

bulging, neck twisted over by the pull on its horns. Lydia put all her own weight on the rope too, planting her feet and yelling at the mule, but the steer stood where it was. Finally she went into the trees and got a stick. She slogged out into the mud again and hit the steer hard across the nose. It bellowed in surprise and eyed her, white-edged. She yelled at the mule and the rope twanged tight a couple of times, but by then the steer's eyes had glazed again and it stood glumly in the mud, unmoving.

"Dang you!" Lydia said suddenly, harsh and loud.

She hit the steer's head again, swinging the long stick in flat and hard between the eyes, a cracking blow. The steer rocked once, silently — for a wild moment she thought she might have killed it — then it lurched ahead suddenly in the mud, bellowing and slinging its horns, hurling mud and slobber in a short, spattering flurry.

Lydia staggered quick out of the mud herself, grabbing along the rope for Rollin. She flung a leg up over the mule's back and held on to the saddle, hanging half off it while the mule sprang out of the way of the steer's short, mad lunge. The mule had never been inclined to buck, but the rope pulled around under his tail when the steer staggered past him, and he snorted wildly, put his head down and bucked up his back. She would have stayed on him if she'd had both stirrups, a solid seat. But she was hanging off the saddle clumsily and his one stiff-legged bounce shook her off. She hit on her back and got up quick, scrabbling around to watch the steer. He kept bellowing and hooking his horns, trying to get loose of the rope, but he stood in one place, cross-legged and swaying, as if he hadn't figured out yet that he was unstuck from the mud.

Lydia got shakily on the mule again, setting her boots well in the stirrups. Then she sidled up along the steer's shoulder. Rollin was set stubbornly on keeping away from the slung horns, she had to pull his head up hard, twisting the reins, kicking him, to get him in close enough, and then she leaned out, grabbing warily for the rope. She tried five or six times, reaching in and out, before she got the rope loose of the steer.

By then her mouth was aching and full of blood — she had bit her cheek, jarred her teeth, when Rollin had bucked her off. She sat on the mule, rocking and keening a little, while she watched the