

# *Steve of Cragg Section*

by

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B Y B E R Y L G R A Y

# Steve of Cragg Section

The story of a man who was  
crossed in love, and what he—and  
an avalanche—did about it.

**I**n my time I've seen some mighty big men and some mighty handsome men, but never did I see another that stuck in mind and memory like Battling Big Steve Lockaday. I've seen men a sight more clever, and more groomed and glib with tongue—and yet I'll wager that no one wouldn't have stopped and stared, as we all stopped and stared, at first sight of him. There he came—years ago now, it was—around a bend in the tracks where we were laying ties. And there we stood, tools in hand, and swore beneath our breaths that, by all the powers that ever were or would be, there was a man!

He stood maybe six foot two, and he swung along with head and shoulders high, for all the world like one of those story-book fellows you reckon you'll never see in the living flesh. I don't know rightly what he wore, except that a pack was flung across his back and his shirt was wide open at the neck, with sleeves rolled high to show as firm and brown a sweep of chest and arms as ever mortal man could boast. His hair was thick; a bright sort of yellow like some kind of wild spring flower. When he got near we saw his eyes were clear and vivid blue, and he had that bold, fine, fighting sort of face that comes from open air and good clean living, and a way of knowing you've got the strength to make a firm stand for your rights.

“Hello, boys,” he said, easy as you please. “How's chances of a job today?”

Pat, who was our foreman, just looked him up and down. And then he looked at us and smiled for the first time since Barney Neill, who'd been our strongest, finest lad, had missed his footing on a high trestle a week before. “Your chances might be good,” he said; and though he asked a few regulation questions, there was never any doubt about what the stranger's chances were. Men like Steve Lockaday didn't come just for the begging.

Within ten minutes Steve had tossed aside his pack and shirt and, without a complaint of being tired or hungry or any other thing you might expect of a man who's walked eight hours in a fierce sun, he was at work as if to the manner born. Came from the prairies, he said; had given up farming because he had a mind to see the mountains out West. It was a mystery to us how he got that far, and then stayed so easy. Maybe he felt an urge to settle for a while, and maybe that urge was strengthened after his first sight of Mollie May. But there he came, and there he stayed, and from there he went. But that's ahead, and it's a story to be told in order.

I reckon most of us worked a mite less hard that day, just to see the way his muscles rippled, all brown and gleaming in the sun. And I doubt if the same thought was far removed from any—and that thought was our women. Those of us who had them safe with house and young ones felt glad enough; but the others looked a trifle uneasy, as if they saw the lasses already slipping through their fingers.

They might well have been uneasy. Even our wives, who should have been well settled and content, sighed a little when they saw him pass, and talked, as women will, of all the men who had come courting them and how much better they might have chosen. As for the others—well, there was not a one who didn't blush rosy as an apple and started fingering up her hair. All except that poor-looking, freckled Judith child, who went all white and frightened when he came near—and perhaps that was not to be wondered at, seeing the way of their first meeting. And as Judith figures more than once in this tale, it might be well to speak of that meeting now.

**I** recall the day right well. It was a summer's morning early, soon after Steve had come, and as clean and sweet a day as you'd find after a week of heavy showering. We'd been out most of the night clearing the line of a bit of persistent slide up in the canyon, and our thoughts were most concerned with bed and breakfast. We'd just rounded the bend—the same bend where we first saw Steve—and there, right ahead, was a grimy-looking roughneck doing some wrestling with a slip of a girl. We saw at once the girl was Judith Creston. She was the old preacher's daughter from up by White Bar; a meek, thin sort of creature who probably had never won a second glance from any man in all her twenty years. But she was a woman for all that, and in distress.



*She was the old preacher's daughter up from White Bar.*

Pat gave a yell and shut off the motor, and the fellow looked around, startled. He tossed the girl aside, down on the track, and took to the bank, scrambling for the bush. Pat yelled again, for the girl lay still, but Steve was off the speeder before it even stopped, and chasing after. We didn't rightly see what happened, it being in the bush and all, but there was plenty to be heard that wouldn't bear repeating. We reckoned Steve could handle him, and at first our concern was for the girl.

But she was struggling up as we drew near, and seemed mostly scared. She'd been walking in along the rails to do a bit of early marketing in Cragg—that was our nearest town—when this hobo jumped out from behind a rock, demanding money. It was a time when there were a sight too many desperate characters riding the freights, and we'd had our troubles with them all along. The girl couldn't have had much money about her, but for all her

fright she must have made a dash with what she had, and angered the hobo to violence.

She'd scarcely finished telling, when all of a sudden she stared and her eyes went big and dark in her white face. We turned to look, and there strode Steve down that bank, straight and powerful, with his hair all disordered and shining in the sun, his shirt half off his back, dragging after him as easy as if he had been a stick, a mighty heavy, limp-looking fellow. He tossed that fellow up on the speeder with scarcely an effort.

"I reckon that'll keep him quiet a spell," he said quite simple, as if he'd done no more than brush aside an ant. "What's the damage here?" He looked at Judith, and Judith just looked up at him as if some knight of old had stepped into her life. I fancy that's the way Steve struck women. It wasn't the first or last time I'd seen that look in a woman's eye at first sight, but I never saw a woman look so dumbstruck. I reckon Steve knew it too, for he shifted a bit and looked uneasy. Steve was no fool where women were concerned. Considering his attractions, he wasn't one to run about recklessly, but he wasn't a man to waste his time or charms on girls that didn't take his fancy, either.

"Oh, that was wonderful!" Judith said, and there was no mistaking how she felt. "Thank you so very much. Mr.—?" She looked at him enquiring like. But Steve had a way of not seeming to hear what he didn't want to take up.

"I reckon if you're not hurt, I wouldn't sit on that track, sister. Tracks aren't the safest places in the world to rest on." And he walked back to have another look at the hobo. We stared, for we all, including the girl, knew there wasn't a train due for four hours.

We helped Judith to her feet, for she hadn't made that attempt herself, and her face wasn't white then. It was flaming so high that in her red jersey and blue skirt, and with her black hair—it was kind of pretty hair at that—all wild and out of place, she looked more noticeable than usual. We kind of felt Steve had overstepped it a mite, seeing she was the preacher's girl and all—but, as he had said to us once, quite casual, you had to stop them at the start when you didn't want them or they became an aggravation to all concerned, and we felt that maybe this brand of philosophy was prompting him now. She looked at him, and she didn't look so meek just then. Maybe men didn't look her way much, but they were never right insulting either. When she opened her mouth, we kind of wondered just what sort of comeback was on her lips. The words weren't uttered, for just then we heard some other

voices, and there, swinging down the track in shirt and breeches, and with a slim young fellow at her side, was Mollie May.

**W**ell, if any girl in Cragg was a fit looking partner to Steve, it was Mollie May. She lived on a ranch back in the hills, with a pack of wild-riding brothers, and she was bold and fearless like the wind, with all the grace and strength of a young tree. She had a fine sweep of warm brown waving hair, and clear grey eyes. Her lips were red and laughing, and her skin was clear and brown and colorful as an autumn leaf. She had a mighty independent way with men, for all they'd be on her doorstep at the slightest sign. Most of this summer she'd spent in the company of the city fellow, Dave Andrews, who'd been boarding with them nigh on three months. He was dark and thin and kind of sickly, and seemingly had come to try and shake off a troublesome cough. It was easy to see, right from the start, just where his fancy lay—but though Mollie laughed and joked and bullied him around a bit more freely than she did most men, there never was much sign to suggest she returned his fancy.

They came on now, headed for the creek, with fishing rods and baskets, and they stopped short at the sight of Judith standing there so wild, and Steve with half his shirt torn off his back, and the fellow stretched so quiet on the speeder. “Why, whatever’s happened?” Mollie cried.

We told her, and we noticed that now Steve was the one who stood and stared. He stared as if he'd never seen such a girl in all his days, as if he'd clean forgotten there were any other folk in the whole world save her and him. I reckon Mollie recognized that look, and it unsettled her a bit, just like Judith's look did Steve but more, seeing as Steve was so big and handsome. And I reckon Mollie thought here was a man who'd best be set right in his place, and she looked him over cool as you please.

“It's nice to know we have such a protective battler in our midst,” she said, and walked on without another glance. The fellow, Andrews, gave Steve a look that was a bit too triumphant for it to do him any good, and took her arm as if to show where Mollie May belonged.

Maybe, casually seeing it in print, Mollie's words sounded complimentary—but her way of saying them was pretty sarcastic. Steve suddenly held the ends of his ripped shirt together as if he'd been caught doing something wrong, and flushed as fiery as you please. There came a sneaking suspicion in my mind—knowing the ways of women just a mite—that what Mollie May might really have meant by that coolness was a sort of

challenge. If so, there was an unmistakable answer in his eyes. Not that he said a word. It wasn't Steve's way to waste words. But we knew right then that Mollie May hadn't seen the last of him.

It seemed as if Judith knew she might as well sigh for the stars as waste a breath over Steve, after seeing Mollie May so fresh and confident. She looked at us so meek, almost as if ashamed for living, that we felt kind of sorry for the child; and then she guessed she'd better be getting on her way. But she hadn't gone two steps before she suddenly fell, and her face was as white as chalk. "It's my ankle. I slipped when he was chasing me," she gasped, and just about fainted then and there. We saw that her ankle was pretty badly swollen, and Pat declared one of us had better get her home, and he looked at Steve enquiringly.

Steve looked as if the notion bored him. "Where's she live?" he asked. "Better load her on the speeder and take her on to Cragg."

Pat shook his head. "No sense in that. She just lives up that hill a stretch." He pointed to a trail just beyond where Mollie May and Dave Andrews were walking.

Steve looked at that trail, and then at Judith and back at Mollie May—and I never saw a fellow's expression change so sudden. He stooped and picked Judith up in his arms as if she were a feather, and he was off down that track as fast as he could decently travel with an injured woman.

They had just passed by the trail when he got there, and he shouted something to Mollie May, so that she turned an instant and pointed upward. In that instant Judith raised her own arm and pointed, and we plainly saw Steve catch that arm pretty rough, and hold it down as if hoping Mollie might not see. Mollie did see, and from the toss of her head and the way she went on, she seemed to mean she'd have no dealings with the sort of fellow who tried to scrape easy acquaintance.

Steve just stood there staring after her a minute. Then he heaved Judith across his shoulder, this time as if she were a sack, and started up that hill as if devils were inspiring him. I confess we felt a mite concerned for Judith, although Pat couldn't help a laugh. "When that fellow's on the warpath, he's sure on it," he declared. "I reckon we'll move on. It won't hurt him to cool his heels a mile or so when he's finished that bit of business—and it won't hurt us, either."



Steve came around that evening to sit on the porch a spell, and I noticed two things at the start. One was that he was itching to ask a question and couldn't quite get up the nerve; the other was that he'd worn that same shirt in the morning and now it was sewn neat as you please all down the tear. That shirt aroused my curiosity more than I could reasonably stand. I waited until the wife was putting the kids to bed, then. "You must be pretty handy with a needle, Steve?" I suggested.

Steve looked at me sideways and grinned a bit, sheepish like. "Oh, I let the preacher's kid do that this morning," he said. "She was pretty anxious to, and I reckoned maybe I'd been a bit short and careless and it might please her to do something for me."

It sounds like pretty strong conceit, whichever way you put it, and yet there was something about Steve that didn't give you that impression. "You see," he grinned again, as if he had to try and excuse himself and also as if he were laughing at himself as well, "I bounced her round too much, I guess, and she got scared and gave a yell for me to put her down. Just to be contrary, I went on faster and landed us both in a heap over a log—which was kind of bad for her, with that ankle and all."

I got a vision of Steve, carrying Judith quite soberly then and kindly, for I'd seen him with the kids around enough to know he could be that way. I gathered, too, that the preacher had taken him for a good-intentioned man and insisted on inviting him inside for breakfast. I could just see Judith too, bending over that shirt, her face all serious; and Steve, probably decently covered in some old sweater, listening just as serious but with his thoughts a mile away, to the preacher's talking.

"Yeah, it was pretty good of her, I guess, although I'd as soon have tossed the shirt away," Steve finished with a shrug. "Talking of girls"—we were around to it at last—"who was that high and mighty dame who went along the tracks this morning?"

I told him—why not?

"Huh," was all Steve replied, and he changed the subject so prompt that I wondered if I'd been mistaken in his interest.

I reckon I wasn't. Tales began to get about, as tales will in small places, that Steve's reason for absenting himself so much on spare evenings, was Mollie May. Not that he seemed to make much favorable headway. It seemed mostly a case of hanging around near the farm and trying to encourage Mollie's brothers into friendly conversation. But it seemed like Mollie's brothers, mostly younger, and inclined to foolishness and sport,

caught on to his purpose, and they strung him along in a dozen ways, and sent him off on wild goose chases that made him look plain silly. Like when one of the lads came shouting that Mollie had had a bad spill by the creek and he'd better go and help; and when Steve went rushing he found that Andrews chap and her, busy picking up and laughing over a pail of spilled berries. And like inviting him to ride on the most crazy-notioned horse the place possessed, just in time for Mollie May to see him landing head first in a clump of bushes. All of that, and the way Mollie still tossed her head as if he were something not hitting on all cylinders, was disconcerting to Steve's pride, especially the way folks began to grin. After a time he kept away, and attended to his work mighty grimly in a mood that was fighting mad—for he wasn't one to take things any too lightly or to give in easy.

We fellows held our tongues after a while concerning Mollie May, seeing he could have swung the biggest of us round his head and was just aching for a chance to do it. But we couldn't resist a little mild fun a time or two when Judith passed us on the tracks with a kind of timid, admiring glance. Once we'd just pulled into a siding to wait for the 5.04 eastbound when she came along, still a bit stiff on that ankle, and one of the boys spoke up. "You might at least say howdy to the dame, Steve, seeing the way she patched your shirt."

Steve just sat and scowled, looking at his boots, and then he raised his head and shouted, "Hi! Hello!" in just the tone of voice you'd expect a fellow to tell you to go places in a hurry.

I reckon it was his way of speaking and not out of any wish to embarrass Judith. But maybe she was too simple to get embarrassed easy. She turned around, and her eyes lit up all sort of wondering; for, after all, she'd likely figure a man wouldn't call out after her unless he had a mind to do so.

Steve caught that look, and looked struck dumb again; then, as we heard the engine whistling down by the level crossing, he swung around and knocked two of us pretty rough together, and stood up straight there on the speeder. "She's coming!" he shouted, as if he'd never seen a train before instead of a round dozen every day. By the time No. 739 had passed, Judith was well down the track. Steve swung around on us again. "Well, what do you want me to do—a pale bit of a thing like that!" he said, pretty defiant, even though none had spoken. "When I want a girl, I'll get her my own way."

"So we've noticed, Steve," Pat spoke up dryly, Pat being the only one who had the right to talk.

Steve glared, and then sat down. “Hmmp,” was all he said, but by the way he said it, it meant plenty.

Which sounds maybe as if we razed Steve plenty and he couldn’t take it. But as a matter of fact he was easy and good-natured in all things except those women—and women, meaningly or otherwise, have made fools of the best and finest men ever since the world began. Steve was a worker, and he was square—which last covers a good piece of ground. In fact he was so square we were all quite willing to consider he was the finest-looking male specimen on the floor that night of the dance down in Cragg Hall. For all his size he wore his good blue suit mighty well, and he had what it takes in lightness of step and swing. I reckon there wasn’t a girl there but held her breath when he drew near, praying she might be favored.

But Steve had his eye fixed on the door, and it was plain to see their spirits dropped a mile when Mollie May came in. She was in something pale and green, with her hair all brown and shining, and it wasn’t many minutes before Steve had elbowed past the fellows crowding by and asked her for the pleasure. Mollie just gave him one glance, as if to deny it was a pleasure, and regretted she was promised dances in advance. Yet somehow I felt, even then, as if there was a hint of devilment and challenge there, as if she was enjoying herself a sight more than Steve.

**S**teve backed out, looking foolish and disgusted. And there, right across the hall, his eye lighted on Judith Creston. Judith had come with the doctor’s two girls, who were thin and unassuming, too, and the three of them just sat there kind of scared and despairing, and trying to look bright and hopeful. Judith’s dress was white and didn’t look right, probably due to having no mother since she was nine, and her hair stuck out too bushy like. But she couldn’t keep her eyes off Steve. I guess he knew that well enough and was feeling pretty sore, for he just went and grabbed her by the wrist and started dancing.

For a moment Judith looked as if heaven had opened right in her face. But that was short lived, for Judith was unpracticed on her feet, and caused them both such trouble that Steve looked like he was caught in a trap of his own making. Especially when he saw Mollie whisper to Dave and laugh. Steve got hold of Judith by the wrist, quite sudden then, and took her outside. I saw Mollie raise her eyes at that, and look puzzled and enquiring.

Somehow I didn’t like the look in Steve’s eye—Judith being a defenseless, inexperienced sort of kid—and I decided I’d take a bit of a

stroll myself. I was just in time to see Steve, there in the shadows of the trees near the steps, grab hold of Judith and kiss her as I reckon she'd never dreamed of being kissed. "There!" He said it kind of menacing at last, and defiant too. "That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Just for an instant Judith stared, as if she couldn't believe it of him—and I changed my mind right then about that girl not being able to take care of herself. She didn't slap his face—nothing so tame and simple. She just sprang and got his hair in both her hands, and tugged and tugged, while he just stood and took it, sort of stupefied. "That's what *you* want, you great hulking brute!" she said, low and fierce. And with a final pull that made him swear, she ran, all breathless and half crying, into the night.

I stepped back when I made sure he wasn't going to give chase, reckoning it might be best for Steve not to face witnesses to that. So I was surprised at the easy, smiling way he came back in, a few minutes later, with his hair all slicked, and only something pretty savage in his eyes to show how he felt. There were more surprises then, for as he came in, Mollie May left her party and came smiling over to him. "Oh, Mr. Lockaday, I think I can give you a dance after all," she said, and slipped her arm through his. "That is, if you're not busy."

Steve looked kind of dazed—her talking so sweet and friendly after the way she'd carried on. But he wasn't one to miss his chance, and he came back prompt. "I'm never busy when you're around," he said, which sounded a neat compliment. And the way she dropped her eyes and sort of blushed, told that despite her airy ways this was what she'd wanted all along.

Well, to cut a long tale short, Steve and Mollie had no eyes for any save each other all that evening. When someone, playful like, remarked, "Where's Judith?" Steve gave a glance fit to freeze him cold. Dave Andrews stood around and looked so hard hit that, for the first time, I felt a mite of sympathy. He looked as if he might have been a decent fellow if he hadn't been spoiled both by sickness and by money, and I reckoned maybe Mollie had been a bit encouraging to him after all or he wouldn't be gazing at her like that now.

It seemed to hit Mollie as sudden as it hit Steve in the beginning. I don't know what they said at parting, but Steve worked in a dream next day and all the days following. Which didn't mean he slacked off either; he worked twice as hard, and didn't seem to know it. He went rushing off to Mollie May's in his free hours as if his life depended on it. Only now he didn't go to scrape acquaintance with any racketing kid brothers. Mollie May herself

was right on hand to welcome him. It was left to Dave Andrews to do his own amusing, and I reckon it didn't come easy to him either.

It was plain enough to see the way things were heading, at least as far as Steve was concerned. I knew too that Mollie was struck back, but I knew as well that she'd always boasted a lot of expensive notions when it came to marrying. The best she could expect of Steve if he stuck round was maybe he'd be a section foreman some day, with a house and rail transportation—which, though good enough for a plain-thinking woman, didn't seem as if it would appeal to her. But I reckon men like Steve don't drop into an average woman's lap just for the praying; and, considering she didn't even have to pray, it must have been a satisfaction to her when she saw the way the girls all looked. I'm not belittling Mollie for that. Women have got that possessive way the whole world over, and they settle down none the worse in the end, but I've always had a sneaking feeling she wanted Steve for the pride of it and not for something that goes a whole lot deeper. I felt it that day when Steve told me he'd won her.

**I** recall that day mighty well. We were eating a bite of lunch down by the river at Mercer Bar. September it was, and we'd been commenting on the fact that it was a powerful striking country, with the mountains towering all around, and the rich fall colorings making you notice them the more.

"Yeah, it's swell," Steve said, never being one to say much, even if he felt it. After quite a spell he added, a bit awkward like: "I guess it's so swell I want to settle, instead of moving on like I first planned. You know, Bill—real settling, with a wife and all." He halted a bit.

"You mean Mollie May?" I asked to help him on, being familiar with the stumbling ways of men in love.

He looked at me, relieved that I'd figured it so easy. "Yes, sure; that's who I mean." His whole face lighted up. "That's how it is."

Just as if I didn't know it. But as his tongue got loosed I began to see it was something more than just unthinking fancy; that Steve had an idea of what it took to make a real marriage that many a young fellow might be the better for figuring. He seemed to take it for granted Mollie couldn't be anything else but all the sweet and understanding things a wife ought to be, but he seemed concerned about himself. "It's kind of a serious thought that a woman has to put up with all your tempers and crazy ways for maybe fifty years," he said. "I've sense enough to know she won't always think I'm as fine as she does right now, but I've got to plan to make it up to her then. I

know darn well I'm not half as good as I ought to be—just when I want to be good enough to guard and keep her proper all her life.”

I remember now the way he sat there, with the sun in patches through the leaves and on his bright hair, and his voice low and solemn; I'll remember that all my life. And I felt right then, strangely enough, that the question wasn't as he put it, but whether Mollie May, for all her looks and ways, was really worth the guarding and the keeping.

That should have been, just then, the happiest time of Steve's life, with everyone congratulating him and all. Yet somehow I got the impression that, despite his grimness, he had been happier in those days when Mollie's brothers had been tormenting him with wild words and horses. He went right on planning—November, the wedding was to be—but he looked kind of worried, the way no newly engaged man had any right to look. At first he just turned me aside when I tried to find if anything was troubling him, but finally he kind of laughed and said he guessed he'd feel a darn sight better after Dave Andrews went East at the end of October. Andrews spent his days telling Mollie how much more she'd get if she'd listen to him, and just how bad his heart was broken through love of her.

“Does he plague you with all that talk?” I asked, thinking none too kind of Andrews just then.

“Oh, no. It's Mollie tells me,” Steve answered, as if that were quite right and dutiful of Mollie. “It worries the poor girl a heap, being tenderhearted over his suffering.”

“Steve Lockaday,” I told him straight, “if you were half a man and not a fool you'd go and end that fellow's suffering by kicking him out the gate.” Which was a mixture of good and bad advice I reckon, and for a long time after I couldn't figure whether it was a good or bad thing that Steve didn't take it.

Steve just looked at me sort of horrified. “Say, do you think I'd upset that girl by acting brutal?” he said, just as if his life had been chock full of gentle deeds. It sure beats all what a woman will do to a naturally fighting-spirited man!

**B**ut the time was to come, and pretty soon, when Steve had a mind to show too much fighting spirit for our comfort. It came near the last week in October—early evening, I recall. I had run down to Steve's one-room cabin concerning a report just come over the wire. He was getting

his supper and whistling merrily, evidently Mollie having been extra sweet just lately and not so full of tales of Dave's broken heart. As I left I caught a glimpse of Judith Creston hurrying home from Cragg on the far side of the track, not looking once across. I reckoned Judith was well cured of Steve by now. She'd kept well out of his way since that dance affair.

I didn't wait, being in something of a rush to eat, myself, but I was halted by a shout, and Steve came rushing out, a breadknife in one hand, the other dripping blood. I rushed back, fearing he'd cut his finger off at least. But Judith had flashed about even quicker, and already she'd got hold of his hand and was looking at it. His face was white as a sheet. "My gosh, look at it bleed!" He was looking at her, both scared and helpless, as if his life depended on her assistance.

It's a mighty strange thing that a man who could do things the way Steve did could also lose his nerve so at the sight of his own blood. Judith just pushed him down on a chair. She gave out some orders for water and tore up a clean tea towel, with some good sharp but invigorating talk the while. "Of all the fuss about a simple scratch!" was some of it, although, to tell the truth, the cut wasn't as simple as all that. "A baby'd have more sense!"

Steve took it in mighty good part, knowing maybe that he had it coming. But finally, when he was feeling somewhat recovered, he just looked at her with something that was half amusement in his eyes.

"Aw, snap out of it, young one," he said, quite soft in her ear as she was finishing the tying with a good efficient reef knot. "Life's too short and good to waste in a lot of insulting remarks and ways. I guess I see that now, if I never did before."

He said it quite kind and simple, and probably it was his way of apologizing to her, even if he wouldn't say so in as many words. She looked at him, startled, her face white, so undecided about how to take it that I knew at once she hadn't given up thinking of him. And I was a bit uneasy, wondering whether Steve could handle it politely after all. But he never had the chance, for just then there was a knocking at the door and there stood Mollie's youngest brother with a letter in his hand.

"Here!" he said, thrusting it at Steve, and then he beat it hell-for-leather down the rails. Steve looked at him, and then at the letter, kind of puzzled. He opened and read it.

It took him so long that we both stood completely still, half fearing to speak. His expression scarcely changed except for the way his lips slowly tightened, and this time his face was worse than white. It was a kind of

sickly grey. He looked down at his bandaged hand. “There’ll be more blood on my mind than that tonight,” he said, too quietly for my peace of mind. He walked out of the door, and stood a long time on the tracks, staring in the direction the boy had run. The letter had fallen to the floor.

Judith picked it up; and I reckon we meant no harm when we both read it. I can’t remember how it was put in words, being full of useless phrases, but its meaning was plain. She couldn’t face the thought of sending Dave away so unhappy and so delicate and all; she figured her duty lay with him. They were leaving that same night, and he was going to take her honeymooning to Hawaii. She hoped Steve wouldn’t feel too bad . . .

“Hoped! Duty! Her duty was to tell Steve decently and properly, and not go sneaking off behind his back. I’d like to wring her neck!” Judith spoke in little more than a whisper, but, although it echoed my own sentiments entirely, I never could have said it or looked the way she did. And if I ever saw real love, and anger for a hurt that had been done, blazing out of any woman’s eyes, I saw it then.

All at once I dashed out as Steve started striding down the tracks. “Hey, Steve!” He didn’t listen, and Judith ran after me, terrified. “Stop him! You’ve got to!” she said quick and fierce, and pushed me on. “He’s liable to do anything!” I knew it. “Hey, Steve!” I tried to catch his arm, but he wheeled around so quick I nearly lost my balance. “You put a hand on me and I’ll lay you out cold, just like I’m going to lay that rat!” he said.

“Steve, you can’t!” That was Judith, and despite his words she rushed forward and clung with both her hands.

“Let go.” He stood still and tense, and there was murder in his voice. “Let go, I say, you little fool, before I—”

She flung her arms up tight about his neck and locked her hands there, and there was fierce, fighting determination on her own face. “Steve, you can’t kill anyone! You mustn’t! You mustn’t kill!”

At that he let out a mighty roar. “You and your preaching! Don’t dare tell me not to kill!” He twisted her arms until she gasped with pain. “Do you think I care what’s right or wrong?” He wrenched her hands apart and flung her from him. “I’m going to kill; I’m going to kill right now!”

Quick as a flash Judith bent down, with her arms all red from his grasp and her eyes still blazing in her white face. She picked up a rock. “Steve Lockaday, if anybody’s going to kill, it won’t be you!” she cried, and flung it straight at his head.



I reckon if I live to be a hundred I won't forget that moment, when Steve dropped on the rails and Judith ran and caught his head and held it close, with the most terrible, despairing cry. And I won't forget the night that followed, long after we got Judith home—with Steve half dazed and still half wild, struggling between spells of lying motionless to get out of his bed and door. It was all both Pat and I could do to hold him. We feared that if he broke away we might have to deal him another knockout blow ourselves, seeing he was so confused he wouldn't even know what he was raging after. Judith had certainly aimed straight and true; and I reckon that when she prayed that night, it was a prayer of thankfulness that she didn't have a full man's strength behind that blow.

At dawn Steve seemed to come to himself, and he lay still and more than half sick with the pain through his head. But there was no wildness in his eyes, just a sort of weariness and dullness that somehow struck us as being even worse.

"It's all right, fellows; you can go," he told us, very quiet. "I reckon I've given you a sight of trouble. I won't be giving any more."

We knew then that Steve wouldn't, for his head was usually pretty level and he was no fool. But we knew that Mollie May had done a thing that was, in its own way, as bad as the killing that Steve had set out to do. She'd just about killed something that had been simple and fine and trusting. I daresay Pat and I wished her, in silence that night, a deal of things that wouldn't bear repeating.

In two days Steve was back at work again. But he never mentioned Mollie May, or Judith either. He worked as well as ever but he talked even less, and he had a way of keeping to himself in his spare hours, as if he couldn't face the thought of company. We sometimes wondered why he stayed in a place so full of bitter memories, when he had nothing to hold him there. Sometimes we had an uneasy notion that he was waiting until the bridal couple should pass back through Cragg on their way East some time in the winter; but just what he planned to do or say then, we didn't know.

**S**o the months passed quietly enough, from the biting cold of November and December to the January snows. By that time the slides were keeping us busy night and day. Scarcely a train went through on time, and finally the big block came that began to tie the transcontinentals in the canyon. Our gang were working up where an Eastbound was tied. It was cut off both ways, and there were a crowd of passengers aboard who had to

amuse themselves the best way they could, looking out on some mighty forbidding country in some mighty unprofitable weather.

It was on the second day the train was caught there that a piece of news got round which made the boys prick up their ears and glance sideways at Steve. Mollie May and her husband, Dave Andrews, were on that train! It was a bad bit of news to come upsetting Steve at a time when he was overworked, and just when we needed all he had to give, without commotion. We planned to keep the information to ourselves, and keep Steve busy where he wouldn't have to be passing much under those windows.

We might have got away with it except for the fact that an old fellow on the train took desperately sick and got a persistent notion that he had to see a preacher in his last hours. It evidently caused a stir aboard, them having not too much to think about, and one of the company men who was riding east came out to us where we were working. He'd heard from a young woman aboard who used to live in Cragg that they had a preacher there, and he wanted one of the boys to go back on the speeder and bring him out.

Pat gave one of the kids the order pretty quick, but he didn't make much song about it, hoping, we all knew, that Steve might have missed the point about the young woman. But Steve wasn't missing any points, and he looked at me a bit queer a moment or so later. He must have seen what I knew, for his lips tightened, and I grew disturbed at the change that came into his eyes.

"Now, Steve, it's long past," I began, hoping to soothe him. But he cut me short.

"It'll never be past while that rat lives," he said, and even then I noticed that there was no blame or word of Mollie. "He'd better keep clear of me if he wants his life, that's all!"

We felt far from easy. The men aboard the train had a habit of taking exercise along the rails and watching us at work, and there was no knowing when Andrews, unsuspecting real trouble, might do the same. But by late afternoon the prospect of another slide was threatening just at the rear of the coaches, and a gang of us, including Steve, were busy there, trying to avert a pack of trouble. Just about that time Steve looked down the tracks. "Here comes the preacher and his wildcat girl," he said, a bit low and grim.



*There came a sudden splitting and sliding of snow. I swung around at Steve but he rushed forward as the slide poured all around us.*

I'd already seen the three of them walking up from where the speeder had brought them, and I reflected it was the first time he'd referred to Judith in months. I was still turning it over in my mind when there came a sudden splitting and sliding of snow up above, and we all jumped and took a run, shouting to those three to keep well back until it was over. We cleared, and I found myself standing beside Steve with the others at some distance.

"Look at that fool!" Steve said, suddenly pointing, for near the rear of the train there was a fellow who'd apparently been out walking, rushing down the tracks. We saw him catch his foot and fall heavy on the ties, just as there was some more disturbance up above. I started forward, and Steve caught and pulled me back. "It's him!" he said, low and menacing. "You let him be!"

I swung around, prepared to give Steve as dirty a crack to free myself as I could, when the slide came crashing. And in that moment Steve rushed forward, just as it poured with a roar all around us.

It seemed as if the whole mountainside must have come down in that slide, and neither Steve nor Dave Andrews would ever be dragged out alive. But almost as soon as it had cleared enough for us to move, Steve was fighting through, kicking and digging into that heap of snow like a man

possessed. It was he who finally put his weight to those two rocks that were trapping Dave Andrews and by some freak not crushing him, and who helped to drag him out, pretty well unconscious but otherwise seemingly unhurt. It was Steve who held him up with his right arm while the lad was struggling for breath. And it was Judith Creston, who, strangely enough, was loosening his collar and helping get him straightened out. Dave was moaning a bit now, and Steve was looking across at Judith as if it wasn't surprising she was there. "What's he saying?" he demanded, suspicious like, for it was as if the fellow wanted something and couldn't say it clear.

Judith bent her head closer. "It's his mother," she answered, very quietly.

Steve looked at Judith again and then down at that fellow—and I swear that in that moment I saw the hate fade right out of his face. Perhaps it was the "mother" when he was sure it must be "Mollie." Perhaps it was because Dave Andrews, for all his brown coloring, looked so sick and somehow young and helpless; perhaps because of the lost feeling and the loneliness that word seemed to hold out there in the snow—something real and simple that Steve could understand.

"Mother," Steve repeated, very low, and he raised his left arm as if to brush back a lock of untidy dark hair that was hanging over Dave's eyes. Then he seemed to see, as if for the first time, that his own hand was hanging limp and useless. And we saw, too, that Steve was needing medical attention himself, and badly.

They got Dave Andrews to his bed on the train, where he lay, conscious now but quiet, as if he were too tired to talk. No injuries, said the doctor who was aboard, but he shook his head as if he seemed to think what we all thought—that Andrews was a sick and unhappy man. They also put Steve in a private room for a while, and set his wrist and fixed some cuts and bruises, with Judith still there, quiet and helping. Only she slipped away when the doctor went, before Steve really got around to realizing she was there. And he lay quiet too, just staring straight above, so that it would take a smarter one than me to know what he was thinking.

Presently there came a knock at the door, just when I was on the point of going back out to the job myself—and it was Mollie May! She came right in, looking at Steve a bit uncertain like; and I reckoned it was maybe up to me to stay, not knowing even then what might be on Steve's mind. But he just turned his eyes to look at her, almost without surprise. "Hello, Mollie," he said quietly. "How's he doing?"

“He’s doing all right.” Mollie still stood staring at him, uncertain, and then all at once she dropped to her knees beside the bed and put her arm across him. “Oh, Steve, it was wonderful of you!” she said, soft and unsteady, and she bent her head to look right in his eyes.

It seemed like Steve didn’t want to meet her eyes. He shifted a bit uneasily, and looked back again at the ceiling. “I was glad to get him for you,” he answered, quite casual. He said no more; and Mollie still looked at him as if she was seeing all over again how strong and clean looking and handsome he was, even lying in an old rough shirt on that bed. And I could tell by her look that she wanted to claim him, right then, as hers, more than she wanted anything on earth.

“Oh, Steve!” she said again, her voice kind of low and fierce. “When I see you I know what an awful thing I did. You’ll never know how much I regretted it!”

Steve did look at her then. “Do you mean he wasn’t good to you?” he asked.

But she had to shake her head at that, and I reckoned I knew what she meant. Dave Andrews was good—too good, likely—but he was tired and ailing, and all his money, after all, didn’t buy her the life she felt she might have had with Steve. I was afraid for Steve just then—helpless as he lay, with that queer look about him, and her arm so soft and her face so close.

“Steve; whatever can you think of me?” she said.

I know for a certainty the answer she expected, but I never in this world expected the answer she got. Steve just took her arm with his free hand and put it gently aside. “You’d be surprised at what I think,” he said, very soft. “Go back to that man you married and give him all the love and care you’ve got, while you’ve got him. He’s the one who needs it now. Not me.”

**H**e said it so quiet and convincing that Mollie just looked at him. And then, without a word she rose to her feet and left the room. But I knew the instant she had gone that it had cost Steve a mighty effort to say that because there was a cold sort of dampness on his forehead. But Steve was a fighter; he smiled a bit, even then.

“Well, Bill, that’s that,” he said to me. And he added what I believe he’d never have said if he hadn’t been more shaken than he’d let on. “I reckon after all, the sort of love we dream of, just isn’t there.”

Something unexpected made me suddenly give an answer I'd never have dreamed of making any other time. "No, Steve—except the sort of love that would face death itself rather than let another face it."

He just looked at me a long moment. "You mean—Judith," he said, very low.

I nodded. He was silent again.

"Bill," he said slowly, at length. "It's queer that you should say that. I've tried time and time again not to let myself think that's why she did it. I kind of hated the part I played in it. But I guess I knew it was that way."

"I don't know why she cares, considering the way you've acted," I told him, quite honest. "But I know mighty well she does."

He drew a deep kind of tired breath. "I don't know either," he said wearily. Then, after a minute: "Bill, do you think she'll come back in here?"

"No." I answered quite simply and certainly, "I don't."

He did not speak again for quite a time. "I don't suppose you'd want to go and find her for me, would you?" he finally asked, hesitant like. "I—I guess I ought to tell her I'm not so proud of the way I treated her. I guess I ought to do that, don't you, Bill?"

"I guess so," I said, and I went outside to find her. And just before I pushed her in, all trembling and protesting, I dropped my voice to say a few things.

"Judith, being only a rough sort myself, I don't know what you can do with a fellow who's down and tired to death and lonely," I told her. "But don't be scared of him. I guess I might even say don't be scared of letting him know you care if you still do care. I've a hunch it might be what he needs. And now, go on." I shoved her in before she had a chance to say a word.

I waited a minute, and there was such silence that I felt uneasy. And then I heard Steve, and I'd never heard him speak like that before—kind of unsteady and yet somehow so understanding. "Judith, don't look at me like that—as if I'm going to hurt you. I wouldn't hurt you—or anything, right now. Just come here." And then I didn't wait for any more.

Steve took her out of Cragg a month later. It was as if suddenly he didn't want to stay there, and Judith was willing that he shouldn't. We saw them go on the train, and he held her tightly with his arm, as if he needed her so much, even if he couldn't give her as yet all that he had wanted to give

Mollie May. And she smiled at us and waved, and then looked back at him as if she'd wait quietly and gladly until it came. And there was none of us but had the feeling that when it did, it would be something worth the waiting for.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Steve of Cragg Section* by Beryl Gray]