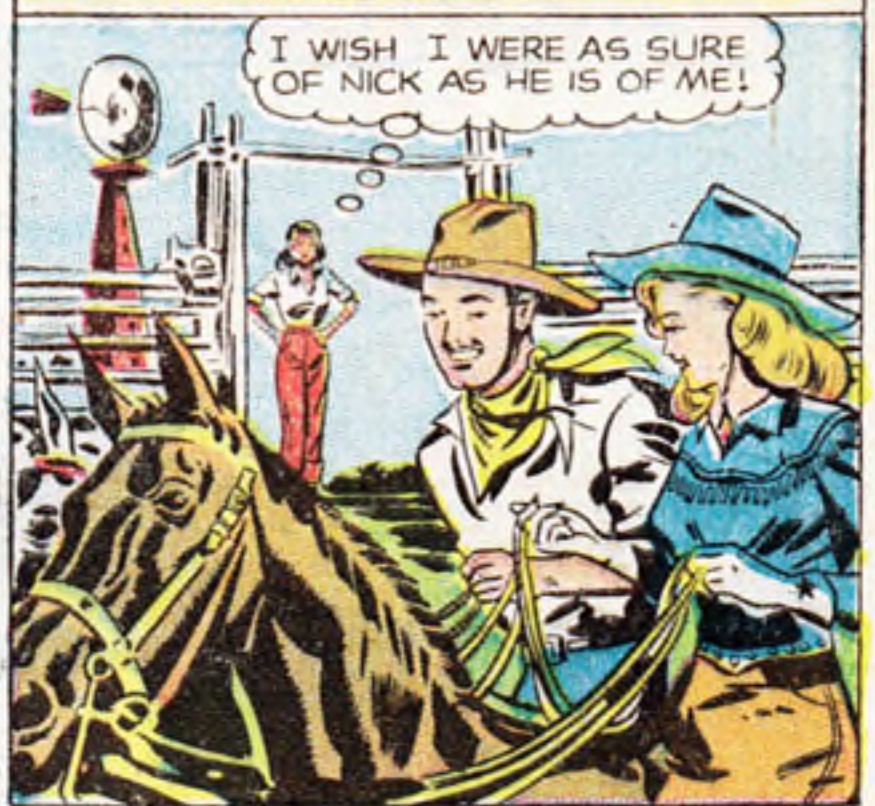
THAT'S GOOD NEWS. THAT WAY I KNOW YOU LOVE ME—BUT DON'T WORRY ABOUT WENDA, HONEY. AS FOREMAN OF THE DOUBLE-D, I'M JUST TRYIN' TO MAKE HER LIKE THE RANCH.

I KNEW THAT WHEN YOU LOVED A MAN YOU OUGHT TO TRUST HIM. AND I TRUSTED NICK—EVEN THOUGH HE HAD ALWAYS HAD THE REPUTATION, BEFORE WE WERE ENGAGED, OF HAVING TOO MANY GIRLS IN LOVE WITH HIM.



A NEW FACE IS AS MUCH OF A CHALLENGE TO NICK AS IT IS TO WENDA CRAIG...

AS I WATCHED NICK AND THE BEAUTIFUL, SPOILED DEBUTANTE FROM THE EAST RIDE AWAY...



I WISH I WERE AS SURE OF NICK AS HE IS OF ME!

WHEN FATHER HEARD ABOUT IT, HE WAS A LITTLE ANGRY...



ONE OF THE OTHER BOYS SHOULD HAVE GONE RIDIN' WITH MISS CRAIG. I NEED NICK AROUND HERE.

DON'T WORRY, DAD, I'LL GO TO THE STATION AFTER PROFESSOR BRADDOCK.

THANKS, MANDY. I'M GLAD, BECAUSE I CAN'T SPARE ANOTHER MAN, WITH THE RUSTLIN' THAT'S GOIN' ON IN OUR HERD AND LOSIN' CATTLE EVERY NIGHT, WE NEED EVERY MAN TO KEEP WATCH. IF WE HADN'T MADE THE DOUBLE-D INTO A DUDE RANCH WE WOULD'VE GONE BROKE!



NICK SAYS WHOEVER IS DOING THE RUSTLING IS PRETTY SMART AND HE DOESN'T THINK YOU'LL BE ABLE TO CATCH HIM.

YEAH? SKUNKS LIKE THAT ALWAYS SLIP UP SOME-PLACE. BUT WE WON'T CATCH HIM IF OUR FORE-MAN IS GONNA BE A GIGOLO TO FEMALE DUDES. NICK BETTER GET BUSY!



NOW, DAD! REMEMBER—YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT YOUR FUTURE SON-IN-LAW! AND YOU MUSTN'T CALL HIM A GIGOLO. WE HAVE TO HUMOR WENDA CRAIG. IF SHE LIKES THE PLACE, SHE'LL TELL HER FRIENDS ABOUT IT AND WE'LL GET A LOT OF WEALTHY EASTERNERS.

I'D RATHER HAVE MY CATTLE BACK!... WELL, YOU'D BETTER START FOR TOWN, MANDY!



I GOT TO THE STATION JUST AS THE TRAIN FROM THE EAST PULLED IN...



POOR DAD! HE HATED TO TURN HIS PLACE INTO A DUDE RANCH. I DON'T LIKE IT TOO MUCH MYSELF, ESPECIALLY WITH NICK BEING SO CHARMING TO GIRLS LIKE WENDA!... I WONDER WHAT THE PROFESSOR WILL BE LIKE. AN OLD FUDDY-DUDDY PROBABLY... OH, HERE'S THE TRAIN.

I WONDER WHERE THE PROFESSOR IS? MAYBE HE GOT ABSENT-MINDED AND GOT ON THE WRONG TRAIN. NO ONE IS GETTING OFF BUT THAT GOOD-LOOKING FELLOW—AND I KNOW HE CAN'T BE A PROFESSOR!



I'M LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO MEET ME FROM DALSTON'S DOUBLE-D RANCH!

ARE-ARE YOU PROFESSOR BRADDOCK? I... I'M AMANDA DALSTON.



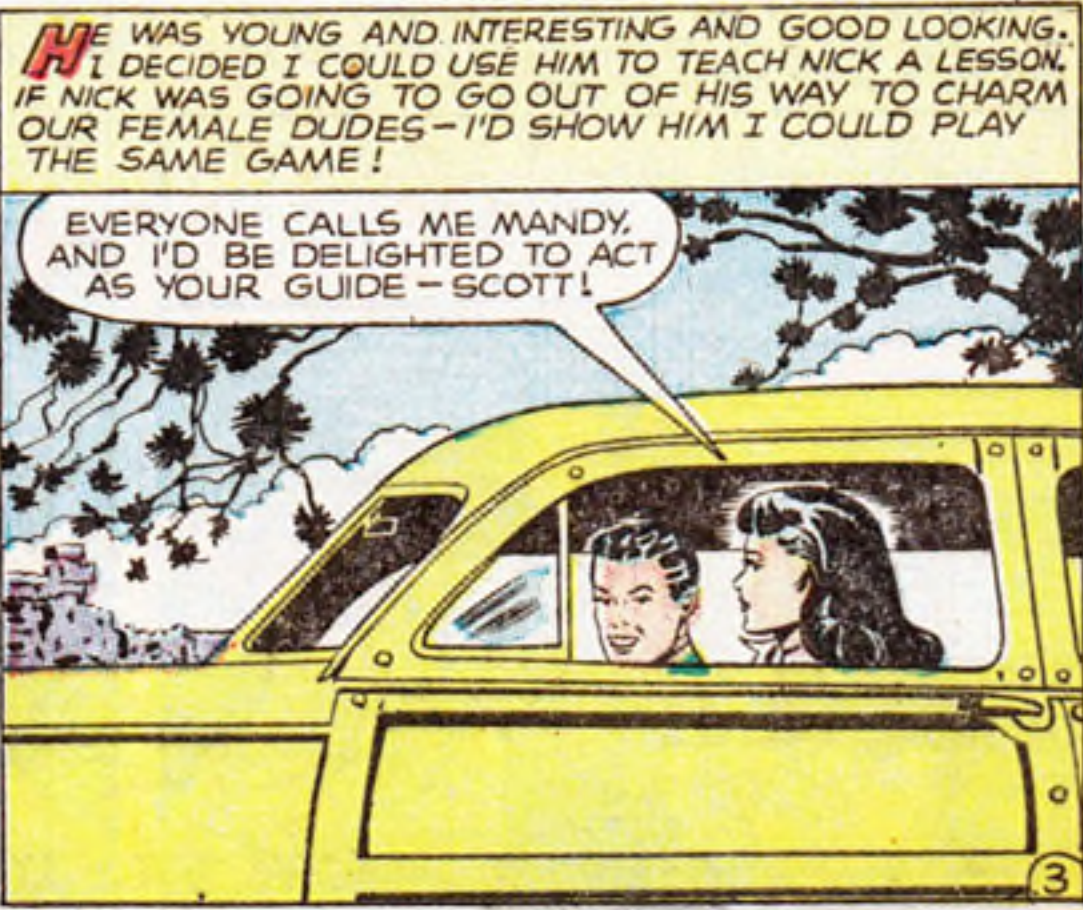
YOU DON'T LOOK LIKE A PROFESSOR! WHAT DO YOU TEACH?

I'M AN ARCHAEOLOGIST AND I WANT TO STUDY THIS PART OF THE COUNTRY. ANCIENT FORMS OF LIFE HAVE LEFT THEIR SIGNATURES ABUNDANTLY IN THE ROCKS AROUND HERE. A STEGOSAURUS WAS FOUND AT SHEEP CREEK, NEAR HERE.



I PROBABLY WOULDN'T KNOW ONE IF I RAN INTO IT! BUT IT SOUNDS INTERESTING, PROFESSOR!

DON'T CALL ME PROFESSOR. CALL ME SCOTT. THAT'S MY FIRST NAME. I HOPE YOU'LL ACT AS MY GUIDE ON MY EXPEDITIONS, AMANDA. MAY I CALL YOU THAT?

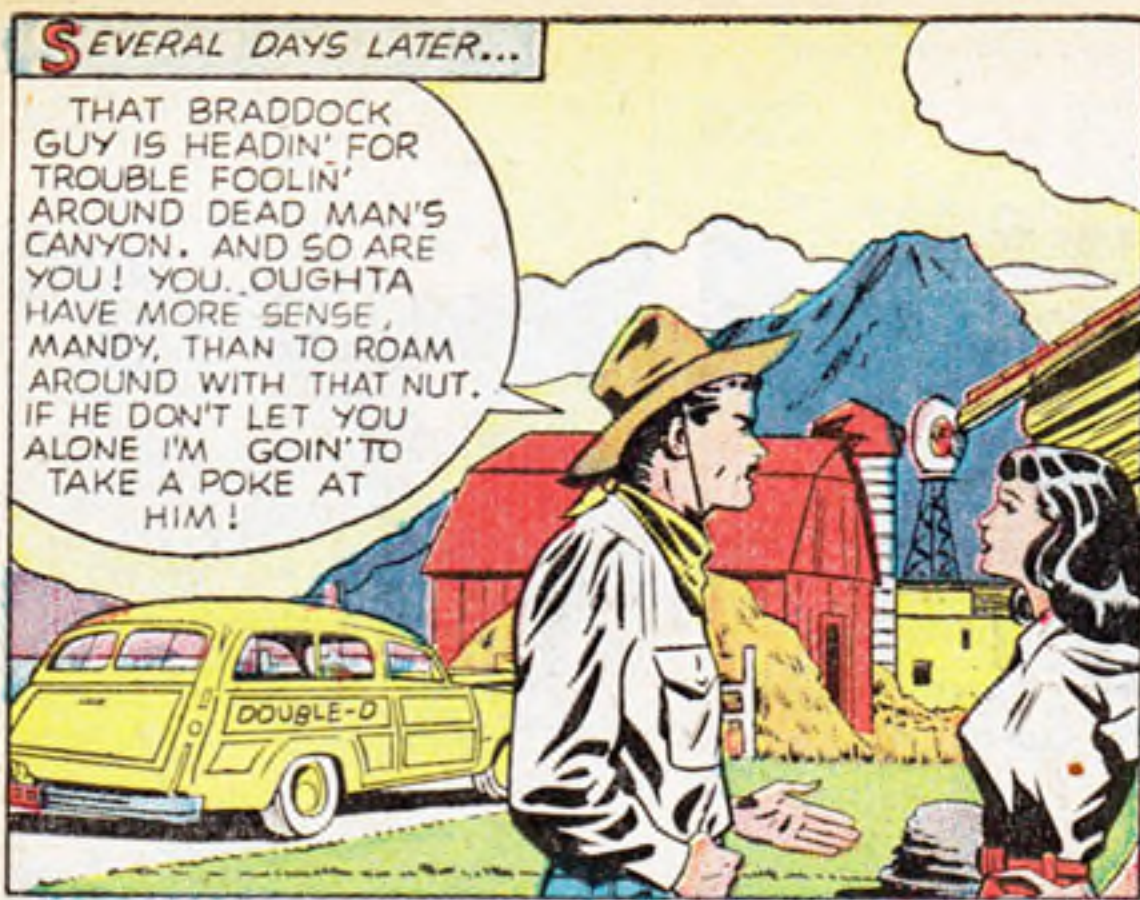


HE WAS YOUNG AND INTERESTING AND GOOD LOOKING. I DECIDED I COULD USE HIM TO TEACH NICK A LESSON. IF NICK WAS GOING TO GO OUT OF HIS WAY TO CHARM OUR FEMALE DUDES—I'D SHOW HIM I COULD PLAY THE SAME GAME!

EVERYONE CALLS ME MANDY, AND I'D BE DELIGHTED TO ACT AS YOUR GUIDE—SCOTT!

SEVERAL DAYS LATER...

THAT BRADDOCK GUY IS HEADIN' FOR TROUBLE FOOLIN' AROUND DEAD MAN'S CANYON. AND SO ARE YOU! YOU OUGHTA HAVE MORE SENSE, MANDY, THAN TO ROAM AROUND WITH THAT NUT. IF HE DON'T LET YOU ALONE I'M GOIN' TO TAKE A POKE AT HIM!



THERE'S NOTHING CRAZY ABOUT SCOTT BRADDOCK, NICK MOULTEN! AND I NEVER HEARD OF ANY REASON TO KEEP A PERSON FROM DEAD MAN'S CANYON. AND ANYWAY, I GUESS IF YOU CAN WANDER AROUND WITH WENDA CRAIG, I CAN GO AROUND WITH SCOTT!



I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY I DIDN'T FEEL THE SUDDEN THRILL NICK'S NEARNESS USED TO GIVE ME. HAD MY PLAN TO MAKE HIM JEALOUS BACK-FIRED? WAS I GETTING TOO INTERESTED IN SCOTT?

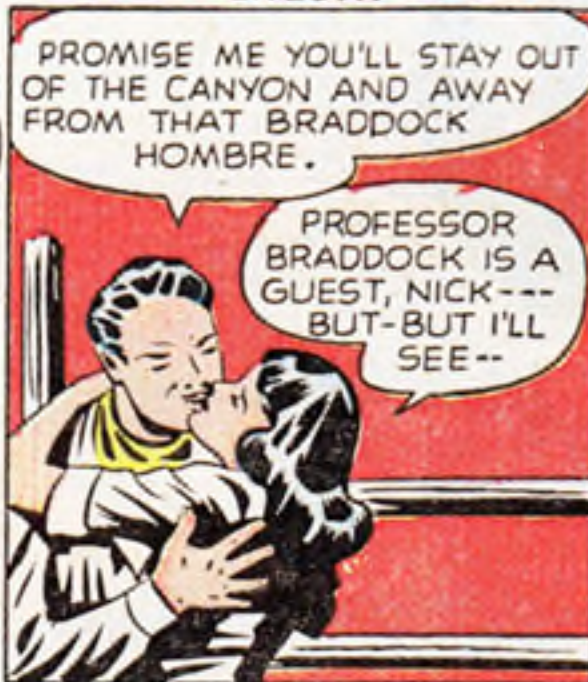
AH, HONEY, I GUESS IT'S JUST MY TURN TO BE JEALOUS. THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE TRYIN' TO DO, I BET! WELL, YOU WIN! ONLY I DON'T WANT YOU RUNNIN' AROUND THAT CANYON. IT'S DANGEROUS.



I FELT GUILTY! I WAS SURE NICK AND I LOVED EACH OTHER. IT WAS OUTSIDERS LIKE WENDA AND SCOTT WHO CAME IN AND UPSET OUR LIVES...

PROMISE ME YOU'LL STAY OUT OF THE CANYON AND AWAY FROM THAT BRADDOCK HOMBRE.

PROFESSOR BRADDOCK IS A GUEST, NICK--- BUT-BUT I'LL SEE--



OH, PROFESSOR BRADDOCK, I WOULD LOVE TO GO ON SOME OF YOUR EXPLORATIONS WITH YOU.

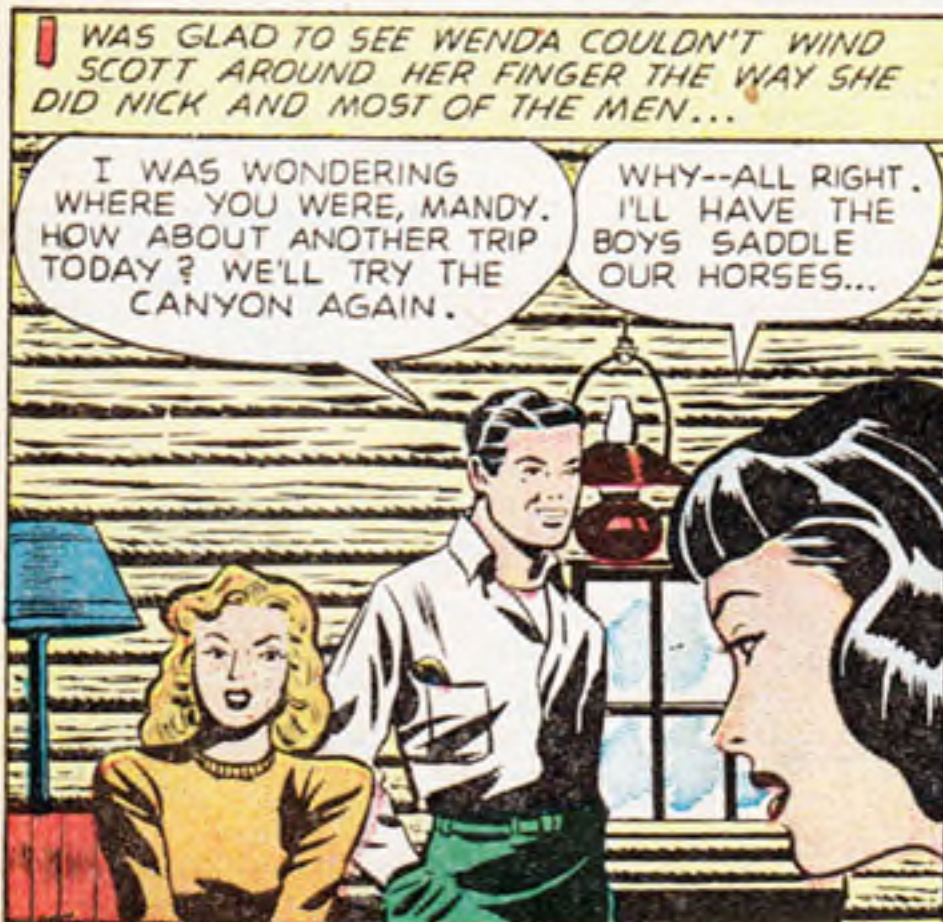
SORRY, BUT THEY'RE NOT PLEASURE EXCURSIONS, MISS CRAIG



I WAS GLAD TO SEE WENDA COULDN'T WIND SCOTT AROUND HER FINGER THE WAY SHE DID NICK AND MOST OF THE MEN...

I WAS WONDERING WHERE YOU WERE, MANDY. HOW ABOUT ANOTHER TRIP TODAY? WE'LL TRY THE CANYON AGAIN.

WHY--ALL RIGHT. I'LL HAVE THE BOYS SADDLE OUR HORSES...



AFTER ALL, I HADN'T ACTUALLY PROMISED NICK I WOULDN'T ACT AS SCOTT'S GUIDE! BESIDES, AS I HAD TOLD NICK, SCOTT WAS A GUEST PAYING GOOD MONEY TO DO THE THINGS HE WANTED TO DO. ACTUALLY, I KNEW I WANTED TO GO WITH HIM...

WE'LL SEE WHAT NICK SAYS ABOUT THAT! HIS GIRL FRIEND AND THE SNOOTY PROFESSOR ON A COZY CANYON PARTY!



BECAUSE OF TALES OF PROSPECTORS AND EARLY SETTLERS WHO HAD BEEN AMBUSHED AND KILLED HERE, THE CANYON WAS A PLACE MOST PEOPLE AVOIDED...

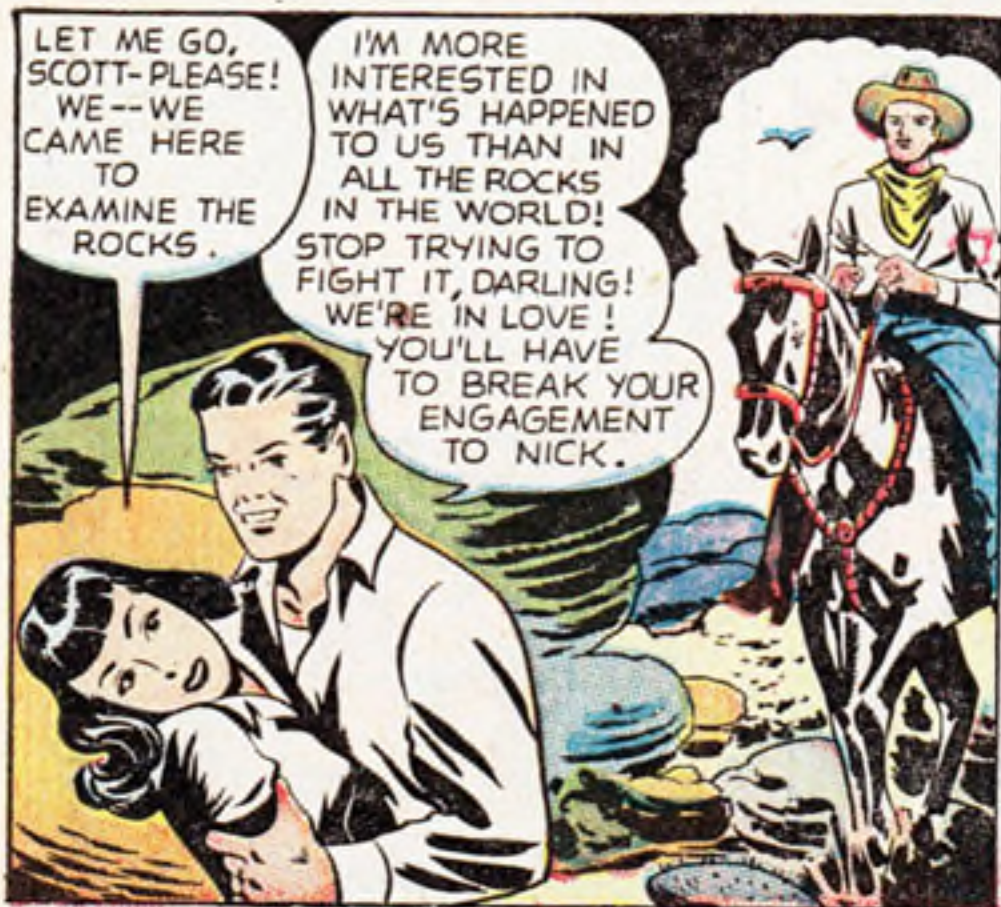


AS WE GOT OFF OUR HORSES AND STARTED TOWARD THE ROCKS, I STEPPED ON A LOOSE ROCK AND SLIPPED! SCOTT CAUGHT ME...



I HAD THOUGHT I WAS IN LOVE WITH NICK, BUT SOMEHOW THIS WAS DIFFERENT-- SWEETER...

AND NICK'S KISSES HAD NEVER BEEN LIKE THIS! I REALIZED SUDDENLY THAT I HAD BEEN CHILDISHLY INFATUATED WITH NICK AND HAD BEEN SWEEPED OFF MY FEET BY HIS MASCULINE ASSURANCE AND ARROGANCE. BUT THIS THING I FELT IN SCOTT'S ARMS WAS REALLY LOVE, BREATH-TAKING IN ITS SHARP SWEETNESS!



WE DIDN'T KNOW NICK HAD RIDDEN UP, GOTTEN OFF HIS HORSE UNTIL...





YOU ASKED FOR IT, DUDE!
YOU'LL FIND I'M A BAD
HOMBRE TO CROSS

NICK!
STOP!

WHACK!

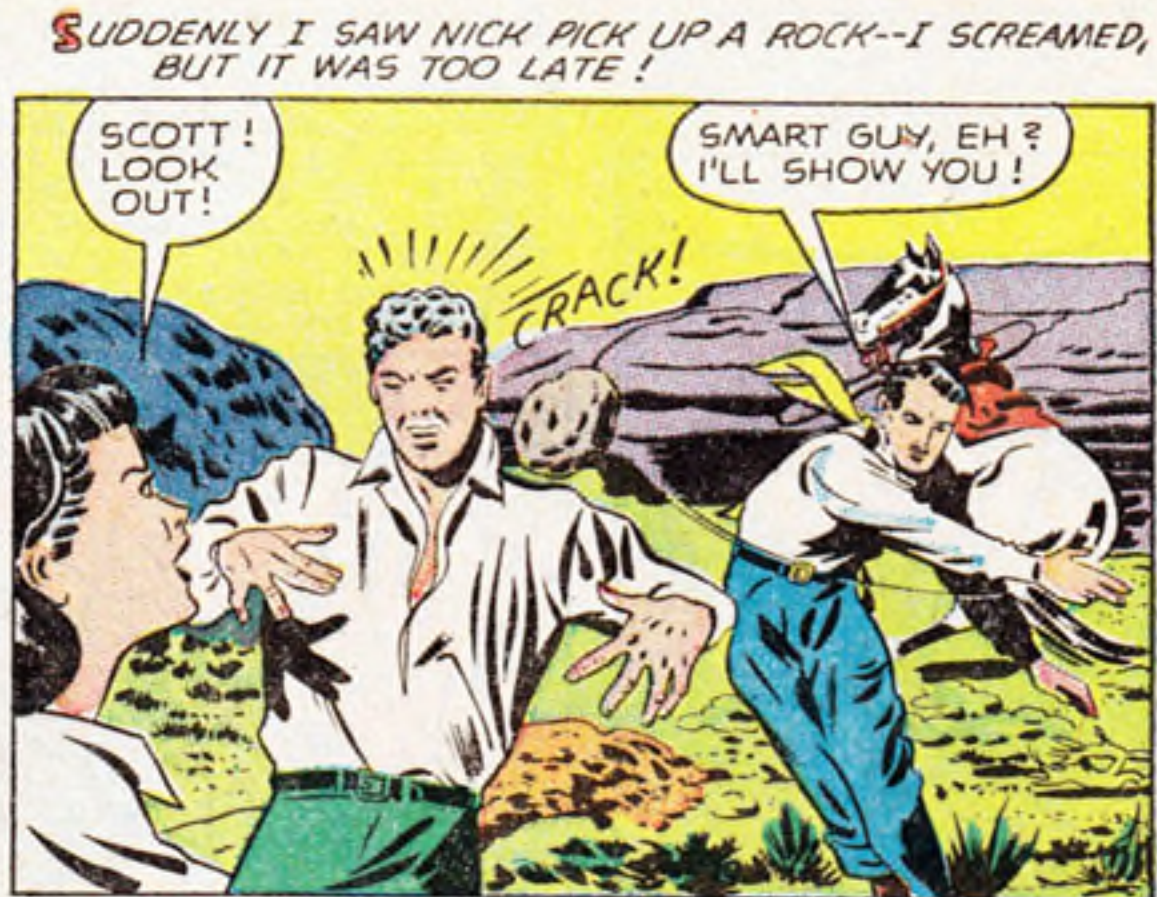


I FORGOT TO MENTION, FELLA,
THAT I WAS AN AMATEUR BOX-
ING-CHAMPION AT COLLEGE!

THUD!



I'M SORRY THIS HAPPENED, MANDY.
IT ISN'T VERY PLEASANT FOR YOU--
BUT IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO
KNOW WHY NICK IS TRYING TO
KEEP US OUT OF THIS CANYON..



SUDDENLY I SAW NICK PICK UP A ROCK--I SCREAMED,
BUT IT WAS TOO LATE!

SCOTT!
LOOK
OUT!

SMART GUY, EH?
I'LL SHOW YOU!

CRACK!



THIS WILL TEACH
YOU TO STAY OUT
OF MY BUSINESS!

OH, YOU BEAST!
HOW COULD I
HAVE BEEN SO
FOOLED BY
YOU!



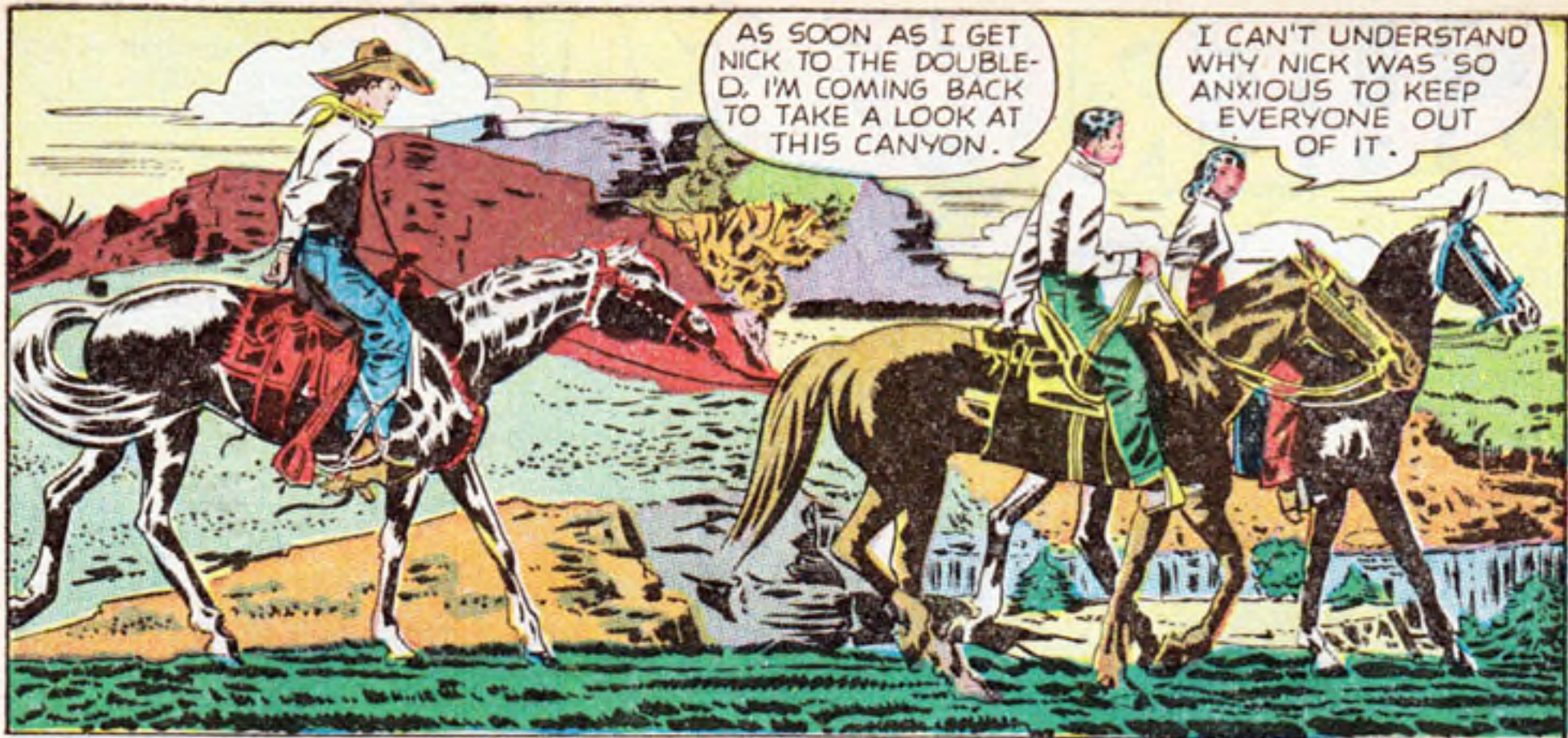
YOU-YOU LITTLE WILDCAT!
I'LL ATTEND TO YOU, TOO!

YOU-YOU CAN'T
EVEN FIGHT FAIR!
YOU WERE GOING
TO KILL HIM!



OH--SCOTT--
THANK HEAVENS!
I-I COULDN'T
HAVE FOUGHT
HIM OFF MUCH
LONGER--SOB!
OH, IT WAS--IT
WAS AWFUL--I
NEVER REALIZED
HE WOULD BE
LIKE THIS!

YOU'RE THE MOST
WONDERFUL GIRL
IN THE WORLD,
DARLING. I KNEW
FROM THE BEGINNING
YOU WOULD BE
AS BRAVE AS YOU
ARE PRETTY AND
SWEET--CAN YOU
GET THE ROPE
FROM MY
SADDLE?



AS SOON AS I GET NICK TO THE DOUBLE-D, I'M COMING BACK TO TAKE A LOOK AT THIS CANYON.

I CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHY NICK WAS SO ANXIOUS TO KEEP EVERYONE OUT OF IT.

AFTER SCOTT CAME BACK FROM HIS EXAMINATION OF THE CANYON...



SO THAT'S THE SECRET OF THE CANYON, SHERIFF. NICK WAS RUSTLING HIS BOSS'S CATTLE--AND KEPT THEM IN A HIDDEN CORRAL IN THE CANYON UNTIL HE COULD ALTER THE BRANDS AND DISPOSE OF THEM.

WE'LL SURE PUT THAT LOBO WHERE HE BELONGS. WE BEEN TRYIN' TO CATCH HIM FOR A LONG TIME. THANKS, PROFESSOR.

THAT NIGHT AROUND THE CAMPFIRE!



I CAN'T UNDERSTAND HOW I NEVER SUSPECTED NICK.

YOU PROBABLY WOULD HAVE FOUND OUT ABOUT NICK SOONER OR LATER. NO ONE GETS AWAY WITH STUFF LIKE THAT FOR LONG. BUT I'M GLAD IT HAPPENED NOW. BECAUSE NOW IF YOU LOVE ME YOU CAN ADMIT IT--WITHOUT FEELING DISLOYAL TO NICK. DO YOU LOVE ME, MANDY?



OH, YES, SCOTT. I-- I THINK I'VE LOVED YOU FROM THE MOMENT I SAW YOU GET OFF THE TRAIN.

THIS TIME I WAS SURE OF MY LOVE-- THERE WOULD NEVER AGAIN BE A DOUBT IN MY HEART... THIS WAS A LOVE I COULD TRUST...



THERE NEVER WAS A MORE ROMANTIC SETTING FOR A MAN TO FIND A WIFE.

I NEVER REALIZED HOW ROMANTIC IT WAS--UNTIL YOU CAME!


THE END

SHERIFF SAL'S Last Stand




GOSH, SAL, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH IT HURTS! WHEN I HAVE YOU IN THE MOONLIGHT LIKE THIS, YOU'RE ALL SOFT AND SWEET—AN' THAT BADGE OF YOURS AIN'T COMIN' BETWEEN US!

I'M NOT THE ONE WHO'S LETTING THE BADGE COME BETWEEN US, FLASH. I LOVE YOU, TOO—I'LL MARRY YOU WHENEVER YOU SAY—BUT I WON'T GIVE UP MY JOB OF SHERIFF!



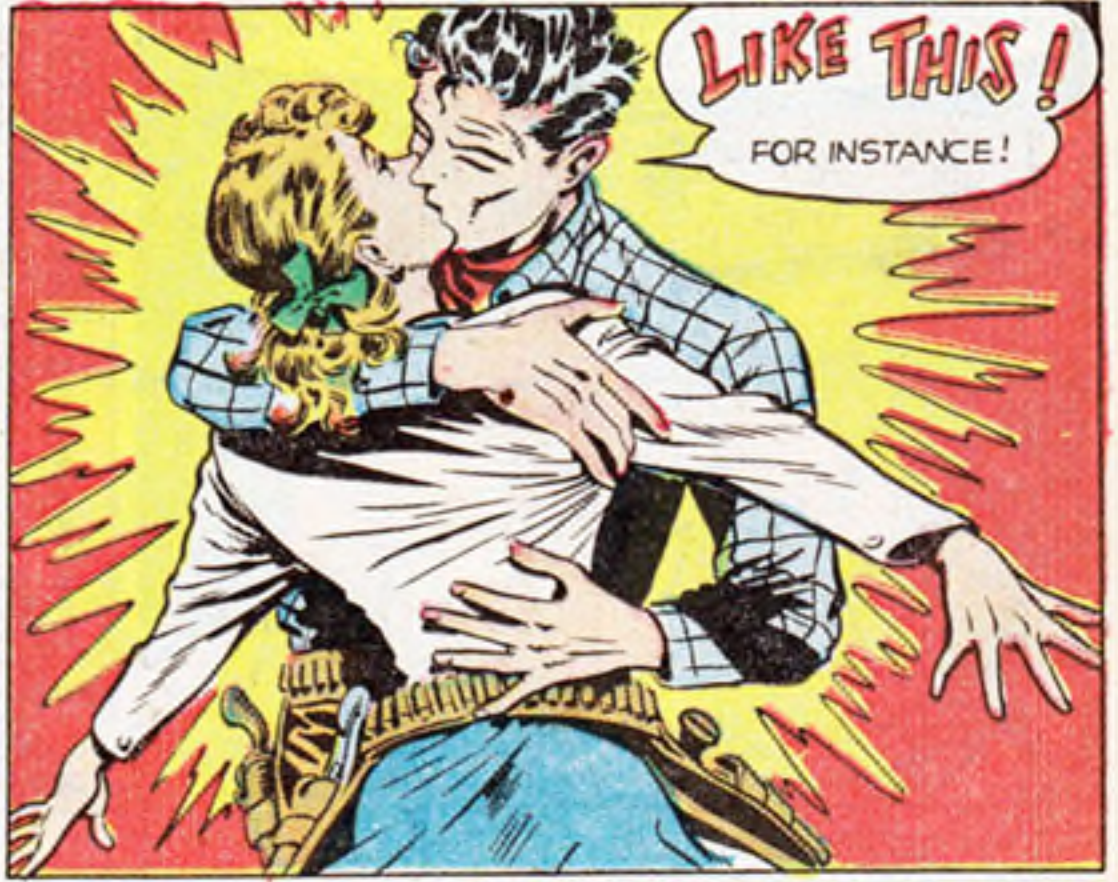
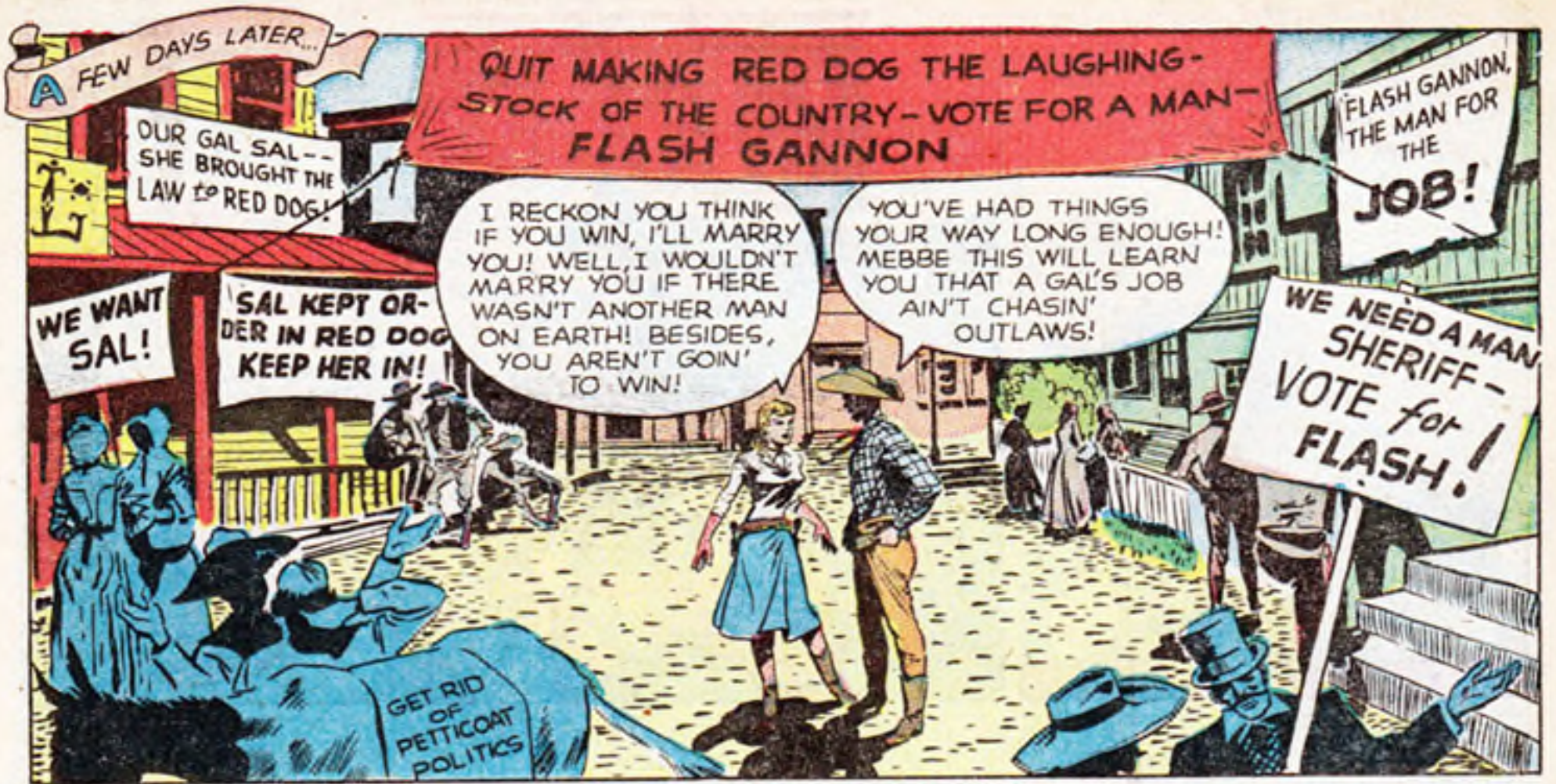
A GAL WHO LETS HER PRIDE AN' AMBITION AN' A JOB STAND IN THE WAY OF HER LOVE AIN'T MAKIN' MUCH OF A WIFE TO MY MIND—AN' I AIN'T HAVIN' ANY OF IT.

SEEMS TO ME IT'S **YOUR** PRIDE THAT'S MAKIN' YOU ACT SO ORNERY!



BEIN' SHERIFF AIN'T NO JOB FOR A WOMAN ANYHOW! COME ELECTIONS, I'M GOING TO RUN AGAINST YOU!

MEBBE THAT'S WHAT YOU HAD IN MIND RIGHT ALONG! MEBBE YOU WANT THE **JOB** INSTEAD OF **ME!**



LOOKING BACK, I CAN SEE THAT I'VE STRETCHED MY LUCK TOO FAR WHERE FLASH IS CONCERNED. BUT I SURE DID LOVE HIM AND I THOUGHT HE LOVED ME, TOO. I ALWAYS THOUGHT HE'D FINALLY GIVE IN. I NEVER DID THINK HE'D ACT THIS ORNERY. NOW I'VE GOT TO FIGHT HIM TO THE FINISH—AND—IT HURTS!



LOOKY HERE, SAL, WE BIN IN BACK OF YUH RIGHT ALONG ON ACCOUNT OF WE KNEW YOUR PAPPY AN' YUH WAS MAKIN' A RIGHT GOOD SHERIFF—HERE LATELY—BUT—



YEAH! TOO MANY THINGS BIN HAPPENIN', SAL. RUSTLERS ARE BACK TAKIN' CATTLE AGIN—AN' THAR'S A NEW KY-OAT A-HOLDIN' UP AND ROBBIN' ALONG THE TRAIL. THEY'RE CALLIN' HIM THE MASKED STRANGER AN' HE GOT THE LONE STAR PAY ROLL YESTERDAY!

I KNOW ALL THIS, BOYS—I-I'VE BEEN WORKIN' ON IT. I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF THE MASKED STRANGER AN' THE RUSTLER WAS THE SAME LOBO—BUT I HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO THROW A LOOP ON HIM.



'TAIN'T TOO GOOD FER YUH, SAL, THAT THIS RATTLESNAKE CRAWLED 'CROSS YUR PATH AT 'LECTION TIME. MAKES THE TOWN THINK MEBBE FLASH COULD'VE HAD THE MAVERICK ROPED BY NOW.

SAY! THET'S SO! THIS TROUBLE JEST STARTED SINCE FLASH BIN RUNNIN' AGIN' SAL! WE NEVER HEERED A' THIS MASKED STRANGER 'TIL NOW. YUH DON'T 'SPOSE FLASH...



OH, NO, MEN! FLASH ISN'T THAT BREED! WE'RE FIGHTING EACH OTHER—BUT HE WOULDN'T TURN OUTLAW JUST TO OUTSMART ME AND PUT ME IN A BAD LIGHT.

YUH CAN'T TELL. IT'S WORTH THINKING ABOUT!

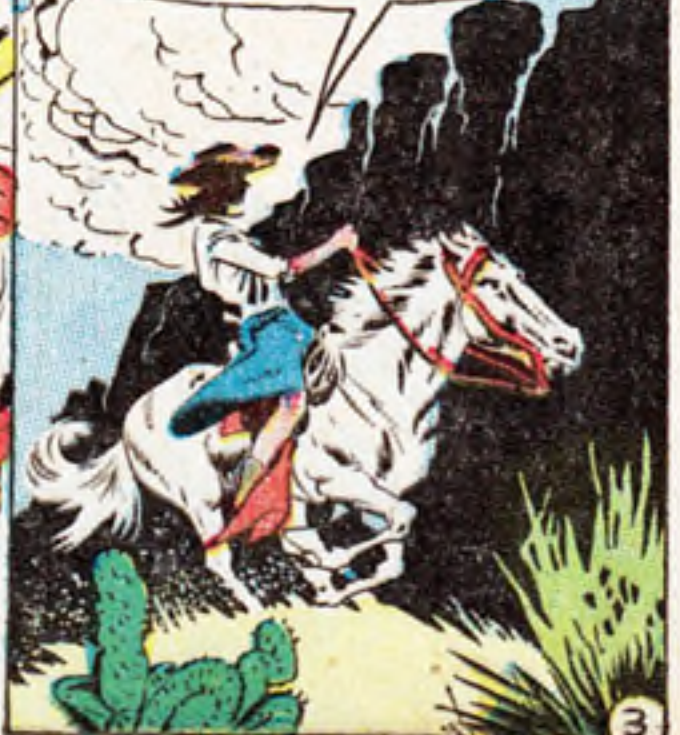


GUESS WE BETTER TELL THE BOYS TO KEEP AN EYE ON FLASH!

YOU'RE PLUMB LOCO ON THAT LINE—AND ELECTION OR NO, I DON'T AIM TO LET YOU PIN ANYTHING ON FLASH THAT HE DIDN'T DO!



IF I CAN CATCH THE RUSTLER AN' THE MASKED STRANGER, THAT'LL PROVE IT ISN'T FLASH! IT **CAN'T** BE FLASH—IT JUST **CAN'T!!!**





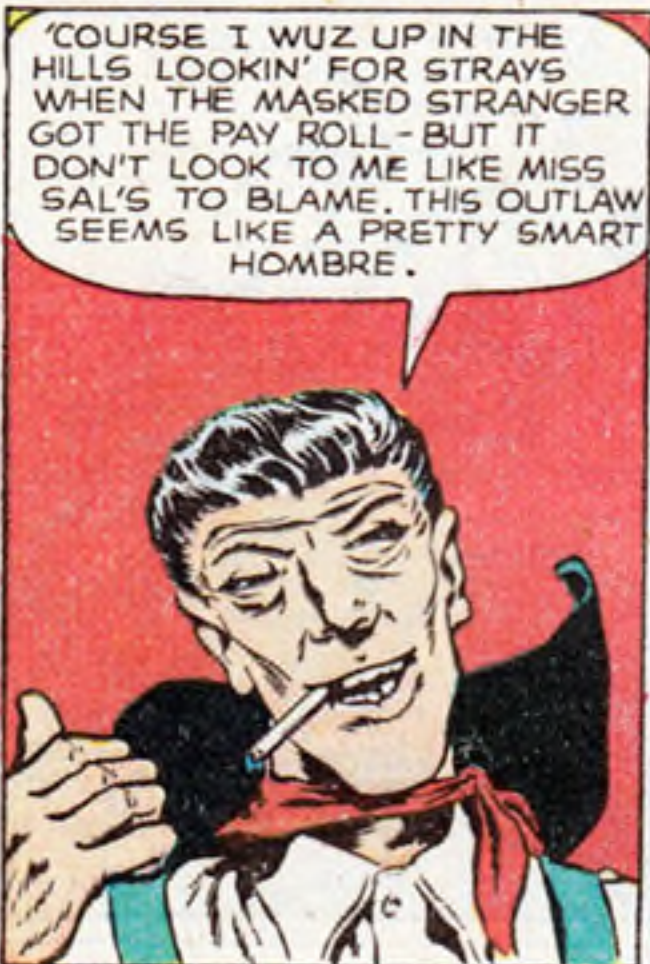
THAT'S MR. BROWN, WHO OWNS THE LONE STAR RANCH. PETE, HIS FOREMAN, IS WITH 'EM. WE BETTER TELL 'EM BOTH WHAT WE THINK.

YEAH—THEY OUGHTA KNOW.



HOWDY, MR. BROWN. HOWDY, PETE. WE JEST BIN OVER TO SAL'S OFFICE TELLIN' HER SHE BETTER DO SUMTHIN' 'BOUT THE MASKED STRANGER AN' THIS RUSTLIN' BUSINESS.

SHE SURE HAD IF SHE WANTS MY VOTE. I BEEN LOSIN' A DOZEN COWS A NIGHT—AN' HAVIN' MY PAY ROLL MONEY STOLE WUZ EVEN WORSE.



'COURSE I WUZ UP IN THE HILLS LOOKIN' FOR STRAYS WHEN THE MASKED STRANGER GOT THE PAY ROLL—BUT IT DON'T LOOK TO ME LIKE MISS SAL'S TO BLAME. THIS OUTLAW SEEMS LIKE A PRETTY SMART HOMBRE.



YEAH! THAT'S WHY ME 'N' JOE HERE FIGGERED MEBBE IT WAS A TRICK OF FLASH GANNON'S—MEBBE HE'S DOIN' THESE THINGS SO WE'LL FEEL WE NEED A MAN FER SHERIFF AN' ELECT HIM!

WHY, SHO'. THAT'S IT! IT'S FLASH—SURE 'NUFF! HE FIGGERS ON BEIN' SHERIFF AN' STILL BEIN' THE MASKED STRANGER—HAVIN' EVERYTHING HIS OWN WAY AN' NO CHANCE OF THE LAW GETTIN' HIM! 'CAUSE HE'LL BE THE LAW!

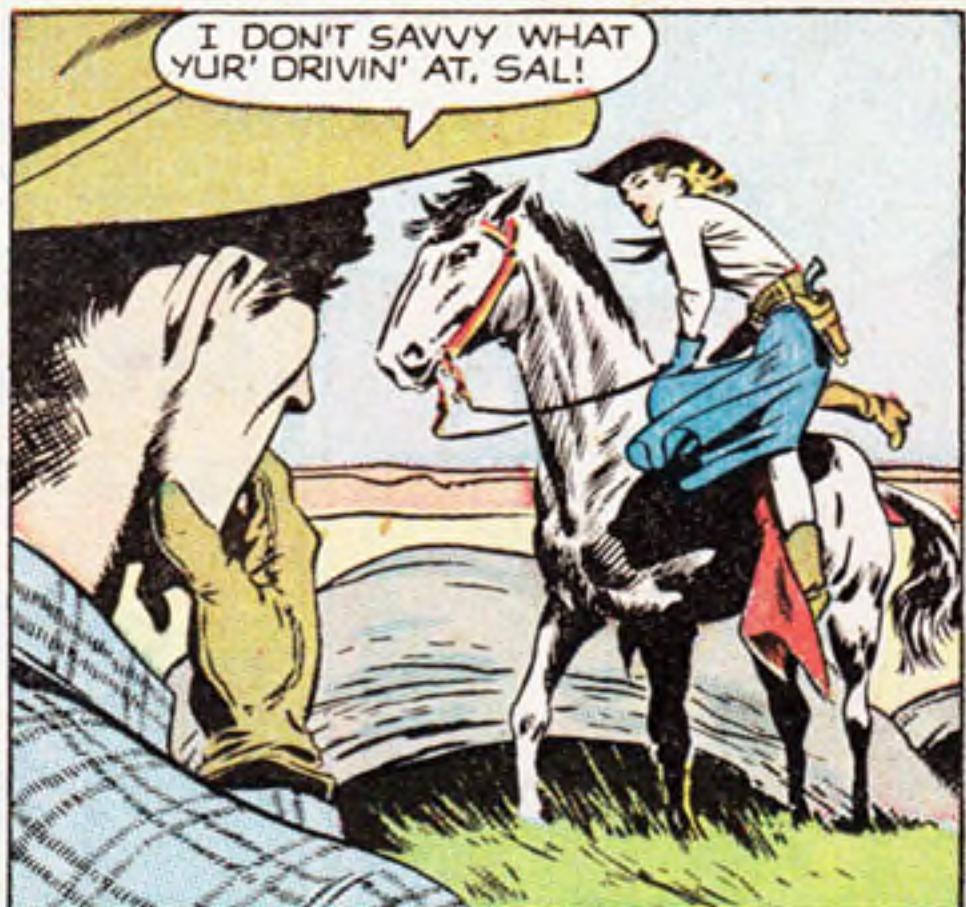
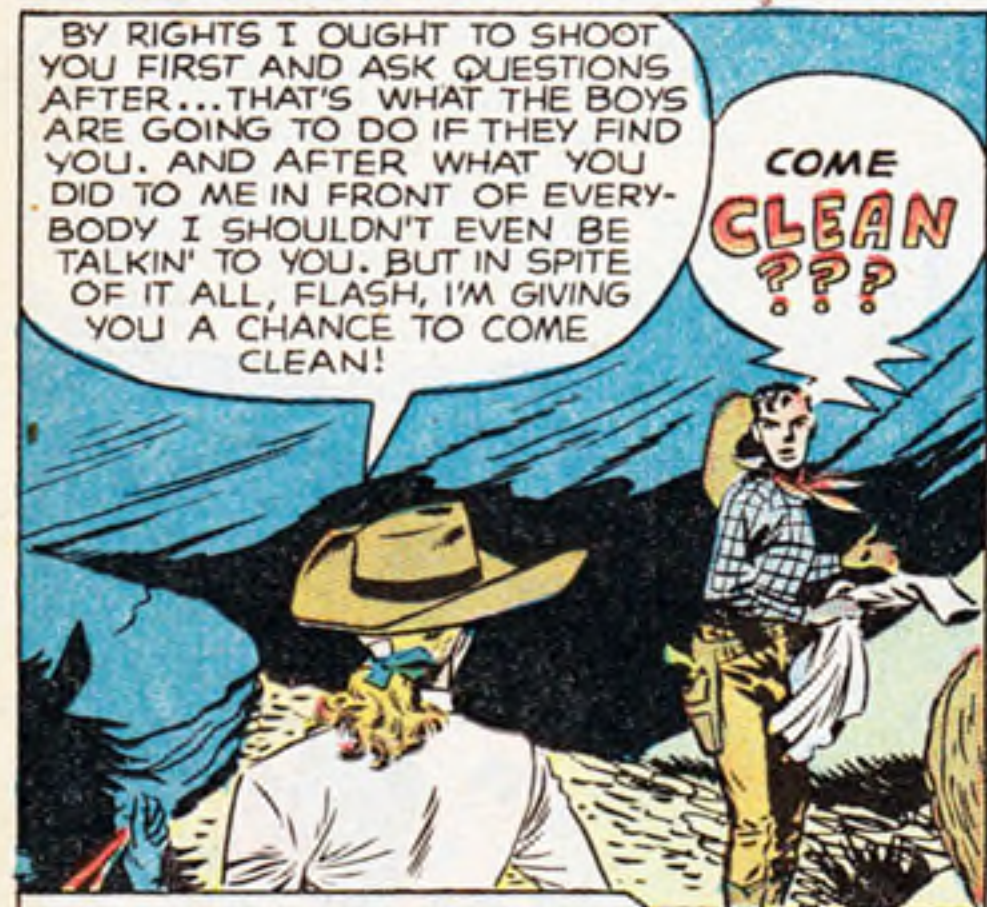
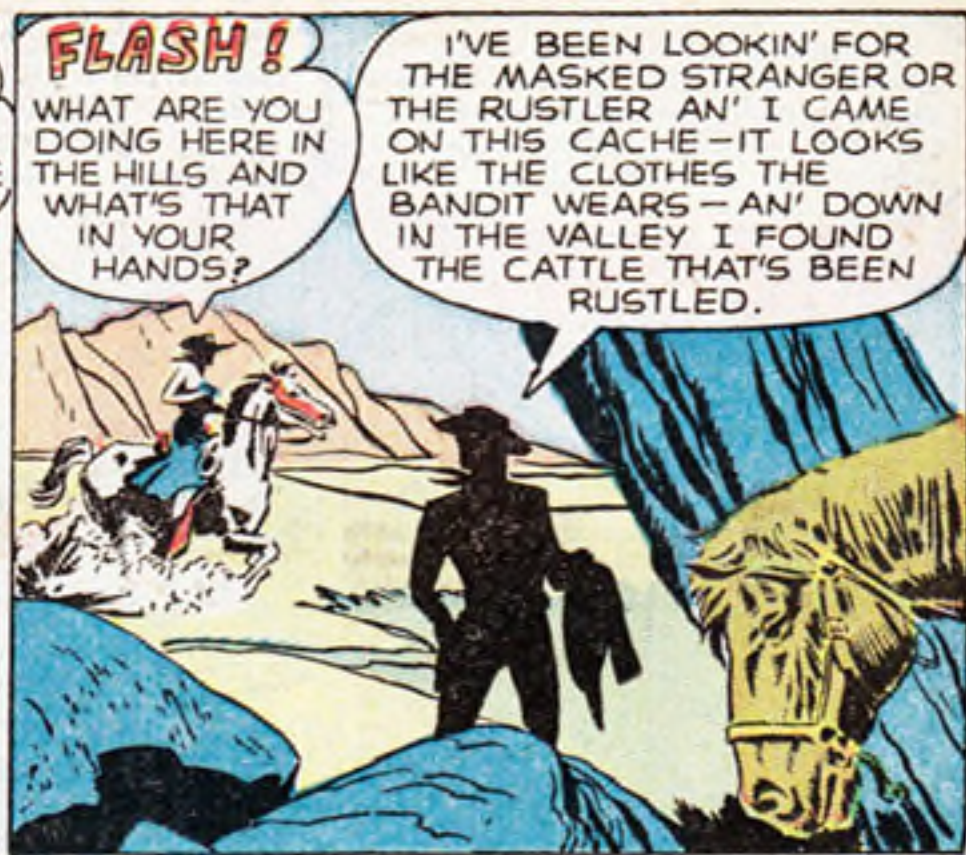


YEAH—THAT'S RIGHT.

LET'S FIND FLASH!

THIS AIN'T NO JOB FER A LADY-SHERIFF. FIND FLASH AN' ASK QUESTIONS AFTERWARD!

COME ON, FELLAS! LET'S GO!

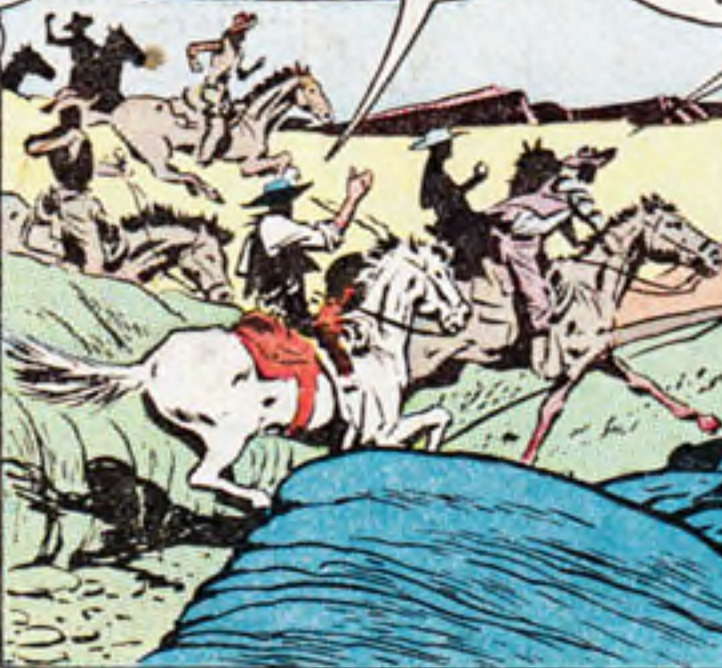


I LOVE YUH, HONEY - AN' I WOULDN'T LIE TO YUH. I DON'T KNOW A THING ABOUT THE DIRTY DOG THAT'S BEEN RUSTLIN' AN' ROBBIN'!



LISTEN! THERE'S A BUNCH OF RIDERS COMING!

THE SHERIFF'S HERE AHEAD OF US! BUT THIS AIN'T NO JOB FOR A GAL! ONLY ONE THING TO DO WITH RUSTLERS AND BANDITS - GIT OUT OF THE WAY, MISS SAL!

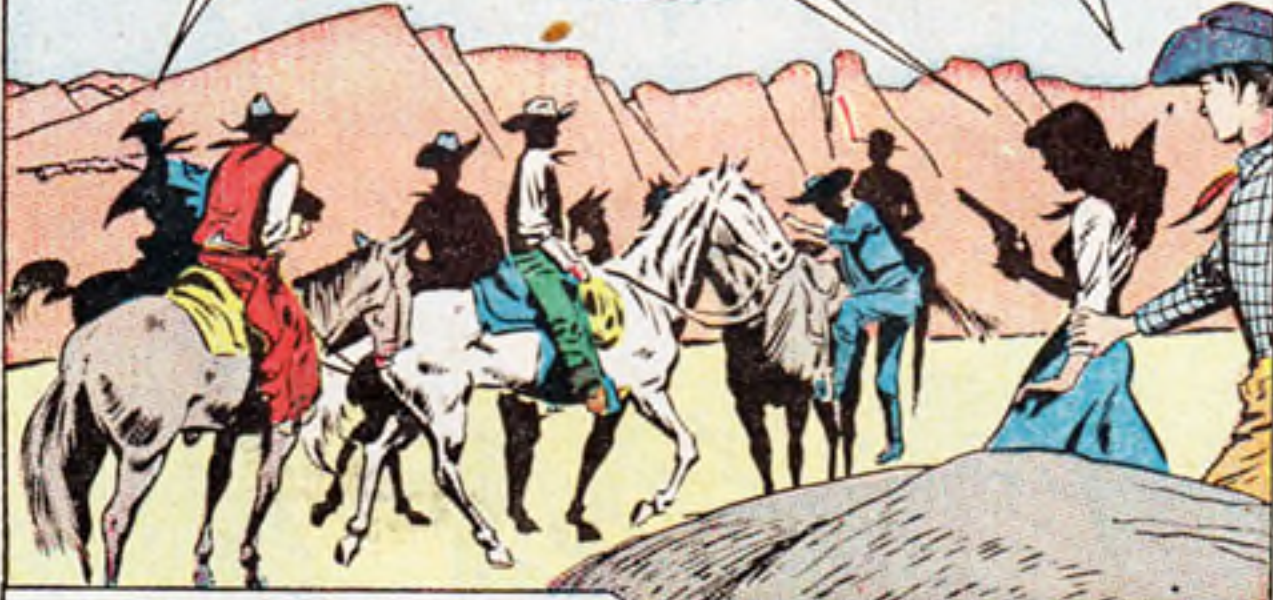


THAR AIN'T NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT. LOOK, FELLAS, THAR'S THE CLOTHES THE MASKED STRANGER WEARS!

STAND BACK, ALL OF YUH! I'M STILL SHERIFF AROUND HERE!



WE SURE HIT THE RIGHT TRAIL - DOWN THAR IN HIDDEN VALLEY ARE ALL THE CATTLE RUSTLED FROM THE LONE STAR.



I'M WARNIN' YOU ALL AGAIN TO STAND BACK - I DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO PUMP LEAD INTO YOU MEN. WE'RE FRIENDS!

I'M NOT HIDIN' BEHIND ANY WOMAN'S SKIRTS. IF THEY WANT ME, SAL, LET 'EM COME AND GIT ME!

WE AIM T'TAKE FLASH. WE DON'T WANT TO HURT YUH, MISS SAL - EVERYTHIN' IS POINTIN' TOWARD FLASH BEIN' THE MASKED STRANGER AN' THE RUSTLER, TOO. EVEN AS SHERIFF, YOU GOT NO CALL TO SHIELD A GUILTY MAN!



BOYS, YOU HAVE NO POSITIVE PROOF OF FLASH'S GUILT. BUT AS SHERIFF, IT'S MY DUTY TO SEE THAT EVEN A GUILTY PERSON GETS A FAIR TRIAL. I BROUGHT LAW AND ORDER TO RED DOG. WE'RE CIVILIZED NOW. THERE'S GOING TO BE NO MORE NECK-TIE PARTIES AROUND HERE - WITH THE WRONG MAN ON THE END OF THE ROPE! IF YOU SUSPECT FLASH, IT'S UP TO YOU TO PROVE HE'S GUILTY. UNTIL THEN, HE'S MY PRISONER AND I'LL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR HIM!

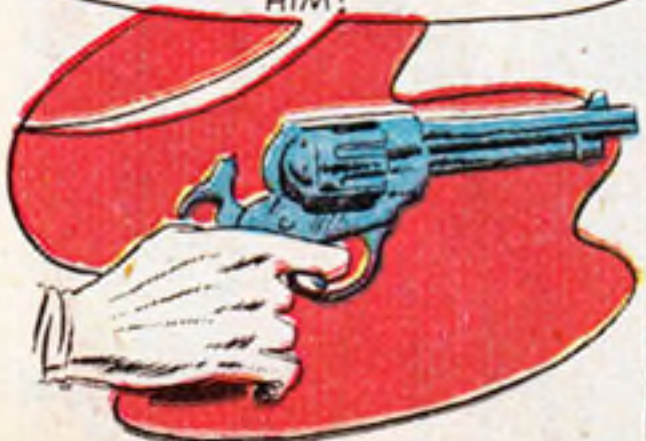
SAL'S BEEN RIGHT A LOTTA TIMES. MEBBE SHE IS NOW.

YEAH, WE'RE CIVILIZED - I RECKON. FLASH OUGHTA HAVE A FAIR TRIAL 'FORE WE HANG 'IM!



I HATE TO DO THIS, FLASH, BUT THERE'S NO OTHER WAY!

IT'S ALL RIGHT, HONEY. I ALWAYS AIMED TO BE HAND-CUFFED TO YUH, ANYHOW.



FLASH, HONEY! I HAD TO PUT YOU IN HERE, BUT NOW I'M GOING TO RELEASE YOU IN MY CUSTODY. I HAVE OUR HORSES OUTSIDE...



YUH MEAN YUH WANT ME TO ESCAPE AN' YUH'LL GO WITH ME?

NO—I COULDN'T DO THAT! WHEN I TOOK MY OATH OF OFFICE, I PROMISED TO UPHOLD THE LAW AND I HAVE TO DO IT. I'M LETTING YOU OUT— BUT I'M GOING TO BRING YOU BACK!



WHAT ARE YUH PLANNING, SWEETHEART?

WELL—YOU— YOU'VE BEEN AFTER ME TO MARRY YOU FOR YEARS — AN'— AND IF YOU STILL MEAN IT— I THOUGHT WE'D RIDE TO DRY GULCH AND GET THE PARSON TO DO IT TONIGHT.

WHEN THE CIRCUIT JUDGE COMES TOMORROW—HE'LL ASK ME QUESTIONS ABOUT WHERE I FOUND YOU AND THE CLOTHES YOU HAD IN YOUR HAND. I'LL HAVE TO TELL THE TRUTH—AND IT WILL MAKE IT LOOK BAD FOR YOU—

BUT IF WE'RE MARRIED THE LAW BOOK SAYS A WIFE DOESN'T HAVE TO TESTIFY AGAINST HER HUSBAND—SO WE'RE GOING TO GET MARRIED TONIGHT.

I'D RATHER IT WASN'T THIS WAY— BUT IT'S SOMETHIN' TO BE GETTIN' YUH—AT LAST.



IN DRY GULCH...

AH NOW PERNOUNCE YUH MAN 'N' WIFE —



IF I HADN'T BEEN SO STUBBORN WE'D HAVE DONE THIS LONG AGO— BUT NOW I'VE GOT TO GET YOU BACK TO JAIL BEFORE DAY-BREAK.





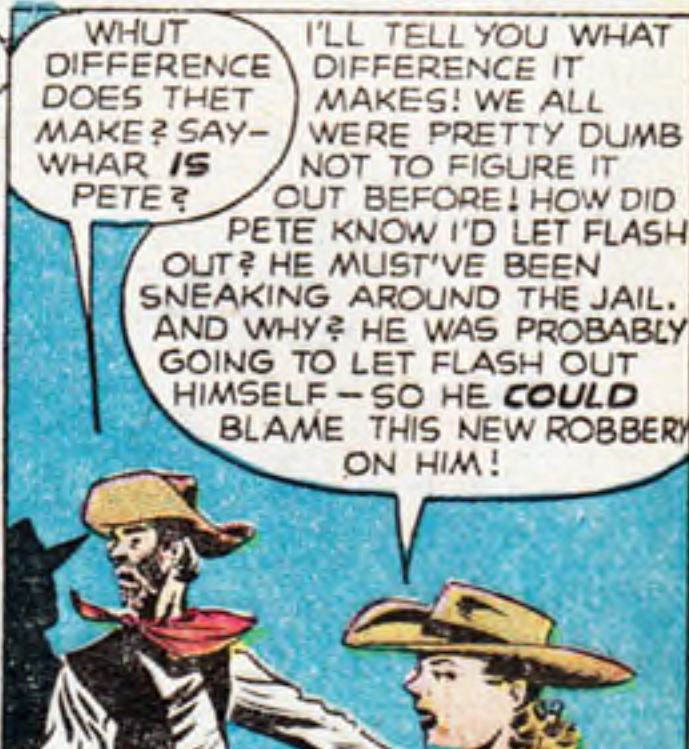
OH! OH! THEY'VE FOUND OUT YOU'RE OUT! DON'T TOUCH YOUR GUN, FLASH. LET ME DO IT. I'M THE SHERIFF - AND I WON'T FIRE UNLESS THEY FIRE FIRST.

I SHOULDN'T'VE LET YUH TAKE THIS RESPONSIBILITY.



PETE, FOREMAN OF THE LONE STAR, DONE TOLD US YUH LET FLASH OUT, AN' WHILE HE WAS OUT THE STAGE WAS HELD UP AGIN BY THE MASKED STRANGER. THAT PROVES FLASH DONE IT - WE'RE THROUGH FOOLIN'. WE WANT FLASH -

YUH SAY PETE TOLD YOU? WHERE'S PETE NOW?

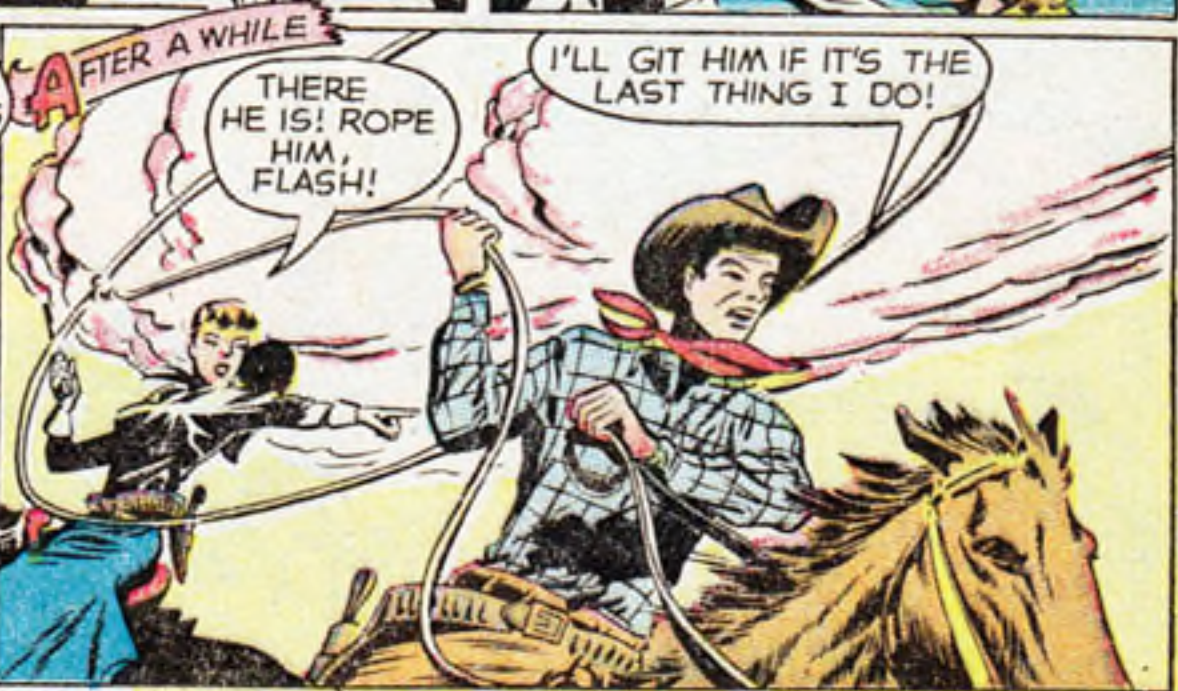


WHUT DIFFERENCE DOES THAT MAKE? SAY - WHAR IS PETE?

I'LL TELL YOU WHAT DIFFERENCE IT MAKES! WE ALL WERE PRETTY DUMB NOT TO FIGURE IT OUT BEFORE! HOW DID PETE KNOW I'D LET FLASH OUT? HE MUST'VE BEEN SNEAKING AROUND THE JAIL. AND WHY? HE WAS PROBABLY GOING TO LET FLASH OUT HIMSELF - SO HE **COULD** BLAME THIS NEW ROBBERY ON HIM!



WHILE YOU GALOOTS WAS CHASING FLASH AND TRYING TO STRING HIM UP, PETE WAS GETTING AWAY WITH TONIGHT'S ROBBERY. I CAN GIVE YOU MY WORD FLASH DIDN'T DO IT - I WAS WITH HIM EVERY MINUTE. COME ON, MEN - WE'VE GOT TO FIND PETE!



AFTER A WHILE

THERE HE IS! ROPE HIM, FLASH!

I'LL GIT HIM IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!



I GOT HIM!

EEEOWW!

WE SURE OWE FLASH AN APOLOGY! CATCHIN' PETE RED-HANDED THAT WAY, WITH THE MONEY ON HIM AN' HAVIN' HIM CONFESS, MAKES US OUT A BUNCH OF GREEN-HORNS. AN' I GUESS OUR SHERIFF IS THE SMARTEST ONE IN THE COUNTRY.

THANKS, HEAPS, BOYS - BUT I'M RESIGNING. THE LAW READS THAT IF ONE CANDIDATE WITHDRAWS, THE RUNNER-UP GETS THE JOB. FLASH IS MORE THAN THE RUNNER-UP - HE'S THE WINNER! I'M WITHDRAWING AND RESIGNING TO BE JUST MRS. FLASH - THE SHERIFF'S WIFE!



SOUNDS LIKE A HAPPY ENDING - MRS. FLASH GANNON, PURTIEST, SMARTEST WIFE IN RED DOG!

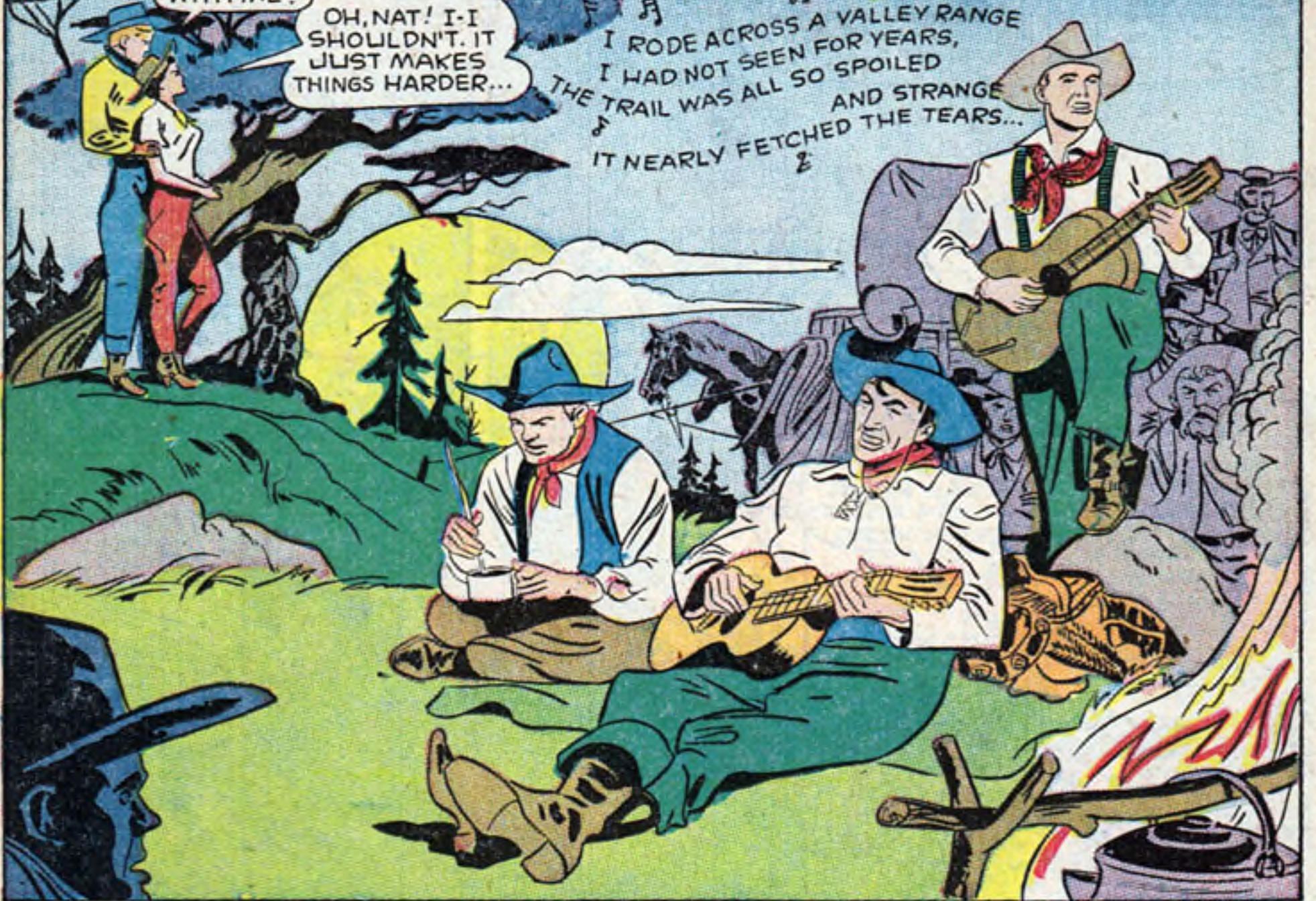
The End

Princess of the Rising Moon

I RODE OVER TO TALK TO YOU, PRINCESS. WON'T YOU WALK DOWN TO THE CREEK WITH ME?

OH, NAT! I-I SHOULDN'T. IT JUST MAKES THINGS HARDER...

I RODE ACROSS A VALLEY RANGE
I HAD NOT SEEN FOR YEARS,
THE TRAIL WAS ALL SO SPOILED
AND STRANGE
IT NEARLY FETCHED THE TEARS...

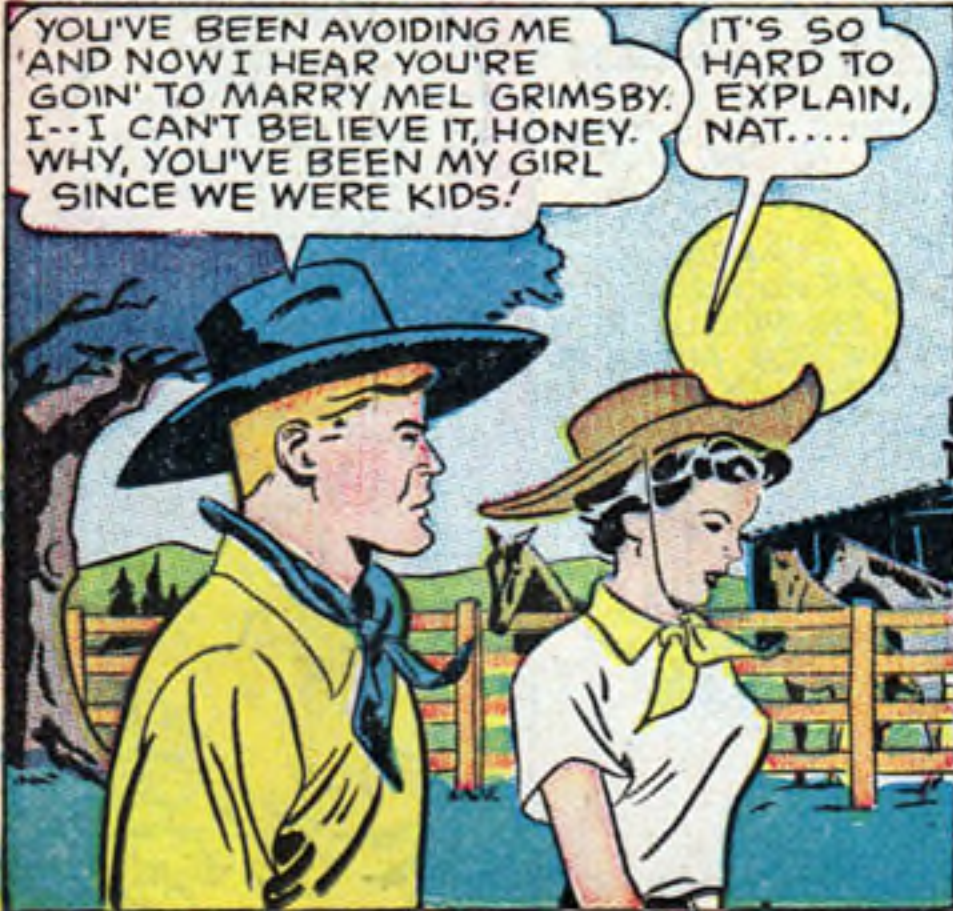


YOU'VE BEEN AVOIDING ME AND NOW I HEAR YOU'RE GOIN' TO MARRY MEL GRIMSBY. I--I CAN'T BELIEVE IT, HONEY. WHY, YOU'VE BEEN MY GIRL SINCE WE WERE KIDS!

IT'S SO HARD TO EXPLAIN, NAT....

YOU BET IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN!... PEOPLE DON'T CHANGE OVERNIGHT... AT LEAST NOT PEOPLE LIKE US!... AND YOU SAID YOU LOVED ME.

PEOPLE DO CHANGE, NAT!... THEY MAY NOT MEAN TO, BUT THEY DO!



LIKE NAT, I KNEW THAT I WOULD NEVER CHANGE AS FAR AS OUR LOVE WAS CONCERNED... BUT I DIDN'T DARE LET HIM KNOW THAT!

IS IT BECAUSE YOU'VE BEGUN TO THINK THAT THE OWNER OF A LITTLE OUTFIT LIKE MINE ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH FOR A GIRL WHOSE FATHER IS KING OF THE RANGE?

NAT!... PLEASE! YOU KNOW IT ISN'T THAT!



THEN WHAT IS IT? WHY ARE YOU GOIN' TO MARRY MEL GRIMSBY? YOU OWE IT TO ME TO TELL ME...

WHY DO PEOPLE USUALLY MARRY? IT-- IT'S BECAUSE THEY'RE IN LOVE, ISN'T IT?



I DON'T BELIEVE THAT!... I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THE WAY WE FELT ABOUT EACH OTHER WAS A LIE. I DARE YOU TO TELL ME THAT NOW....



THE TOUCH OF HIS LIPS FILLED ME WITH FLAMING ECSTASY... BUT I TRIED TO HIDE THE WAY I FELT... I HAD TO LIE...

ALL RIGHT, NAT... YOU ASKED FOR IT. I'M IN LOVE WITH MEL GRIMSBY!



HIS ARMS FELL FROM AROUND ME... HE LOOKED STUNNED AND BEWILDERED...

I-- I GUESS I'VE MADE AN AWFUL FOOL OF MYSELF... BUT.. BUT I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT....

I-- I TRIED TO TELL YOU--

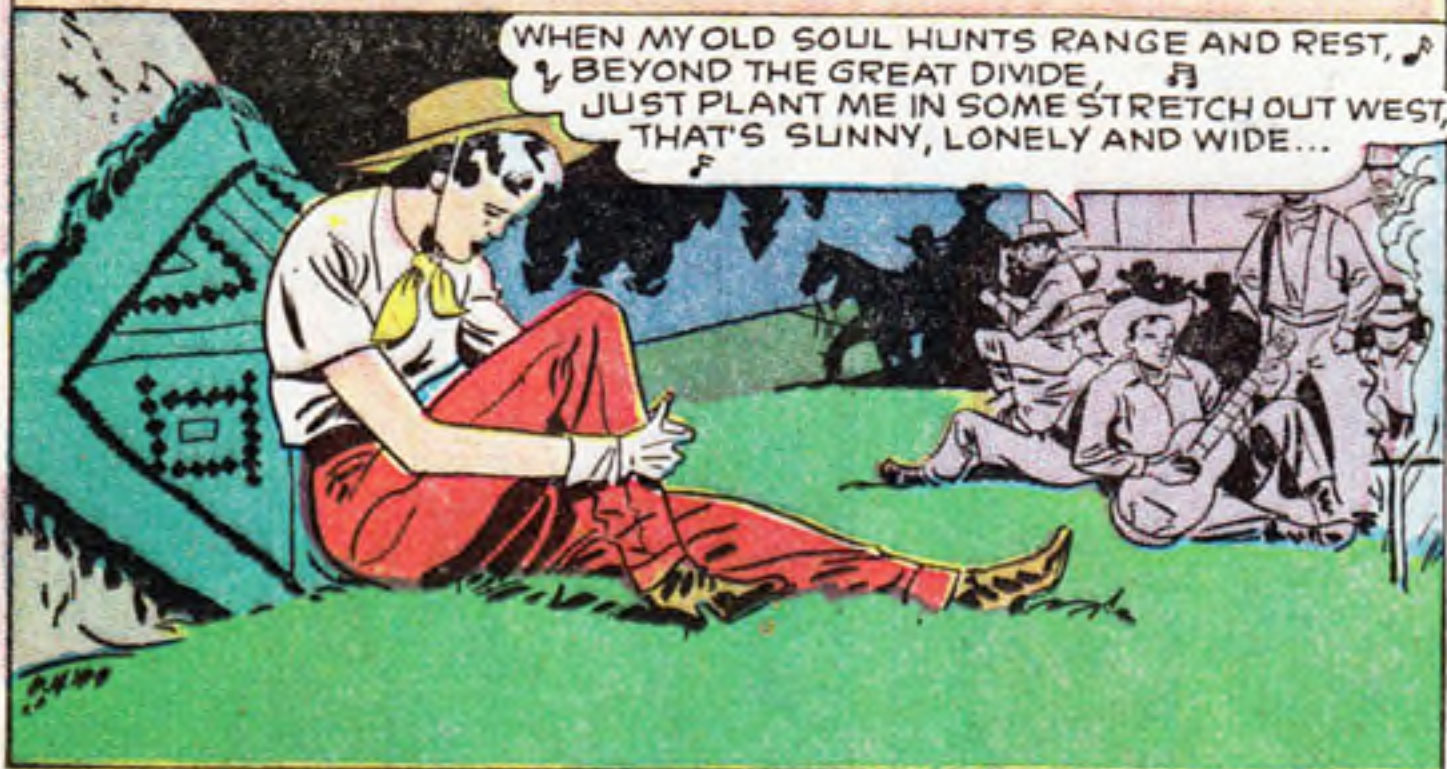


I-- I'M NOT SURE I'LL EVER BE ABLE TO BELIEVE IN ANYTHING AGAIN. IF THE WAY WE FELT ABOUT EACH OTHER WAS PHONY -- THERE ISN'T ANYTHING REAL! SO LONG, PRINCESS... I WON'T BE BOTHERIN' YOU AGAIN. SORRY I MADE A NUISANCE OF MYSELF....

OH, NAT... MY DARLING... I LOVE YOU SO!



AFTER NAT LEFT I WENT BACK TO THE CAMPFIRE, BUT SAT FAR ENOUGH AWAY SO THAT NO ONE COULD SEE MY TEARS... I KNEW THAT MEL GRIMSBY WOULD BE HERE SOON...



WHEN MY OLD SOUL HUNTS RANGE AND REST,
BEYOND THE GREAT DIVIDE,
JUST PLANT ME IN SOME STRETCH OUT WEST,
THAT'S SUNNY, LONELY AND WIDE...

MY FATHER'S WHOLE LIFE WAS WRAPPED UP IN THE RISING MOON RANCH. HE HAD ONCE BEEN THE MOST POWERFUL CATTLEMAN IN OUR PART OF THE COUNTRY AND HAD EARNED THE NAME "KING" WILLARD. NOW, NO ONE KNEW THAT KING WILLARD WAS BROKE AND THAT ACTUALLY MEL GRIMSBY, THE LOCAL BANKER, OWNED THE RISING MOON RANCH...



I LOVE THESE SONGS, BOYS... THEY BIN SINGIN' 'EM ON THIS RANCH SINCE I WUZ A BOY... AN' I HOPE MY DAUGHTER'S CHILDREN WILL BE LISTENIN' TO 'EM, TOO.

IT WOULD KILL DAD TO HAVE TO LEAVE THE RANCH...



GOOD EVENIN', KING. WHERE'S THE BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS?

WHY-- HELLO, MEL. PRINCESS OUGHT TO BE AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE. SHE SAID SHE WUZ EXPECTIN' YUH...



HELLO, MEL... HERE I AM.

THOUGHT WE'D GET EVERYTHIN' SETTLED TONIGHT. SOON AS YOU SET THE DAY, PRINCESS, I'M GIVIN' THE DEED TO THE RANCH BACK TO YOUR FATHER. THAT'S THE KIND OF HUSBAND YOU'RE GETTIN'... PRETTY NICE WEDDIN' PRESENT, EH? GOOD ENOUGH EVEN FOR A PRINCESS. HEH! HEH!

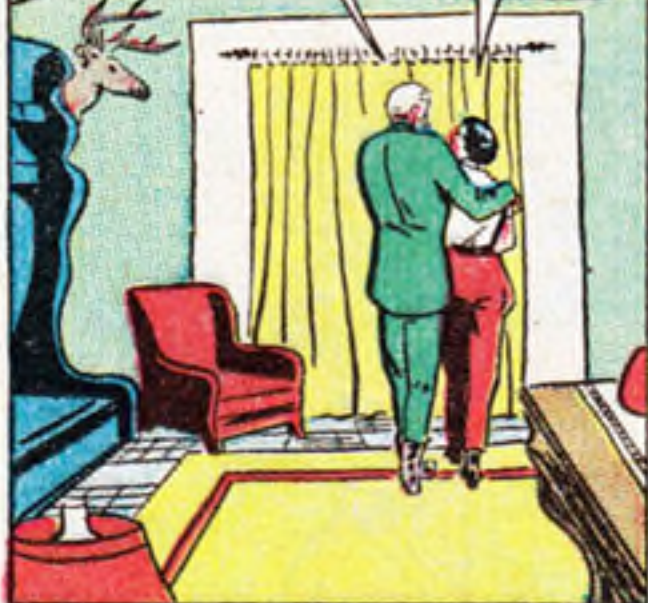


ALL RIGHT, MEL. I'LL SET THE DATE. RIGHT AFTER RODEO TIME DOWN IN SAINT JO. THAT'S ONLY TWO WEEKS AWAY...

THAT NIGHT AFTER MEL WENT BACK TO TOWN...

YOU-- YOU'RE SURE YOU'LL BE HAPPY WITH MEL, PRINCESS?

OF-- OF COURSE, DAD!



I NAMED YOU PRINCESS BECAUSE THEY CALLED ME "KING" AND I FELT THAT SOME DAY THE RISING MOON WOULD BE A LITTLE KINGDOM YOU WOULD RULE OVER AS I DID-- BUT LITTLE BY LITTLE I LOST IT BY BORROWING FROM MEL-- NOW IT WILL BE YOURS AGAIN BY MARRYING HIM...



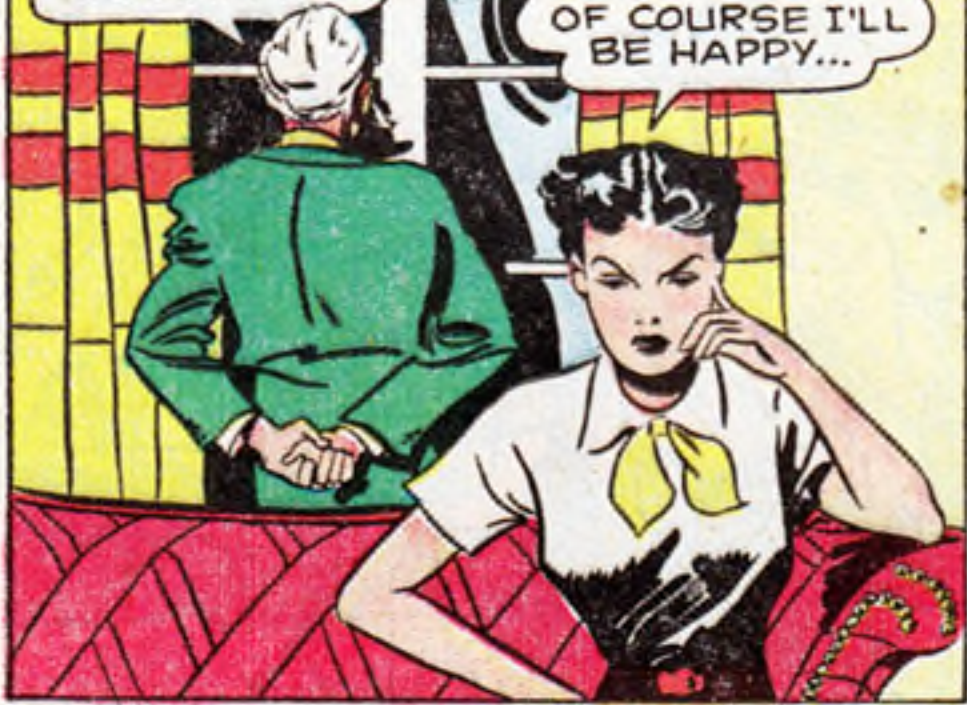
I NEVER WANTED A KINGDOM, DAD... BUT I KNOW HOW MUCH IT MEANS TO YOU...

I HATE HAVIN' PEOPLE KNOW I'M A FAILURE... THAT I'VE LOST MY POWER AND MY LAND AND MY CATTLE...



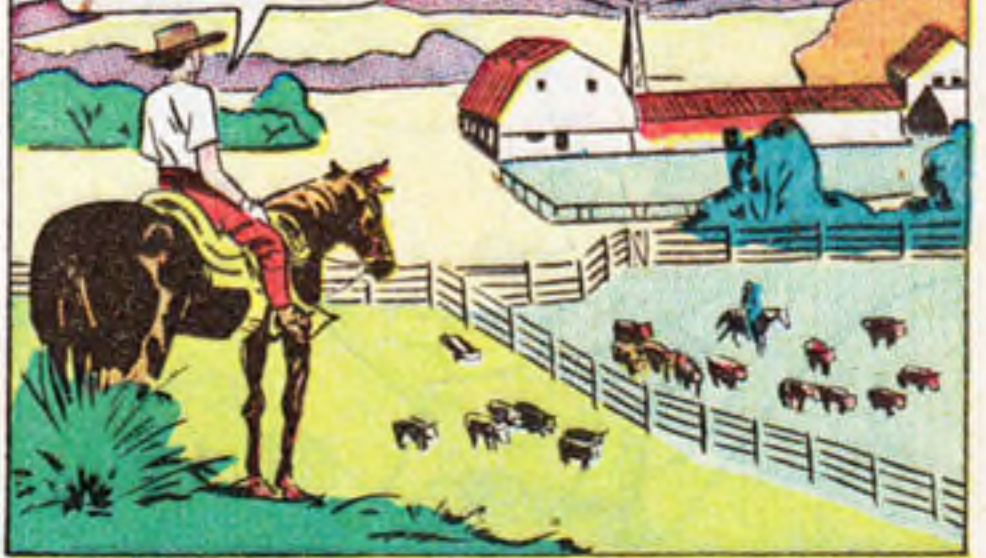
I-- I'M NOT ALWAYS SURE ABOUT MEL'S BUSINESS METHODS. SOMETIMES I THINK HE KINDA TOOK ADVANTAGE OF ME... BUT HE CAN GIVE YOU 'MOST EVERYTHIN! HE'S A WEALTHY MAN. YOU-- YOU OUGHTA BE HAPPY...

OF COURSE I'LL BE HAPPY...



BUT ACTUALLY I KNEW THAT I HATED AND FEARED MEL GRIMSBY... AND AS THE DAYS PASSED, THE THOUGHT OF MARRYING HIM GREW MORE AND MORE TERRIBLE....

OH, NAT... HOW HAPPY I COULD BE DOWN THERE ON THAT LITTLE RANCH OF YOURS. TO BE MRS. NAT LANGFORD AS I ALWAYS DREAMED OF BEING...



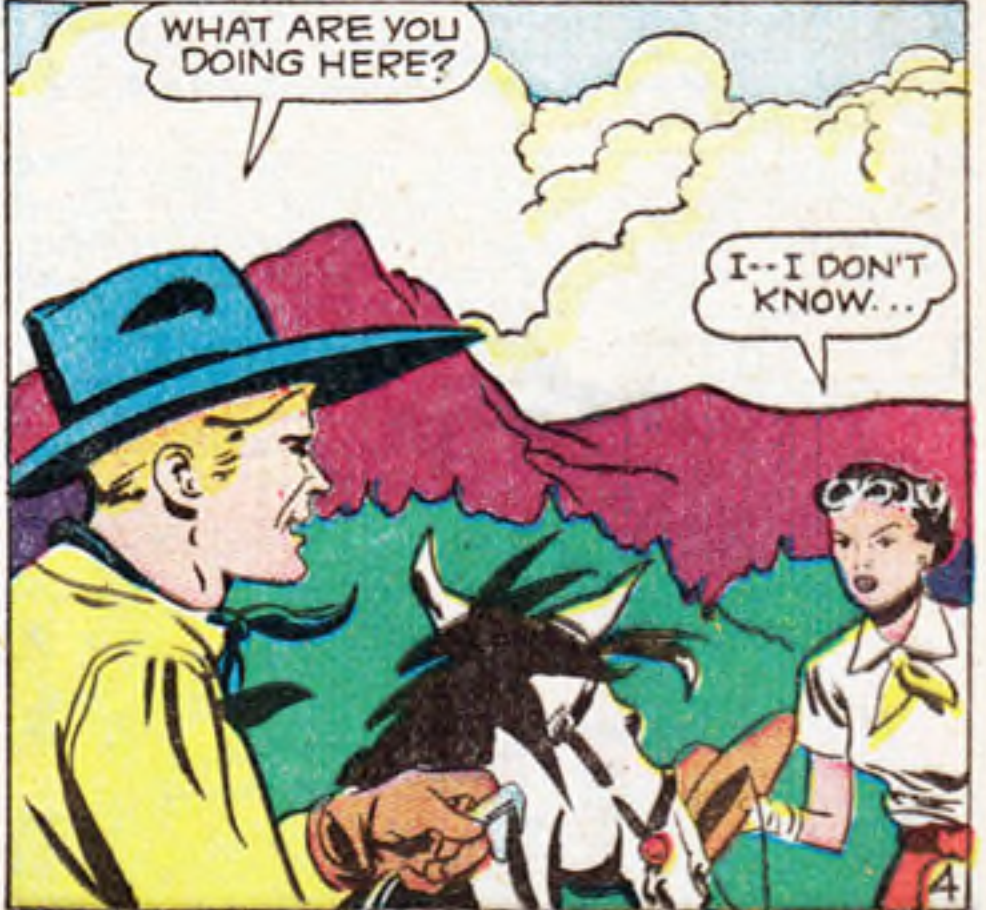
NAT WOULD NEVER KNOW THE HOURS I SPENT UP HERE, DREAMING OF THE PAST... DREADING THE FUTURE AND TRYING TO GET MY LAST GLIMPSSES OF HIM...

PRINCESS!



WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

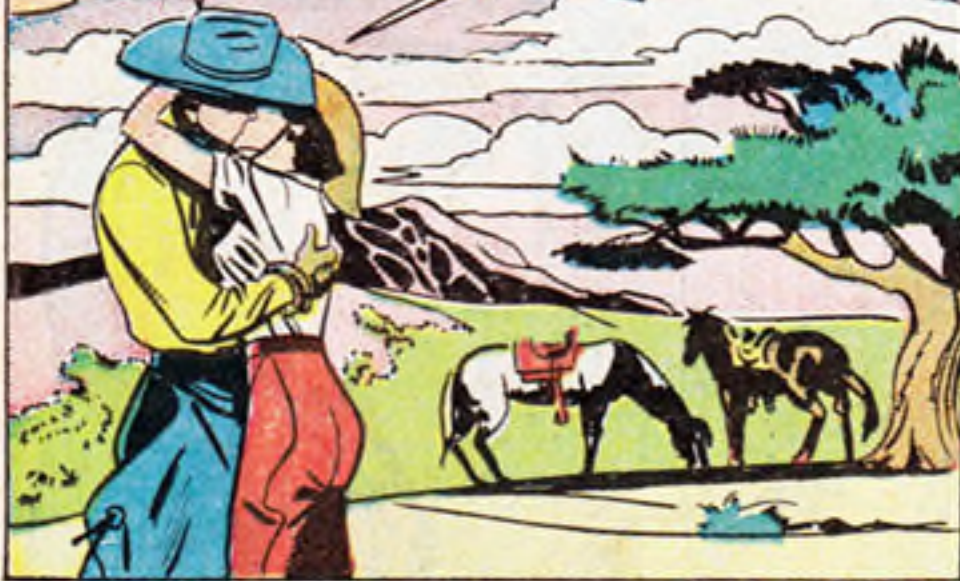
I-- I DON'T KNOW...



HAVING NAT COME UPON ME SO SUDDENLY LEFT ME CONFUSED AND DEFENSELESS...

WHETHER YOU HATE ME FOR IT OR NOT... I'VE GOT TO DO THIS. I LOVE YOU SO-- I CAN'T GET OVER IT...

I--I CAN'T GET OVER LOVING YOU EITHER, NAT...



WHAT-- DID-- YOU-- SAY? SAY THAT AGAIN-- I MUST BE HEARIN' THINGS. I'VE BEEN DREAMIN' TOO LONG!

I-- I DIDN'T MEAN TO SAY IT!

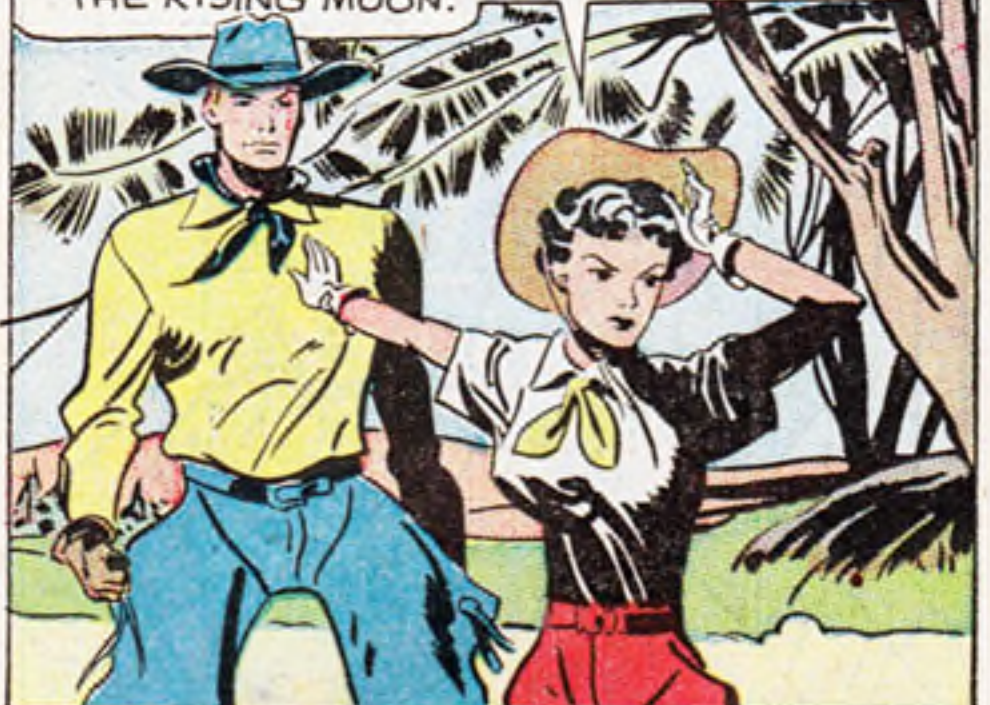


BUT YOU SAID IT-- AN' THAT'S ENOUGH FOR ME!

NAT, PLEASE---



I DO LOVE YOU, NAT... BUT I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE EASIER FOR BOTH OF US IF I PRETENDED I DIDN'T... BECAUSE... I CAN'T MARRY YOU... I'VE GOT TO MARRY MEL FOR DAD'S SAKE. IT WOULD KILL HIM TO LOSE THE RISING MOON.



I TOLD NAT THE STORY... HOW WHEN THINGS WERE BAD, MEL HAD LOANED DAD MORE AND MORE MONEY AND TAKEN MORTGAGES ON THE RANCH.....

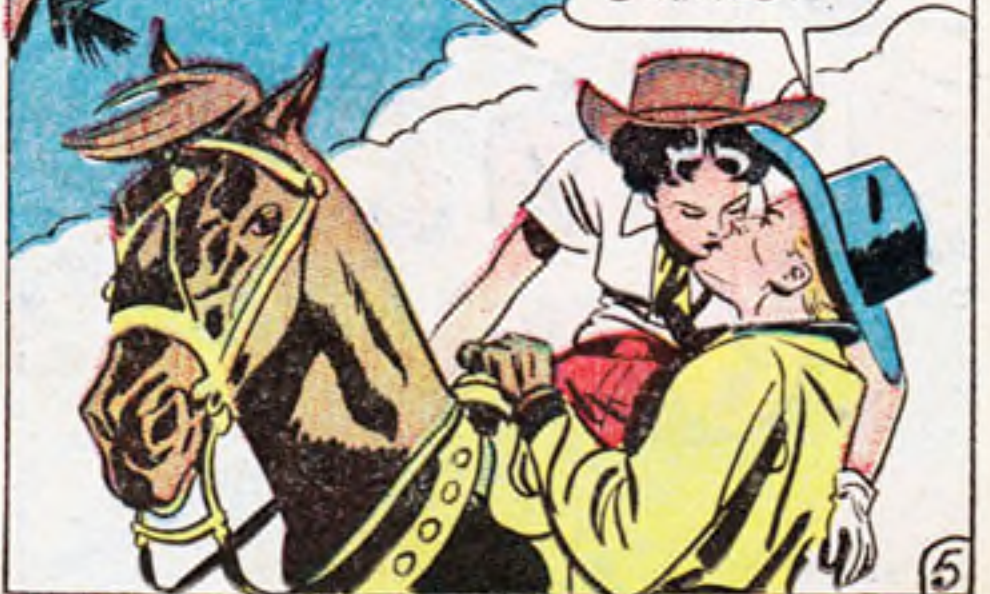
OH, GOLLY... IF I ONLY HAD THE MONEY TO GET THE PLACE BACK FOR HIM... BUT EVEN MORTGAGING MY OWN PLACE WOULDN'T DO IT. BUT I WON'T LET YOU MARRY HIM, DARLING... NOT NOW THAT I KNOW YOU LOVE ME...

YOU CAN'T STOP ME, NAT. I HAVE TO GO THROUGH WITH IT....



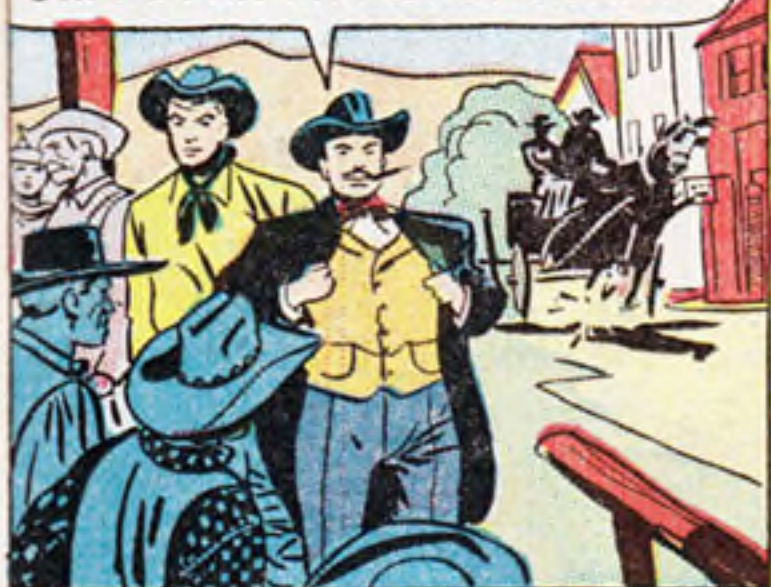
I LOVE YOU, MY DARLING... BUT DAD IS OLD AND PROUD... AND... I'M GOING TO MARRY MEL...

WE'LL SEE ABOUT THAT. I'LL BE RIDIN' DOWN THERE IN THE RODEO AT SAINT JO NEXT WEEK... AND YOU WON'T BE MARRYIN' MEL GRIMSBY!



THE RODEO AT SAINT JO BROUGHT TOGETHER SOME OF THE BEST RIDERS ON THE RANGE...

YOU BOYS DO THE HARD WORK AND I CLEAN UP THE DOUGH. I'VE HIRED THE BEST RIDER IN THE STATE TO COME UP FROM GALVESTON AND I'M PUTTIN' MY MONEY ON HIM...



I'M BETTIN' ON MYSELF AGAINST YOUR MAN IN THE ROPIN' CONTEST, GRIMSBY... AN' IF I WIN THAT ONE, WE'LL SEE ABOUT THE NEXT CONTEST...

THIS WILL BE LIKE TAKIN' MONEY FROM A BABY, LANGFORD. THE MAN I GOT UP HERE IS CHAMP LEROY.

PLEASE... NAT... YOU'LL JUST LOSE YOUR MONEY...



I KNEW THAT NAT WAS A GOOD RIDER AND ROPER... BUT CHAMP LEROY WAS A PROFESSIONAL...



OH, NAT...

NAT WON!

IT COULDN'T HAPPEN AGAIN IN A HUNDRED YEARS!

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE BETON THE NEXT ONE?



THAT NIGHT IN THE LOBBY OF THE SAINT JO HOTEL...

I'VE TAKEN QUITE A BIT OF MONEY AWAY FROM YOU TODAY, GRIMSBY... LOOKS LIKE EVEN CHAMPIONS CAN'T ALWAYS WIN...

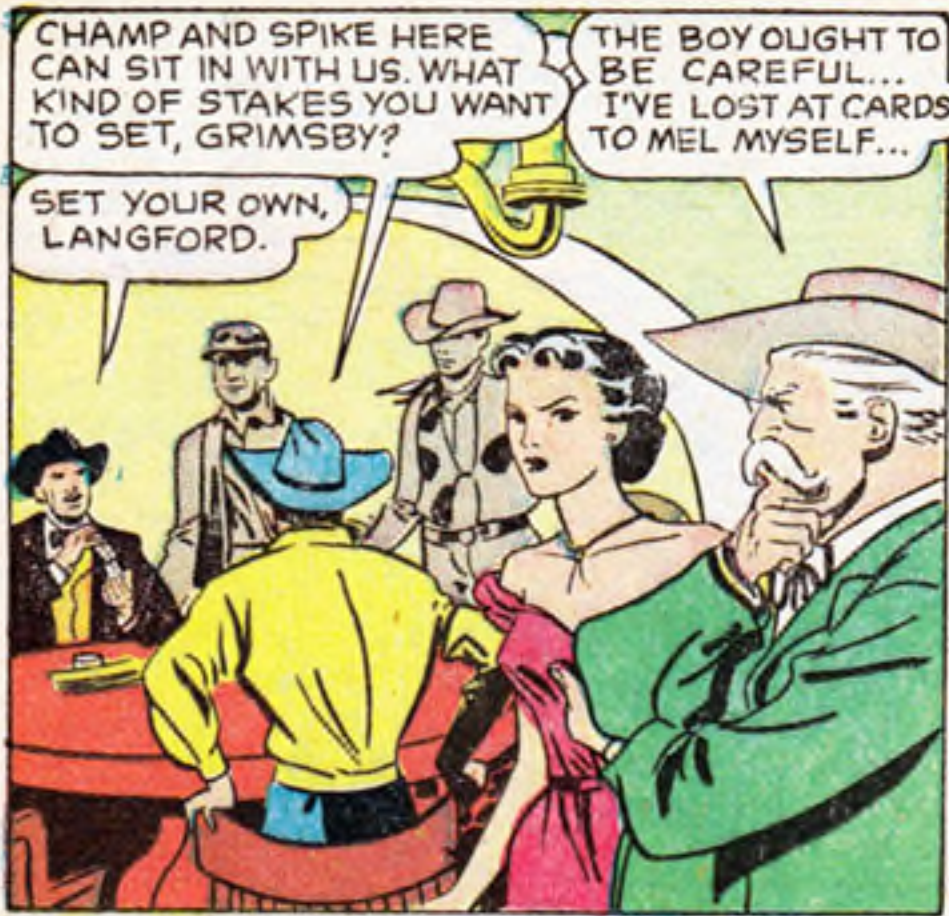
YOU THINK YOU'RE PRETTY SMART, DON'T YOU, LANGFORD? WELL, IT DON'T TAKE BRAINS TO RIDE AND ROPE AND RACE. HOW ABOUT A LITTLE GAME OF CARDS?

NO, NAT!... DON'T!



OKAY, GRIMSBY, IF THAT'S THE WAY YOU LIKE TO DO THINGS. I DON'T LIKE GAMBLIN' MYSELF... BUT I'VE HEARD YOU NEVER LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE YOU'RE LICKED AND IF YOU CAN'T WIN ONE WAY, YOU WILL ANOTHER.





CHAMP AND SPIKE HERE CAN SIT IN WITH US. WHAT KIND OF STAKES YOU WANT TO SET, GRIMSBY?

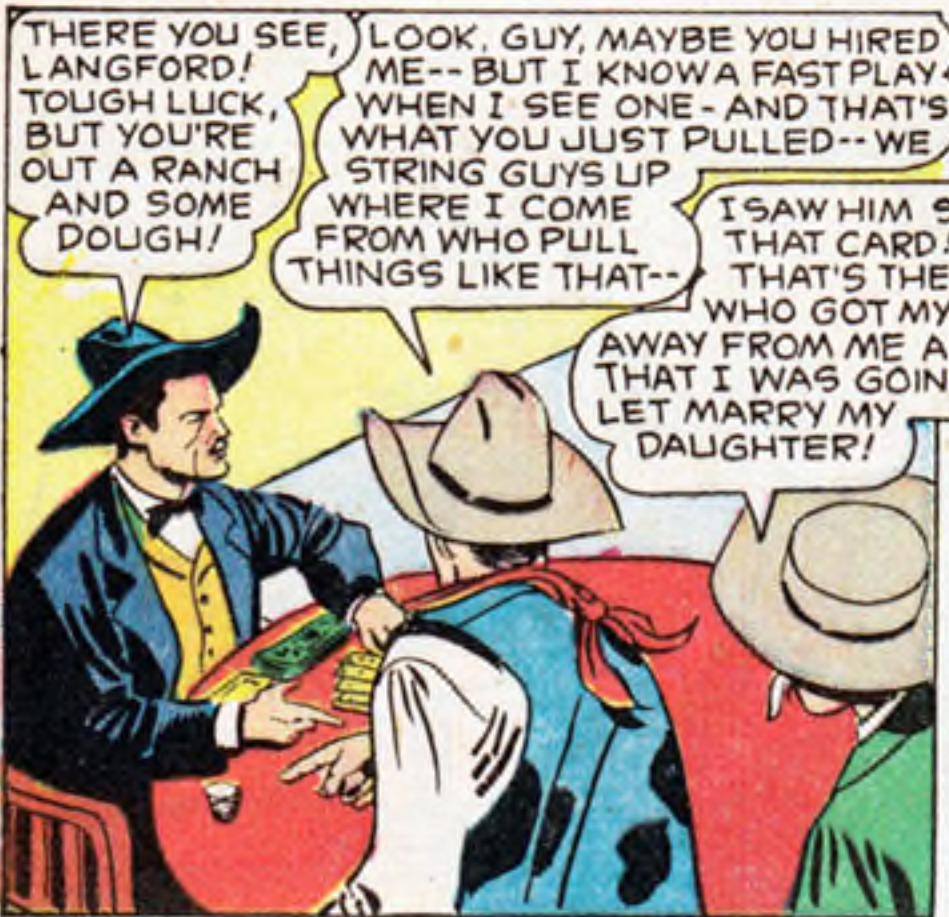
THE BOY OUGHT TO BE CAREFUL... I'VE LOST AT CARDS TO MEL MYSELF...

SET YOUR OWN, LANGFORD.



SUPPOSE WE MAKE IT, THE MONEY I WON FROM YOU TODAY RIDIN', INCLUDING THE DEED TO MY RANCH--- AGAINST THE DEED TO ANY RANCH YOU HOLD--- AND I HEAR YOU'VE GATHERED IN QUITE A FEW...

THIS TIME, YOU BETTER NOT BE SO SURE OF YOURSELF.. BUT THE STAKES SUIT ME.



THERE YOU SEE, LANGFORD! TOUGH LUCK, BUT YOU'RE OUT A RANCH AND SOME DOUGH!

LOOK, GUY, MAYBE YOU HIRED ME-- BUT I KNOW A FAST PLAY WHEN I SEE ONE - AND THAT'S WHAT YOU JUST PULLED-- WE STRING GUYS UP WHERE I COME FROM WHO PULL THINGS LIKE THAT--

I SAW HIM SWITCH THAT CARD! AND THAT'S THE MAN WHO GOT MY RANCH AWAY FROM ME AND THAT I WAS GOIN' TO LET MARRY MY DAUGHTER!



I DIDN'T KNOW FOR SURE-- BUT I'VE HEARD YOU'RE A SLICK ARTICLE-- AND I KNEW THAT SOME TIME YOU'D SHOW YOUR HAND... THERE'S SURE NOTHIN' WORSE THAN A SLICKER AND A CHEAT!

LET'S RUN HIM OUTA TOWN... IF THAT'S THE KIND OF BUSINESS HE DOES, I'M GOIN' TO THE LAW AN' SEE IF THERE WASN'T SOMETHIN' CROOKED IN THE DEALIN'S I'VE HAD WITH HIM...



LOOK, BOYS, LET'S BE REASONABLE ... MAYBE SOMETIMES I DO CUT A CORNER OR TWO. I--I'LL GIVE KING WILLARD BACK THE DEEDS TO THE RANCH AND-- WELL, SUPPOSE I JUST LEAVE TOWN QUIETLY...

LATER THAT NIGHT

I WASN'T SURE IT WOULD WORK, BUT I WAS WILLING TO TRY IT. I FELT IF I GAVE MEL ENOUGH ROPE HE'D HANG HIMSELF. BUT I NEVER INTENDED TO LET YOU MARRY HIM ANYHOW-- EVEN IF I HAD TO KIDNAP YOU BEFORE THE RODEO WAS OVER...

DAD SAYS HE'S ASHAMED TO THINK I THOUGHT THE RANCH WOULD MEAN MORE TO HIM THAN I DID-- BUT HE'S SO HAPPY TO HAVE IT BACK.

I'M PRETTY HAPPY MYSELF.... HOW SOON CAN WE GET MARRIED, SWEET? WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR? DAD AND SPIKE AND CHAMP HAVE THE MINISTER--- THEY'RE WAITING IN THE HOTEL.



The End

DOUBLE-CROSS COURTSHIP

Atop the mountain range the blizzard raged, but in the foothills the wind died to a whisper. No snow fell from the leaden skies. At a patch of level ground, swept free of snow, three riders halted their jaded mounts.

Swinging off, the men shook snow from their clothes, stamped half-frozen feet. The rangy, beak-nosed fellow clawed icicles from his black beard. Against his dark features, a jagged white streak scarred his left temple.

"Winter shore was whoopin' it up, but we made it over the pass." His harsh voice lifted with satisfaction.

"And no John Law can plow his way through them drifts," spoke up the second man with pale, unwinking eyes. "Plum safe for the winter," he went on. "Gotta find a place to hole up here in Hagen's Hole."

"I tole you we'd find a rustlers' camp or some-thin'," returned Scar.

The third man said nothing. Younger by far than the other two, he was a slender blond lad scarcely out of his teens, with clear blue eyes and wind-reddened face unmarred by dissipation. That bank job back in Rambler, now sixty miles behind, had been his first venture outside the law; and he hadn't known there would be murder done.

These two hard-bitten outlaws had made it sound so simple when they met young Rod Kent, broke, out of a job and sore at the world. He'd just hold the horses while the two of them went in and held up the cashier and got the loot. Not a shot would be fired and they'd be miles out of town before the alarm was sounded.

But the holdup hadn't worked out that way. For there'd been a customer in the bank who'd gone for his gun, so Scar and White Eye said afterwards. They drilled him and the cashier and fled without the money, for the shots attracted armed men.

The three had fled in a hail of singing lead which failed to find its mark. Rod Kent almost wished a shot had found him. Only the coming of night had saved the fugitives from the chasing posse. Scar had led the way to the pass over Blizzard Range. All night their horses had wallowed knee-deep through snowbanks. Wallowed through the blackest of nights and a raging storm. Nevertheless, Scar had brought them through to safety.

The lad relaxed and his keen glance searched this depression in which he now found himself. Hagen's Hole, a deep basin surrounded by mountains; its monotonous white expanse relieved only by the blue of pine on the slopes. Far away in a meadow could be seen blurred shapes of cattle; beyond them a plume of wood smoke lifted toward the sodden sky.

"A ranch!" exclaimed Kent. "Feed for our horses!"

"We seen it," returned Scar curtly. "Fire to warm

us and grub to eat."

They climbed stiffly to their saddles and goaded their tired horses to a trot. There wasn't a spurt of speed left in any of the animals. Two of them showed welts and spur wounds.

Abuse of the horses was not all Rod Kent disliked about the two bandits. He wondered how he'd survive a winter holed up with these killers.

From a ridge they dropped down into a narrow valley dotted with haystacks and cut by a stream. They came upon the cattle—about two hundred head. In the lee of a hill stood the ranch buildings; log house, barn, shed, set of pole corrals. A man sawed firewood in front of the house. Now he ceased work, straightened up and looked at the newcomers.

"Howdy, men?" greeted the rancher who was an old man but still hale and hearty with the ruddy glow of health showing in his red cheeks above his whiskers.

"Howdy?" spoke Scar. "Can you put us up?"

The rancher hesitated a moment before he said: "For overnight, yes."

"Good!" Scar returned. But he didn't turn his horse toward the stable. Instead he remarked casually "Maybe you'd rather we stayed with some of your close neighbors?"

"No close neighbors," informed the rancher. "None closer than seven miles. Your horses couldn't take another jaunt."

Rod had seen the eyes of Scar and White Eye meet for a split second. Something was in the wind which he didn't savvy.

"Still maybe your family won't care to take on the extra work of feedin' us," Scar spoke again.

"Ho-ho," the rancher laughed. "I'm a bachelor. You'll do your own cookin' here."

Still the outlaw boss didn't turn toward the stable. "Beds enough for us as well as your hired hands?" he inquired.

The ranchman was plainly puzzled. "Don't worry. I got an extra bed, and the kid can double with me. I have no hired man. But why this palav—"

Out of its holster came White Eye's Colt and flamed. Its roar cut into the old man's query. It ripped the silence, rousing echoes from the hills. Kent scarcely heard the report, he was staring thunder-struck at the old graybeard who was now slumped in a heap—dead.

Scar Seymour reached over and plucked Rod's gun from its holster before Rod knew what was happening. "I'll just take this hogleg to keep you from makin' any damn fool play, kid," Scar said quietly.

At last Kent found his voice and blazed "Why'd you do it?"

Scar shrugged. "So's we can hole up here. White Eye, look in the shanty for the old-timer's guns.

"Taint safe to trust our side-pard with a lead chucker at present."

Four days had passed. Kent had been feeding the cattle, since Scar had condemned them to death by starvation. They'd given Kent permission to hitch the hayrick because they knew he couldn't run out on them, what with no trails broken and no place to go.

So Rod Kent was doing all the work, cooking, washing, wood rustling. The two bandits rested, smoking, eating, drinking by the fire. And Rod was glad to keep busy since it eased his tortured mind. If only he hadn't thrown in with these killers. What could he do now that all the trails were snow-locked? He had no snowshoes to get over the mountain with. And Scar was watching him, seeing to it he never got his hands on a gun.

On this fourth afternoon, as he finished washing the dinner dishes and was throwing the dishwater out of the door, an electric thrill ran through him. Someone on skis was coasting down the hill into the valley. Rod glanced covertly into the second room of the house. Scar and White Eye hadn't seen the newcomer yet. Rod had to warn him. But as he darted out a voice came floating across the clear air: "Yo-ho, Uncle Billy!"

Rod Kent's heart stopped, then hammered wildly against his ribs. The voice was a girl's, although the figure was dressed in men's clothing. Scar and White Eye had bounded outside at the hail. The girl was coming steadily closer. White Eye stepped up to Rod. "Get back in the kitchen and keep outa this!"

Rod half lifted his arm and thought better of it. He was only a slight youth and his blow would have been as ineffectual as a calf's battling a bull.

"How do you do, strangers? So Uncle Billy's got company. That's nice. Where is he?" How cheery the voice of the girl. She was about eighteen, fresh and gloriously alive and strikingly pretty. Altogether adorable.

Scar's smooth voice answered her. "Why, he's gone. He sold out to us. I'm Frank Seymour and this is my partner, John White, Er—you see we don't know our neighbors yet."

"I'm Nancy Holmes." The girl's voice was no longer happy. "It's strange about Uncle Billy. Where did he go?"

"Over the pass." Scar waved a vague hand. "Where do you live, Miss Nancy? How many are there in your family, on your ranch?"

"Mother, Dad and I live about seven miles over that way. I just don't know what to think of Uncle Billy. He wasn't my real uncle, but we were great pals. He should have come to see us before he left. Who else is here in the house?"

Scar didn't answer, but Rod could see that he and White Eye were sending each other eyebrow messages. And Rod's keen ears caught a low aside: "Only three of 'em! Put ole man and lady outa the way and cut cards to see which of us gets the girl."

Kent's body was cold as ice, his brain on fire. On the balls of his feet he moved like a shadow into the farther room. Scar was answering the girl: "Only one hired man—the pot wrassler. No, don't go inside, missy. How about a kiss right now? You're the—"

There was an unexpected sound at the door farther along the wall of the house—the living room door. The sound a rifle makes when a shell is levered into the firing chamber. Scar dropped the girl's arms and whirled to face the sound. So did White Eye, with his Colt in his fist. Perhaps in that second both renegades realized that for once they had been negligent. In their haste to jump outside at the girl's call they had left behind the murdered rancher's rifle!

"Up!" clipped Rod Kent. "And be quick about it!"

White Eye's .45 roared an answer. Kent's rifle spoke at the same instant. The slug from the Colt ripped through Kent's left side, turning him halfway around, but the rifle bullet plowed into the head of the pale-eyed bandit.

Rod Kent fought off overpowering dizziness. His left hand refused to do his bidding, and with his right he levered a second shell into his weapon. Across the sights of his gun he saw Scar struggling furiously to get out his Colt.

And Scar's Colt stuck in its holster because the girl tried to grab his gun. But she succeeded only in ramming the weapon deep into its holster. It was this which saved Rod Kent's life. For he was ready to pull the trigger once again just as Scar's .45 cleared leather and belched fire. The two reports sounded as one. Rifle in hand, Kent staggered forward and fell. To him the girl looked to be all eyes in a chalk-white face. Then her face like everything else vanished.

From the limbo of darkness, Rod drifted back to semiconsciousness. Someone was forcing hot coffee between his stiff lips. The young cowboy opened heavy eyes, looking into those of the girl. They were in the cabin, yet when he had seen her last, they were all outside—he, she, and the two bandits. She was taking care of him. She wanted him to come back!

He muttered thoughts as they swirled through his brain. "They said they wouldn't kill, but they did! They killed two in the bank. I had to stay with them then and run for my life. They shot the old man here. I didn't know they were going to. But it was Uncle Billy's gun that got them at last!"

The girl brushed her hand across her moist eyes. "Don't try to talk, cowboy. You're going to live, be—"

"I want to live for you. But—I was with them killers, and the Sheriff—"

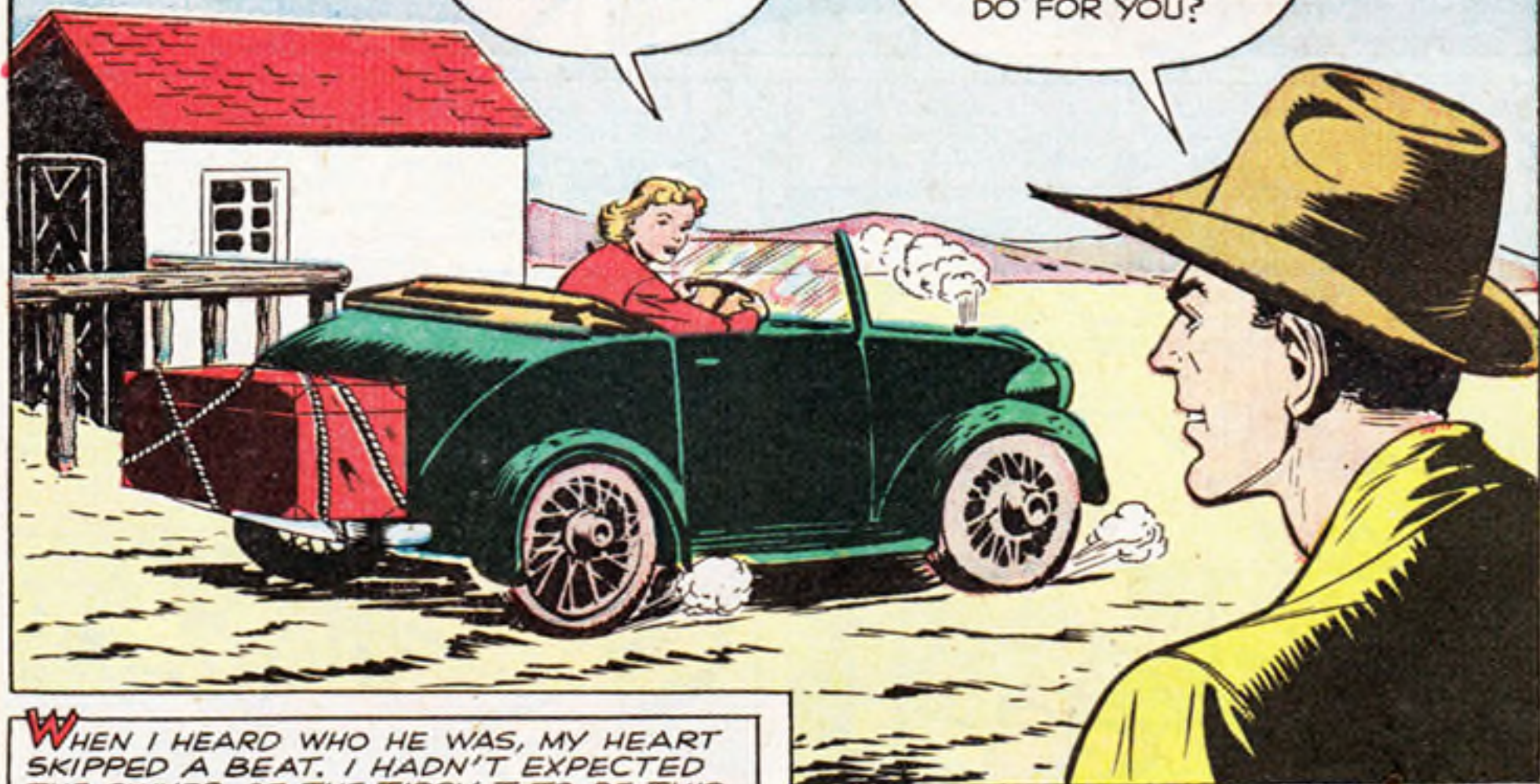
"With them, but not of them," explained Nancy. "I'll tell the Sheriff what you did today. Then what you did before won't matter."

Red Kent's pale features lighted with an indescribable joy. "Nancy, with you on my side I know I can begin again. Out of the darkness and storm to this!"

ROMANCE ON THE RANGE

THIS IS THE
TIPSY T RANCH,
ISN'T IT? I'M
LOOKING FOR
MR. GIL McCOY.

THIS IS THE
TIPSY T ALL RIGHT,
MA'AM, AN' I'M
GIL McCOY.
WHAT CAN I
DO FOR YOU?



WHEN I HEARD WHO HE WAS, MY HEART SKIPPED A BEAT. I HADN'T EXPECTED THE OWNER OF THE TIPSY T TO BE THIS YOUNG OR THIS HANDSOME....

UNCLE JED WATT
AT THE GENERAL STORE
IN MUD CREEK SAID
YOU SENT WORD DOWN
FOR A COOK--AND HE
TOLD ME TO COME
ON OUT. I'M
MONTANA
KENDALL.

WHOA,
THERE!

WHAT'S THE
MATTER,
MR. McCOY?

WHY, THAT OLD FOOL!...
BEG PARDON, MA'AM...
BUT UNCLE JED
OUGHT'VE KNOWN
BETTER THAN TO
SEND A GIRL--A
PRETTY GIRL
LIKE YOU!



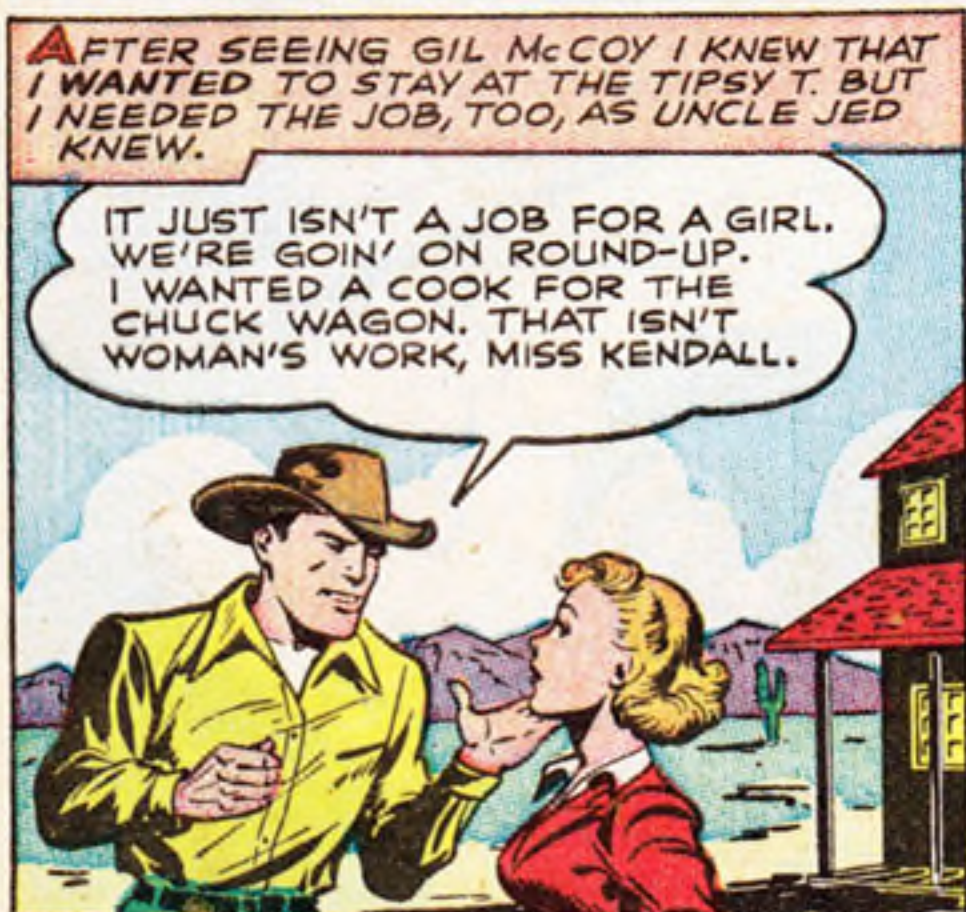


WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH BEING A GIRL, MR. McCOY? I'M A GOOD COOK. UNCLE JED SAID HE TOLD YOU HE'D SEND ME OUT.

THE OLD COOT SENT WORD THAT HE'D SEND OUT MONTANA KENDALL, THE BEST COOK IN THE COUNTY. I THOUGHT YOU WERE A MAN. LOOK, MA'AM, THIS ISN'T A FANCY DUDE RANCH--IT'S A HARD-WORKIN', ALL-MALE SETUP. 'T' WOULDN'T BE PROPER FOR YOU TO STAY HERE.

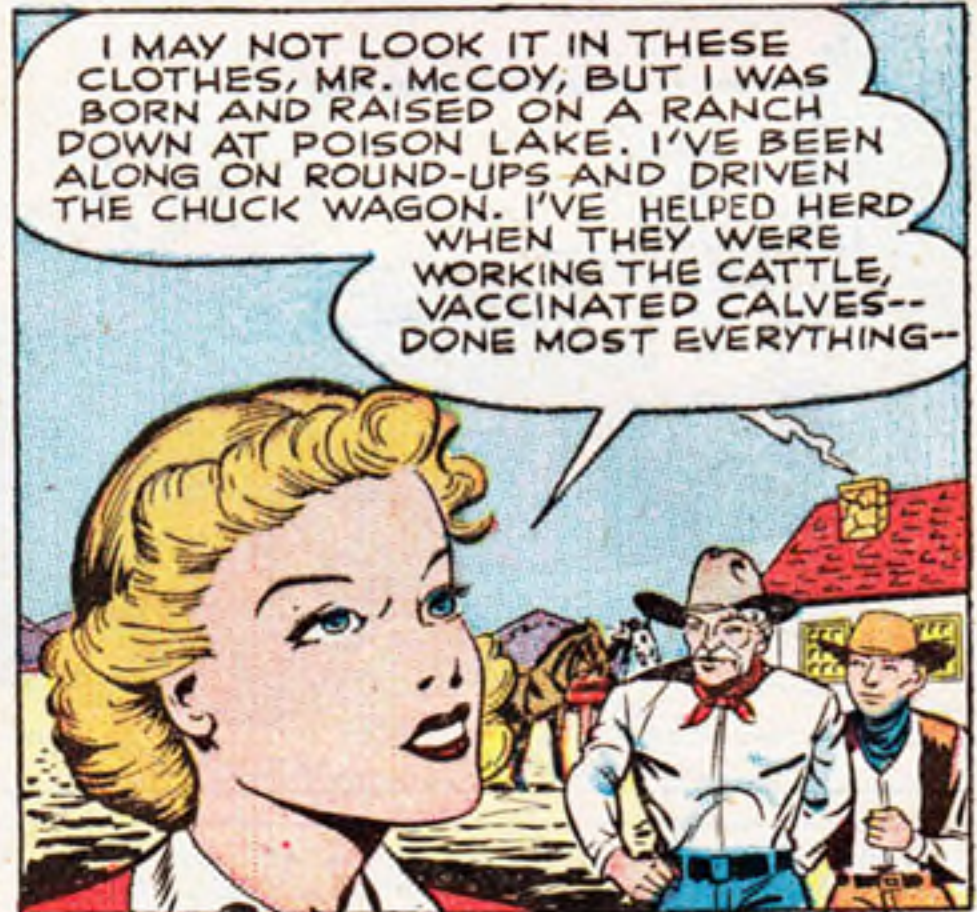


I'LL ADMIT UNCLE JED GOT HIMSELF TANGLED ON THIS DEAL. I THOUGHT YOU'D BE SORT OF MIDDLE-AGED AND MAYBE HAVE A WIFE AND FAMILY... BUT I'M HERE NOW, I NEED A JOB, AND I AM THE BEST COOK IN THE COUNTY.



AFTER SEEING GIL McCOY I KNEW THAT I WANTED TO STAY AT THE TIPSY T. BUT I NEEDED THE JOB, TOO, AS UNCLE JED KNEW.

IT JUST ISN'T A JOB FOR A GIRL. WE'RE GOIN' ON ROUND-UP. I WANTED A COOK FOR THE CHUCK WAGON. THAT ISN'T WOMAN'S WORK, MISS KENDALL.



I MAY NOT LOOK IT IN THESE CLOTHES, MR. McCOY, BUT I WAS BORN AND RAISED ON A RANCH DOWN AT POISON LAKE. I'VE BEEN ALONG ON ROUND-UPS AND DRIVEN THE CHUCK WAGON. I'VE HELPED HERD WHEN THEY WERE WORKING THE CATTLE, VACCINATED CALVES-- DONE MOST EVERYTHING--



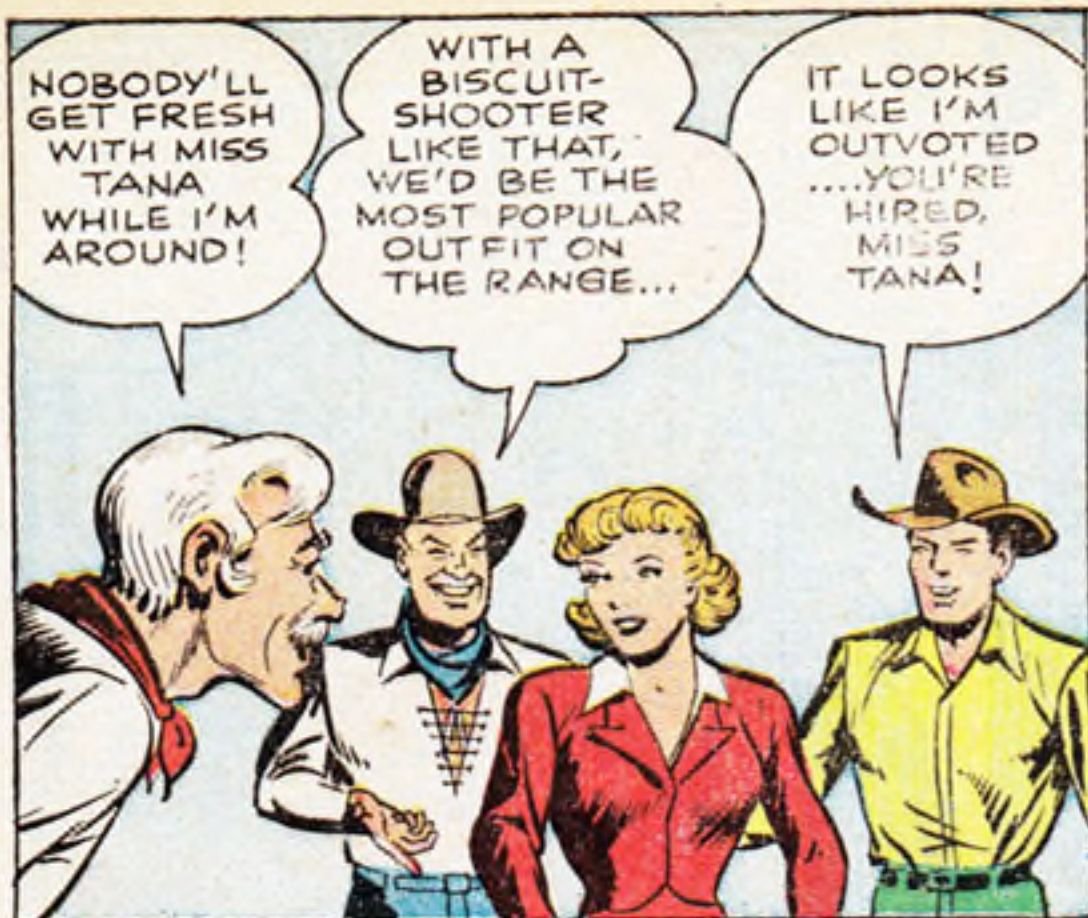
BEGGIN' YUR PARDON, MA'AM, BUT AIN'T YOU TANA KENDALL? I USE TO RIDE FER YUR POP WHEN YOU WUZ A LEETLE GAL... RECKON YA WOULDN'T REMEMBER ME....

WHY, OF COURSE, I DO, CACTUS! I REMEMBER, YOU BOUGHT ME A LITTLE ROPE AND TAUGHT ME TO USE IT.



I DONE HEARD YUR POP WAS BAD OFF, MISS TANA.

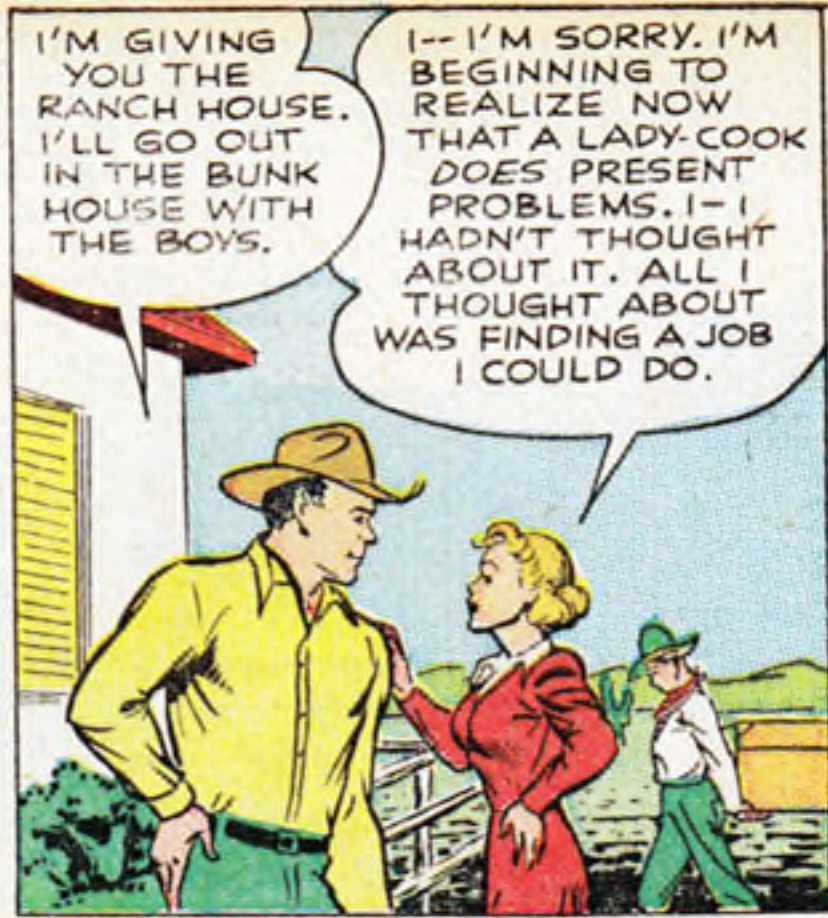
YES, HE IS, CACTUS. I WAS AWAY AT SCHOOL, AND HAD TO COME HOME. HE'S COMPLETELY PARALYZED NOW. WE LOST THE RANCH. UNCLE JED AND HIS WIFE ARE TAKING CARE OF HIM, AND I'M TRYING TO PERSUADE MR. McCOY TO TAKE ME ON AS COOK.



NOBODY'LL GET FRESH WITH MISS TANA WHILE I'M AROUND!

WITH A BISCUIT-SHOOTER LIKE THAT, WE'D BE THE MOST POPULAR OUTFIT ON THE RANGE...

IT LOOKS LIKE I'M OUTVOTED ...YOU'RE HIRED, MISS TANA!



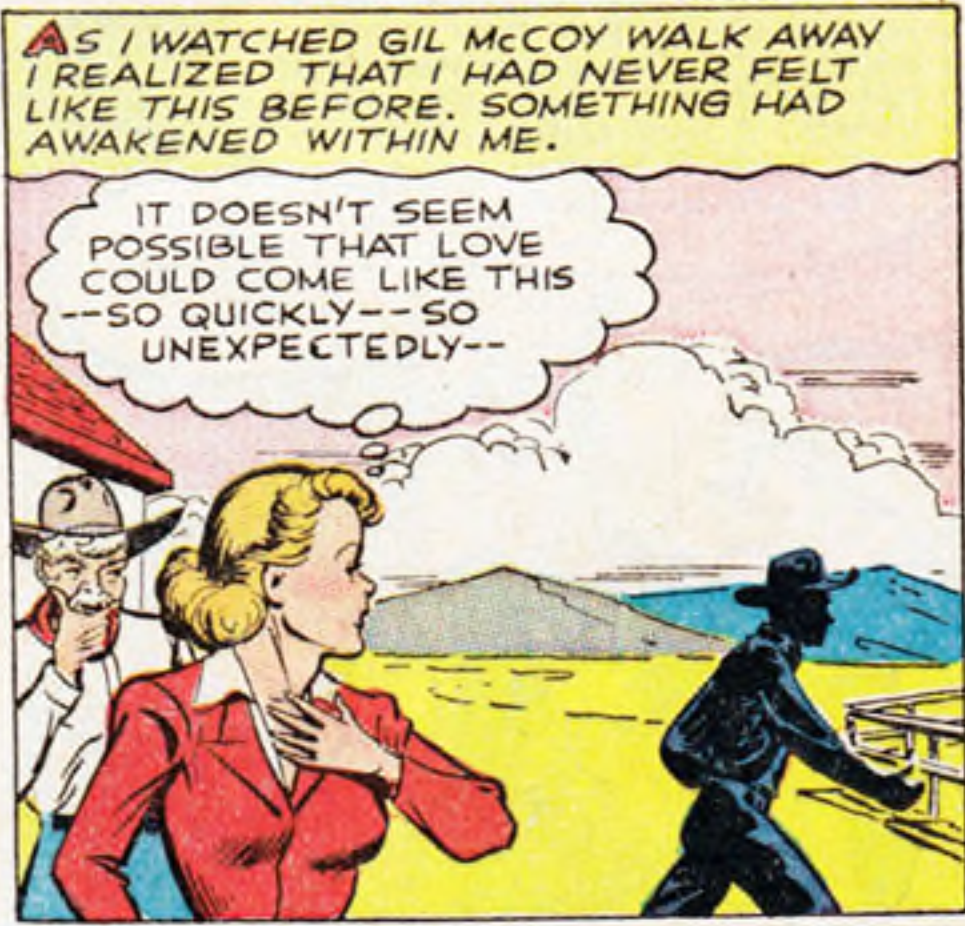
I'M GIVING YOU THE RANCH HOUSE. I'LL GO OUT IN THE BUNK HOUSE WITH THE BOYS.

I-- I'M SORRY. I'M BEGINNING TO REALIZE NOW THAT A LADY-COOK DOES PRESENT PROBLEMS. I-- I HADN'T THOUGHT ABOUT IT. ALL I THOUGHT ABOUT WAS FINDING A JOB I COULD DO.



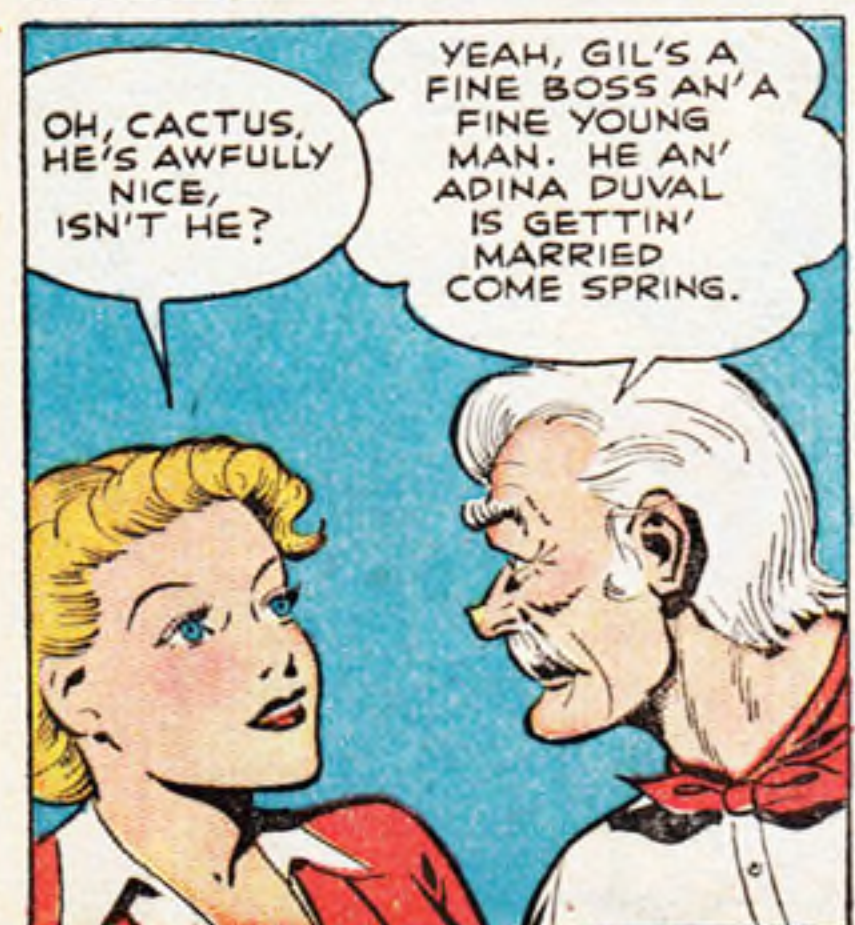
I GUESS THERE WILL BE PROBLEMS, ALL RIGHT, BUT THE BOYS ARE RIGHT-- IT WILL BE NICE TO HAVE YOU AROUND. ONLY HOPE IT WON'T BE TOO MUCH FOR YOU.

I'M SURE IT WON'T. I'M HAPPIER THAN I'VE BEEN IN A LONG TIME.



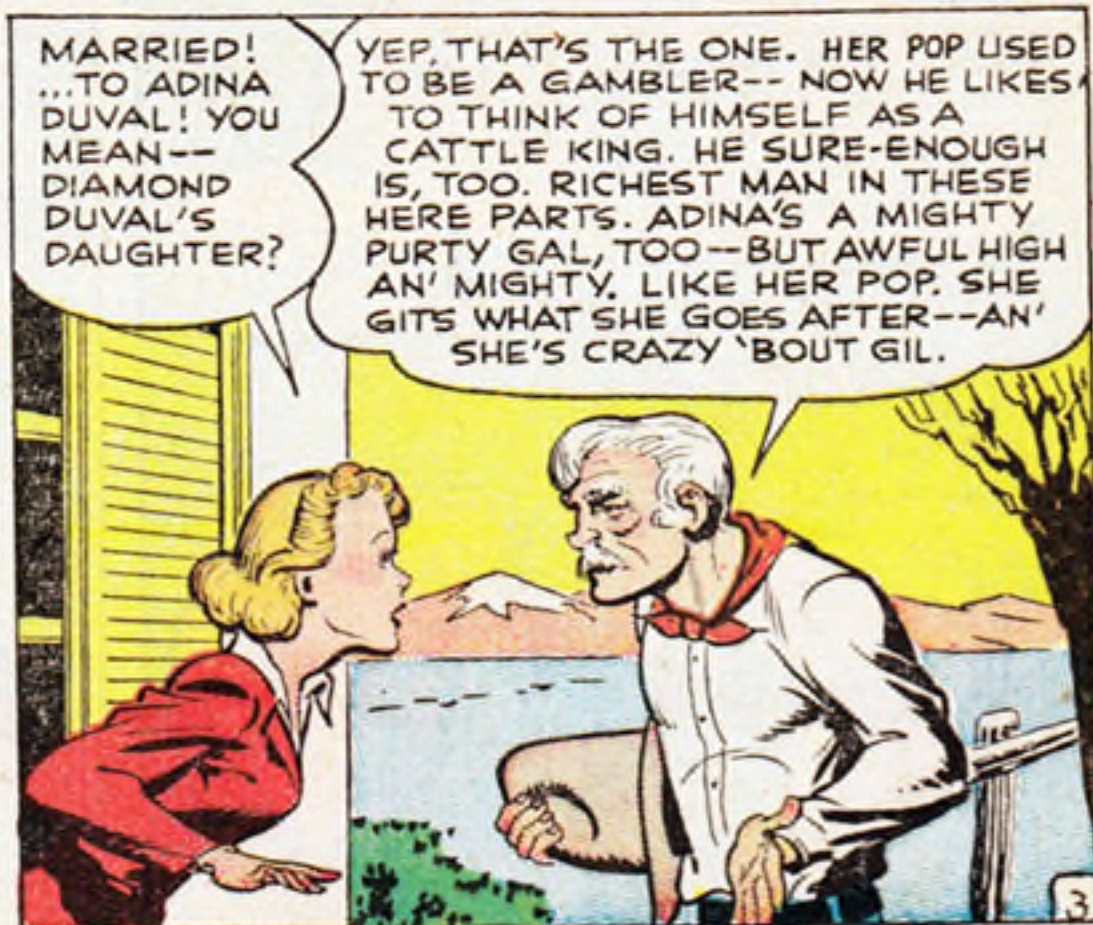
AS I WATCHED GIL MCCOY WALK AWAY I REALIZED THAT I HAD NEVER FELT LIKE THIS BEFORE. SOMETHING HAD AWAKENED WITHIN ME.

IT DOESN'T SEEM POSSIBLE THAT LOVE COULD COME LIKE THIS --SO QUICKLY-- SO UNEXPECTEDLY--



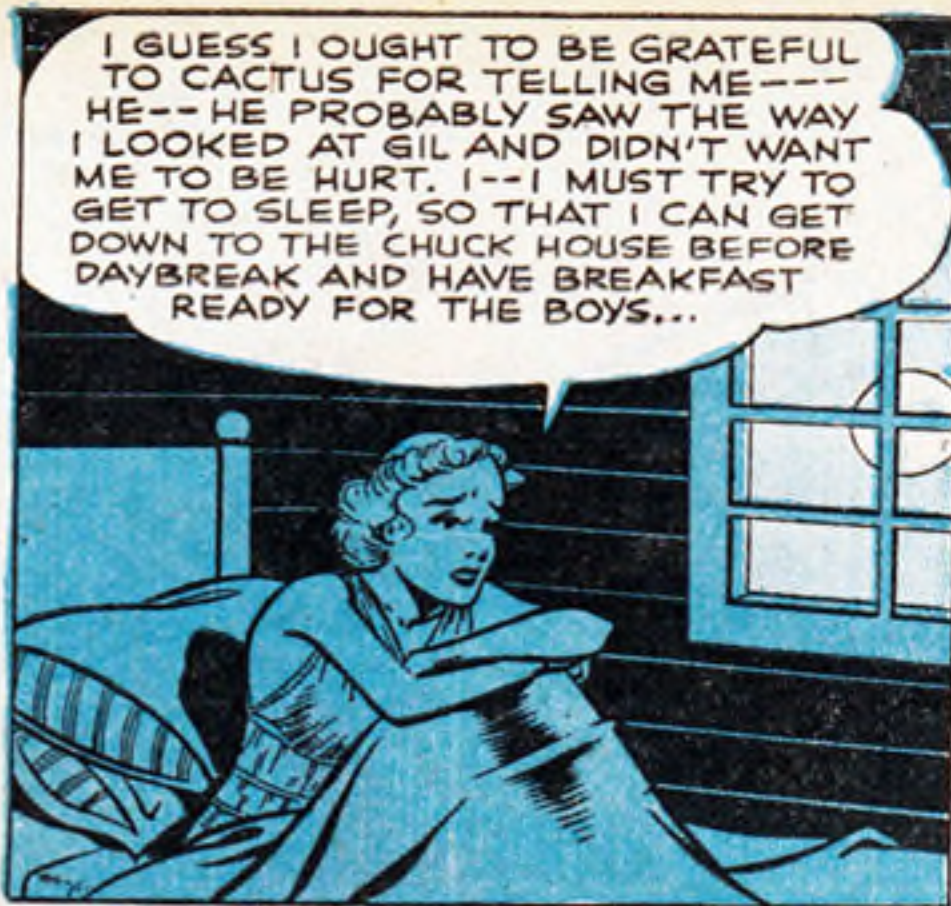
OH, CACTUS, HE'S AWFULLY NICE, ISN'T HE?

YEAH, GIL'S A FINE BOSS AN' A FINE YOUNG MAN. HE AN' ADINA DUVAL IS GETTIN' MARRIED COME SPRING.

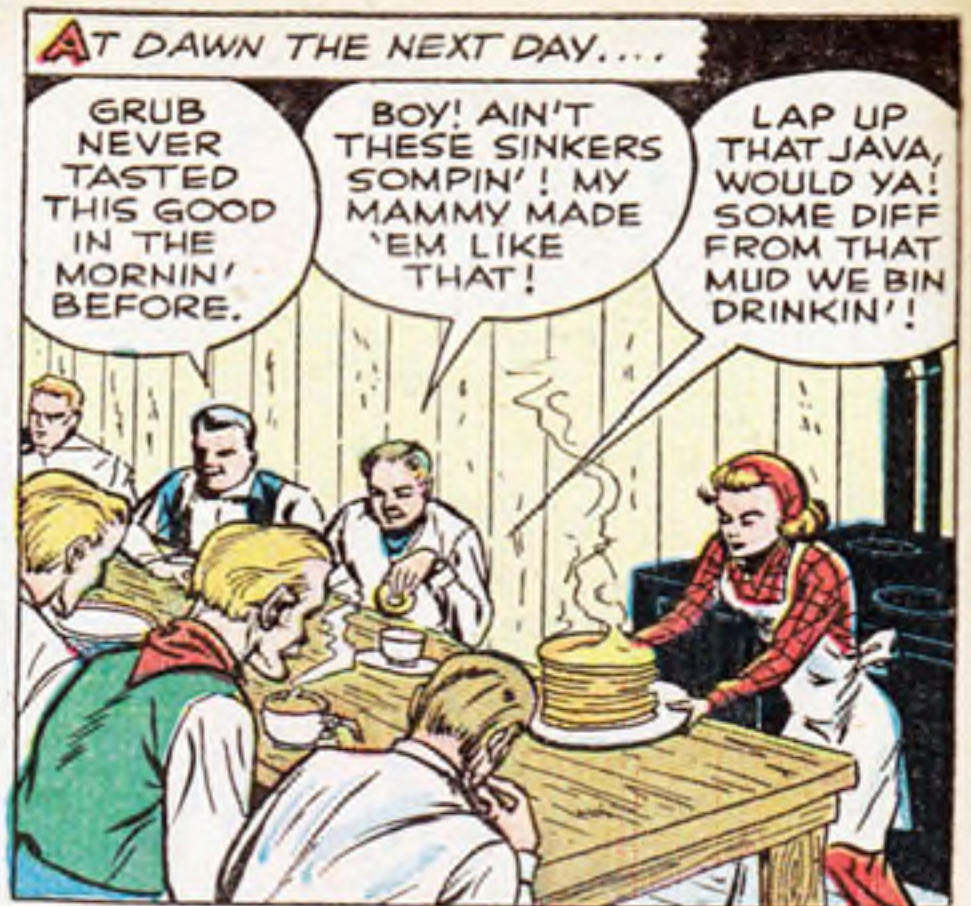


MARRIED! ...TO ADINA DUVAL! YOU MEAN-- DIAMOND DUVAL'S DAUGHTER?

YEP, THAT'S THE ONE. HER POP USED TO BE A GAMBLER-- NOW HE LIKES TO THINK OF HIMSELF AS A CATTLE KING. HE SURE-ENOUGH IS, TOO. RICHEST MAN IN THESE HERE PARTS. ADINA'S A MIGHTY PURTY GAL, TOO-- BUT AWFUL HIGH AN' MIGHTY. LIKE HER POP. SHE GIT'S WHAT SHE GOES AFTER--AN' SHE'S CRAZY 'BOUT GIL.



I GUESS I OUGHT TO BE GRATEFUL TO CACTUS FOR TELLING ME--- HE-- HE PROBABLY SAW THE WAY I LOOKED AT GIL AND DIDN'T WANT ME TO BE HURT. I--I MUST TRY TO GET TO SLEEP, SO THAT I CAN GET DOWN TO THE CHUCK HOUSE BEFORE DAYBREAK AND HAVE BREAKFAST READY FOR THE BOYS...



AT DAWN THE NEXT DAY...

GRUB NEVER TASTED THIS GOOD IN THE MORNIN' BEFORE.

BOY! AIN'T THESE SINKERS SOMPIN'! MY MAMMY MADE 'EM LIKE THAT!

LAP UP THAT JAVA, WOULD YA! SOME DIFF FROM THAT MUD WE BIN DRINKIN'!



LOOKS LIKE I HIT PAY DIRT WHEN YOU CAME ALONG, TANA. I'M GOIN' TO CALL YOU THAT IF YOU DON'T MIND--AND I'D LIKE FOR YOU TO CALL ME GIL.

THANK YOU -- GIL.



I HAD INTENDED TO TELL HIM THIS MORNING THAT I WOULDN'T STAY, BUT NOW I KNEW THAT I WANTED TO BE NEAR HIM AS LONG AS I COULD. AND I TRIED NOT TO THINK OF ADINA DUVAL OR TO LOOK AHEAD...

GUESS YOU KNOW ABOUT ROUND-UPS. TOMORROW MORNIN' WE'LL BE PULLIN' OUT EVEN EARLIER THAN THIS. HAVE CACTUS HELP YOU LOAD UP THE CHUCK WAGON TODAY WITH FOOD AND UTENSILS.



WHEN I SAW YOU YESTERDAY ALL SLICKED UP LIKE A CITY GAL, IT SEEMED KIND OF FUNNY TO THINK OF YOU AS COOK TO THE OUTFIT. BUT NOW-- WELL, YOU SURE FIT IN.

I--I'M GLAD.

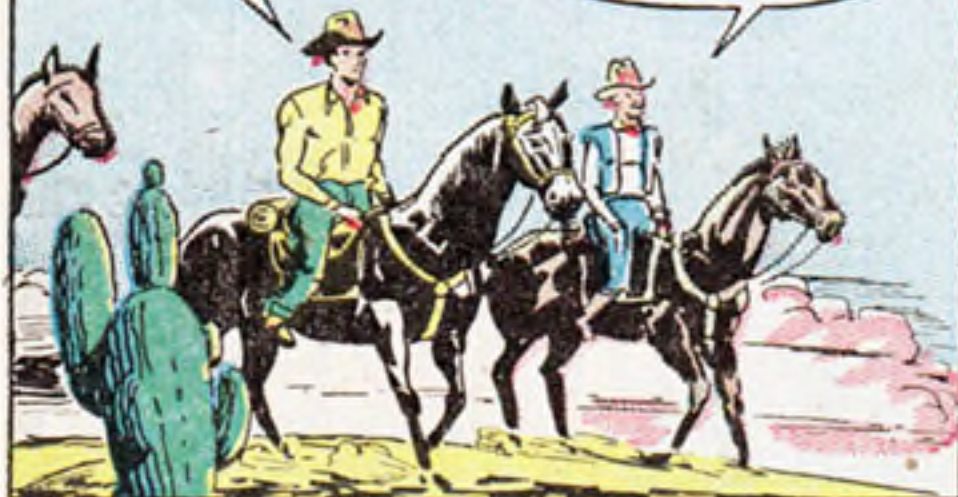


THREE WEEKS WITH HIM OUT THERE ON THE RANGE. I KNOW ADINA DUVAL WON'T BE THERE AT ANY RATE... I WONDER WHAT SHE'S LIKE... I WONDER IF SHE REALLY LOVES HIM.

THE NEXT MORNING WE STARTED FOR THE RANGE...

TANA IS A WONDERFUL GIRL, CACTUS, BUT I'M STILL NOT SURE I DID THE RIGHT THING HIRIN' HER FOR THIS JOB...

YOU'LL GET OVER THAT FEELIN', GIL. MISS TANA'S A THOROUGHbred AN' A THOROUGHbred DON'T GIT STAMPEDED.



I COOKED LUNCH FOR THE CREW OVER MESQUITE COALS AT A WATERING SPOT...

WE NEVER HAD A BISCUIT SHOOTER THAT DID THIS ANY EASIER, TANA. WHEN WE HIT THE RANGE TONIGHT, I'LL PUT UP THE GRUB TENT FOR YOU, AND THAT CAN BE YOUR CAMP.

THAT WILL BE FINE.



THAT NIGHT ON THE RANGE....

I WONDER IF YOU KNOW HOW WONDERFUL YOU ARE, TANA.

ARE YOU REALLY BEGINNING TO FEEL THAT IT WAS ALL RIGHT TO HIRE ME, GIL?



GIL AND I SAT THERE WHILE THE FIRE DIED DOWN, LONG AFTER THE OTHERS ROLLED UP IN THEIR BLANKETS...

TONIGHT HAS BEEN WONDERFUL--

TONIGHT HAS BEEN WONDERFUL FOR ME, TOO. I NEVER REMEMBER THE RANGE BEING THIS BEAUTIFUL BEFORE.



OH, TANA! THIS IS WHAT I WAS AFRAID OF.

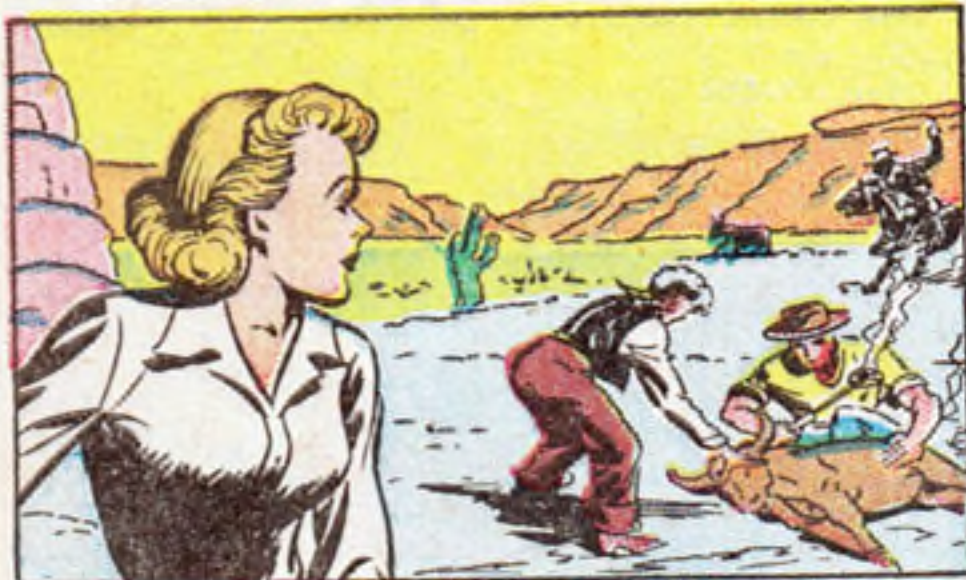


I HAD NO RIGHT TO DO THAT. FORGIVE ME. I-- I'M ENGAGED.

I-- I KNOW --SO--SO IT WAS AS MUCH MY FAULT AS YOURS.



THE DAYS PASSED QUICKLY. THE MEN WORKED HARD AND WERE DOG-TIRED AT NIGHT. GIL ARRANGED NEVER TO BE ALONE WITH ME. I KNEW MISERABLY THAT HE HAD ONLY KISSED ME BECAUSE I WAS A GIRL AND NEAR. I HAD NO ONE TO BLAME BUT MYSELF. I HAD KNOWN THAT HE WAS ENGAGED TO ANOTHER GIRL AND MUST BE IN LOVE WITH HER.



IT WAS THE LAST NIGHT OUT. I COULDN'T SLEEP AND GOT UP AND SAT BY THE FIRE...

TANA!
I DIDN'T KNOW YOU WERE HERE. I--I COULDN'T SLEEP---

NEITHER COULD I.



WE GO BACK TO THE RANCH TOMORROW AND THIS IS HARD TO SAY AND I HOPE YOU'LL TRY TO UNDERSTAND-- BUT---I--CAN'T LET YOU STAY ON.

I--I UNDERSTAND. I--I WAS GOING TO LEAVE ANYHOW.



OH, TANA.

LET ME GO!



YOU'RE ENGAGED TO ANOTHER GIRL--AND SO YOU FEEL YOU HAVE TO FIRE ME--AND YET YOU DARE TO KISS ME AGAIN! OH---I--HATE YOU!

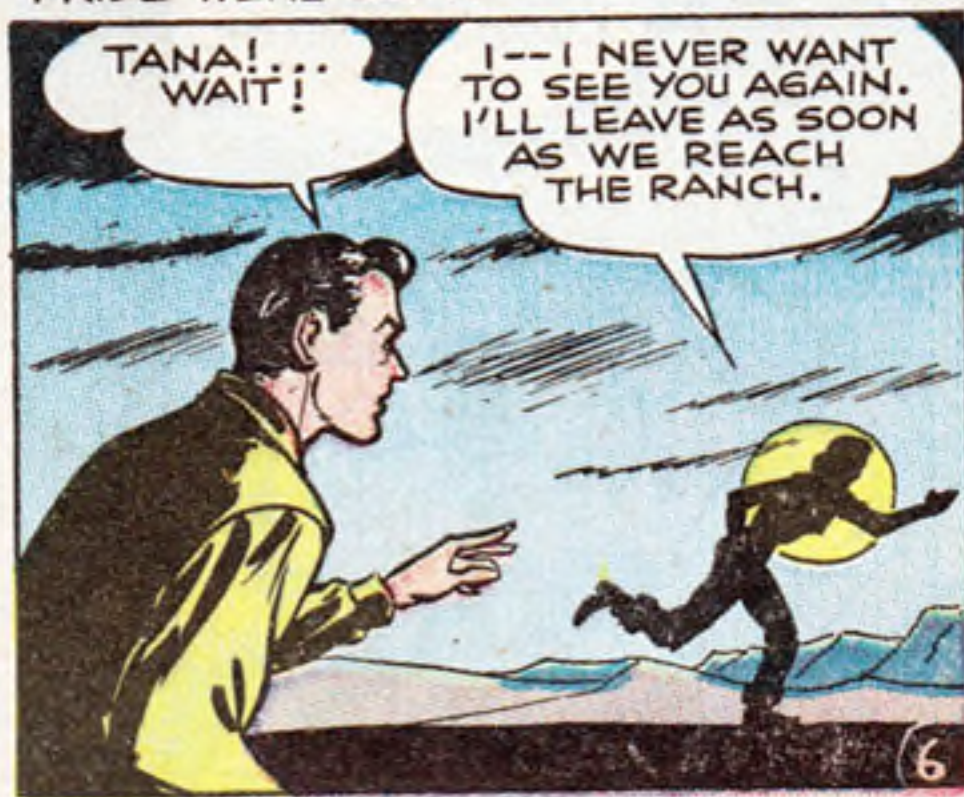
SMACK



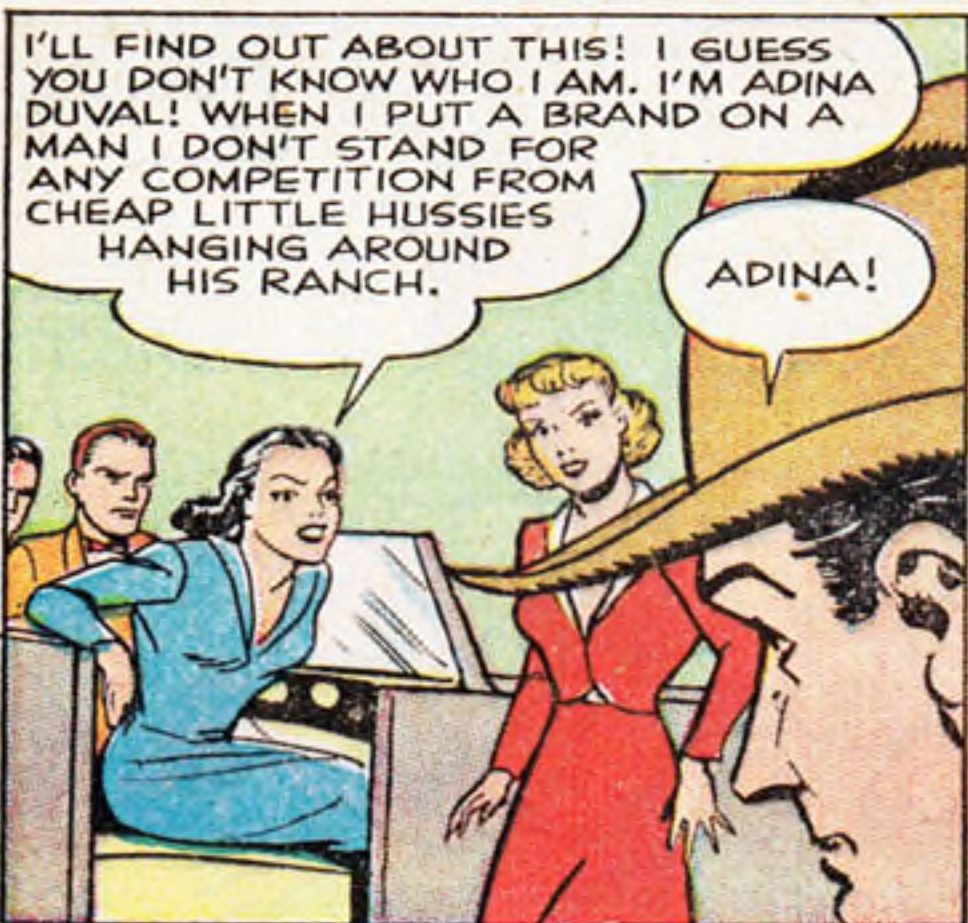
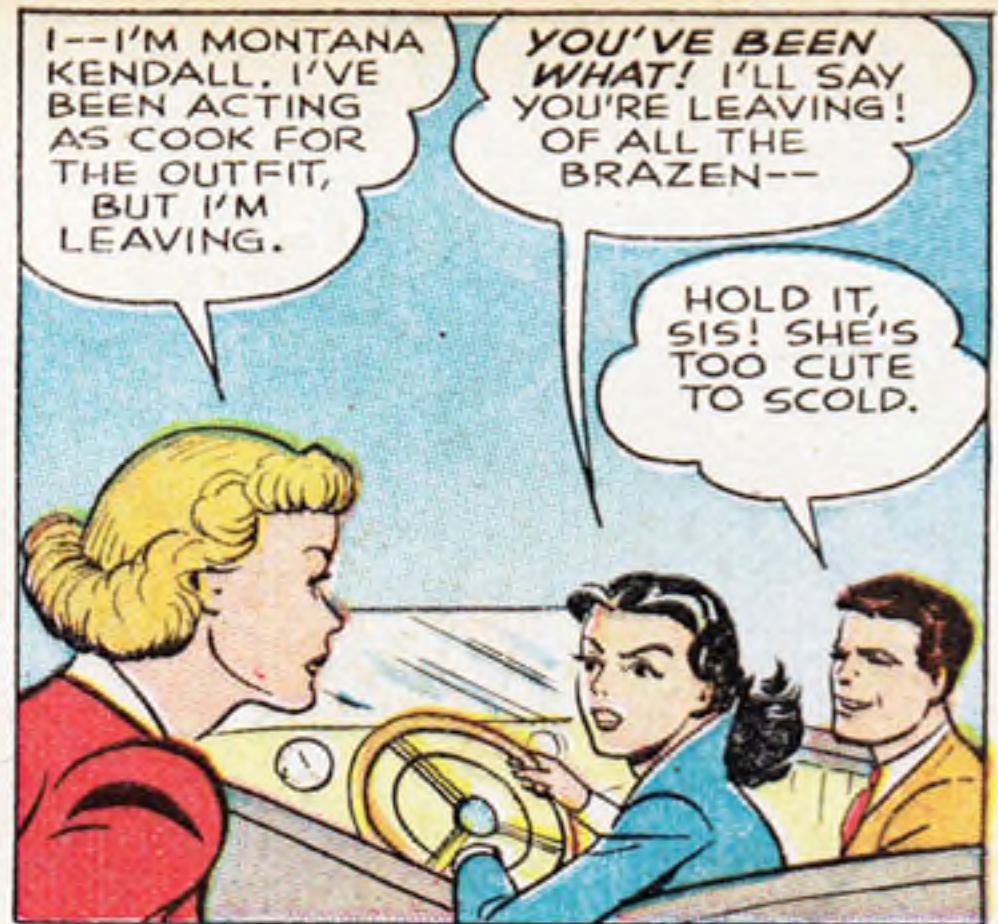
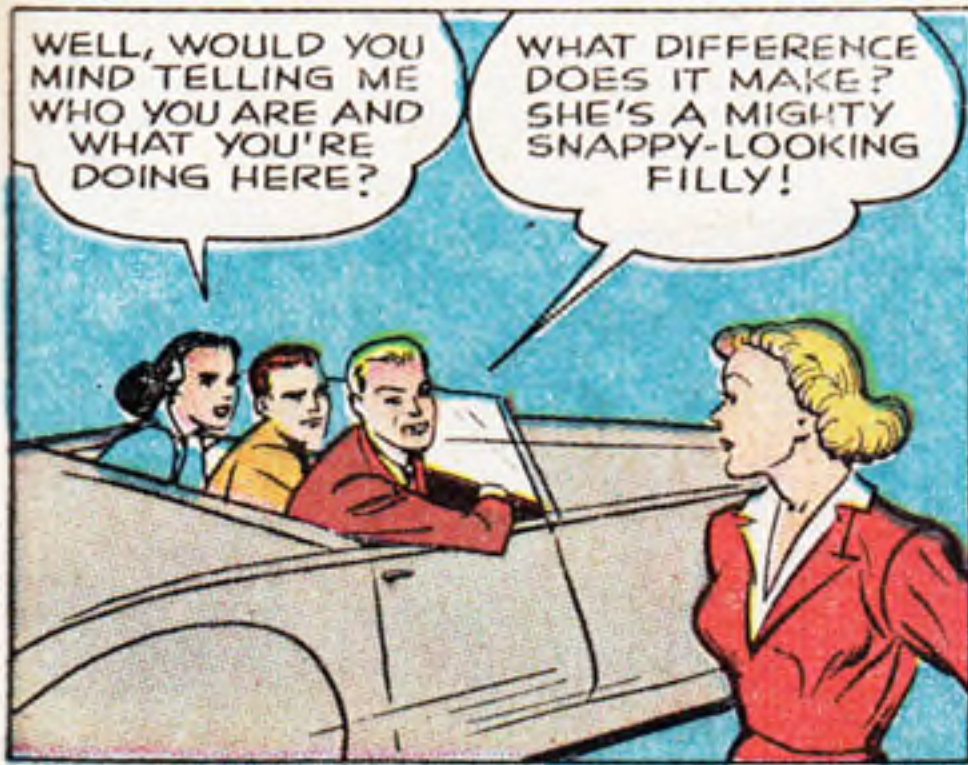
I DIDN'T HATE HIM. I LOVED HIM! BUT I HAD TO KEEP WHAT SHREDS OF MY PRIDE WERE LEFT.

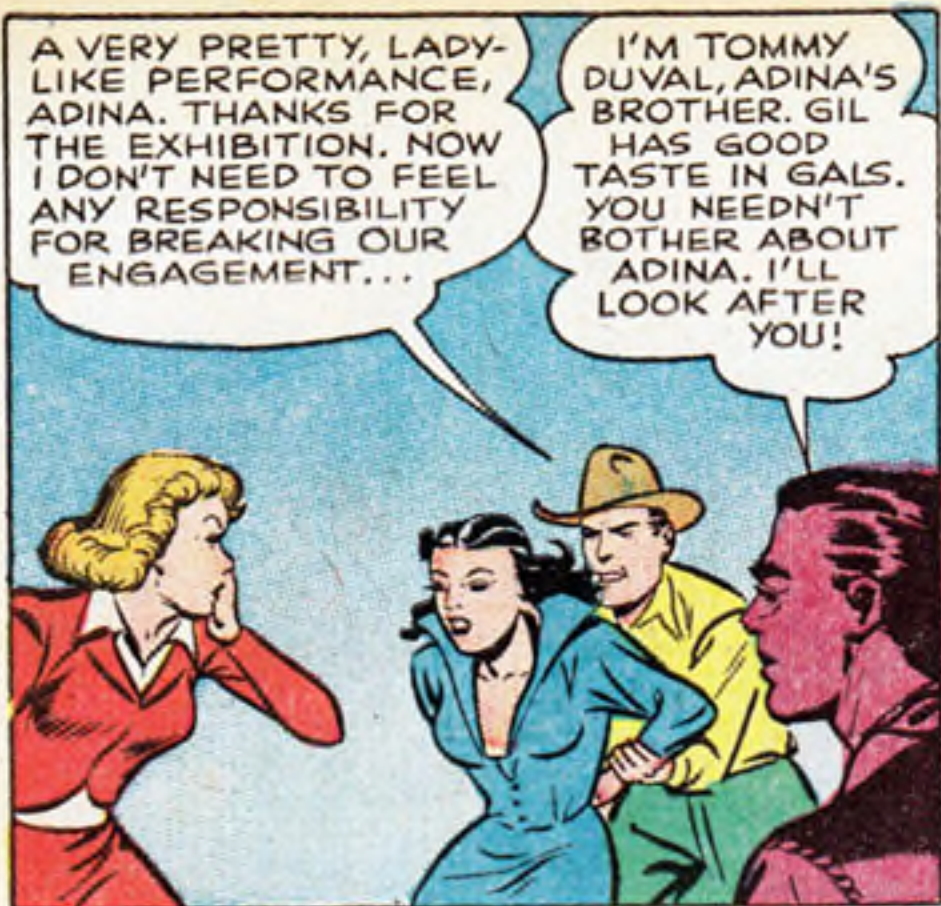
TANA!... WAIT!

I--I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOU AGAIN. I'LL LEAVE AS SOON AS WE REACH THE RANCH.



BACK AT THE RANCH, I PACKED MY CLOTHES AND WAS WAITING FOR CACTUS TO CARRY MY TRUNK TO MY OLD CAR WHEN AN EXPENSIVE ROADSTER DROVE UP....





A VERY PRETTY, LADY-LIKE PERFORMANCE, ADINA. THANKS FOR THE EXHIBITION. NOW I DON'T NEED TO FEEL ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR BREAKING OUR ENGAGEMENT...

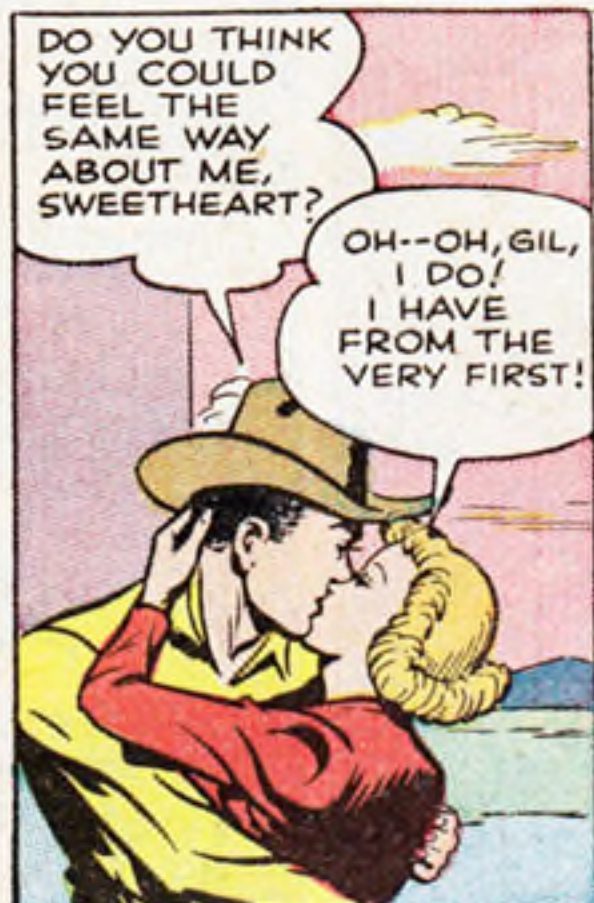
I'M TOMMY DUVAL, ADINA'S BROTHER. GIL HAS GOOD TASTE IN GALS. YOU NEEDN'T BOTHER ABOUT ADINA. I'LL LOOK AFTER YOU!



AND TO THINK I ALMOST MARRIED INTO SUCH A FAMILY! GET OFF THIS RANCH, BOTH OF YOU. I'VE BEEN THINKING FOR A LONG TIME I MADE A MISTAKE, BUT I WAS FOOL ENOUGH TO FEEL THAT AS A GENTLEMAN I HAD TO GO THROUGH WITH AN ENGAGEMENT THAT I WAS PRACTICALLY ROPEDED INTO! NOW GET GOING-- ALL OF YOU!



I'M SORRY YOU HAD TO GO THROUGH THAT, DARLING, BUT I CAN TELL YOU NOW THE THING I WANTED TO TELL YOU BACK ON THE RANGE, WHAT I WASN'T FREE TO TELL YOU BECAUSE I FELT IT WASN'T FAIR TO ADINA.... I LOVE YOU. I WAS NEVER IN LOVE WITH ADINA. I WAS JUST SORT OF SWEEPED OFF MY FEET BY HER--AND SOMEHOW DRIFTED INTO AN ENGAGEMENT. THIS IS DIFFERENT. I'M CRAZY ABOUT YOU!



DO YOU THINK YOU COULD FEEL THE SAME WAY ABOUT ME, SWEETHEART?

OH--OH, GIL, I DO! I HAVE FROM THE VERY FIRST!



TANA, LET'S GO TO TOWN AND GET MARRIEDNOW

THE TIPSY T IS GETTING A PERMANENT COOK AND I'M GETTING THE MAN I LOVE!

THE END

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