Eight outlaws rode in, a regular gang of them with rifles slung on saddles and kerchiefs 'round their throats like wounds. They pulled hard on reins and bits without a thought, and their horses tossed angry heads against the pain. You knew they'd kick if you got too close. They circled the yard in front of the house. The cowponies in the nearby corral cried out and jostled each other.

When the outlaws rode up they brought a tension with them like too much summer heat and lightning on the horizon. The leader came up front and center. He had a beard like a thousand other men, scruffy hair that hadn't been washed in too long, worn shirt and trousers, a snarl showing dirty teeth. He was the kind of man some folk say needed a woman's touch, except that he was also the kind of man who wouldn't sit still for it, who fled the minute his woman started talking about putting up nice curtains, or who drove her off when he raised a hand to her.

Revolver in hand, the outlaw leader looked at the folk standing on the house's front porch: mother, father, brother, and sister. Two farm hands came up from the barn but the one of the gang fired a gun in the air to keep them back. He looked them over, smiled cruelly, and said, "Which of you is going to tell me where Harlow Mason is?"

The outlaws did not know that one member of the family standing there on the porch was missing. That is, they didn't until they saw the dust raised up by a cowpony racing out across the plain with a girl perched on its back.

Mother and Father would have stopped her if they could, but Annie was fourteen now and contrary in the way of a girl who had grown up with a pony of her own. (Mother warned them, if they let her wear trousers and run around like a heathen she'd never be tamed. Father smiled indulgently, her brother egged her on, and secretly Mother was pleased. Her eldest daughter might have a terrible time finding her an understanding husband. Then again, if she kept this up she might never need one.)

One of the crew of outlaws set up a holler, pointing out to the clear trail of rising dust. The leader scowled, wearing the nastiest of expressions when he looked over the Mason family, and spurred his angry horse back round the way he'd come, shouting at his people, pulling them in line, so they galloped on in a formation that was almost military after that trail of dust.

They would never catch this particular cowpony, not even if they'd all started at the same time, pretty as a race.

The Mason ranch was not quite standard: The windmill had double the blades and a complicated set of pistons and belts leading down its spine. Pumped water streamed into a wide trough, and from there a kind of water wheel gathered it up and sent it down a split channel, one part leading to a barn, the other to the house. The whole ranch had running water. Likewise the gates had extra hardware on them, bolts and brackets, gears and winches connected to cables and switches—they were automated and could be operated from one spot by the barn. And there was a clattering bell that rang as soon as anyone road up to the house, which was how Annie Mason got her head start.

The outlaws would not catch her because like the gates and the windmill and the alarm, the automated apple peeler and hydro-sonic washing machine, the pneumatic post hole digger and piston-driven corn husker, Annie's pony, Copper, was a thing made by Uncle Harlow Mason.

Annie hoped to warn Uncle Harlow about the terrible men who were looking for him, and Copper would do whatever she asked. He was alive because of her tears, and because of her he could run forever. This was his job now, the purpose he embraced: to make his girl fast, to lift her up as far as he can. Sixty inches off the ground, at least. More when he jumps. Closer to the sky either way.

Anyone else would have shot the horse after it broke not one but two legs over a loose stretch of rocks on the prairie, but Harlow was there and wanted to try something, because he always wanted to try something, and he was sure there was nothing in the big wide world he couldn't fix given time and tools. "Give me a lever long enough!" he used to bellow, before pulling out wrench and tin shears. That saved Copper. That and Annie, begging, unwilling to see her Copper shot, broken legs or no.

Now, instead of flesh and blood for legs this singular cowpony had steel and pistons, rubber tendons, and brass flywheels, slicked with oil and faster than bees' wings. He had interchangeable shoes: broad plates for sand, spikes for ice, rubberized points like a billy goat's hooves, and regular polished-for-parades horse's feet. Mostly, though, this cowpony could now run fast. And he still loved his girl. (You can tell a horse loves his girl by the way he rests his nose on her shoulder, whuffing softly, like he has come home. You can tell a girl loves her pony by the way her arms exactly fit around his head when he lowers it to greet her.)

Uncle Harlow's only reservation about the whole deal was that the cowpony's heart might not be strong enough to power the rest, but he needn't have worried about that. His heart was plenty. The only thing was Copper had to be kept in his own pen because one solid kick from him would destroy a natural horse. And the other horses bullied him; he was too strange for them, and they let him know.

The outlaws did not know any of this about the cowpony's legs, and could not understand why the girl kept drawing farther and farther ahead, no matter how much they shouted and whipped their own already overworked mounts.

Annie talked to Copper during that mad ride to the valley where Harlow kept his workshop in a cave hidden from prying eyes. "What's Harlow done to get such men riled at him? Crazy man." She said this with affection because she owed Harlow a lot.

The pony told her he agreed by running faster.

She took a roundabout route, leaving dusty plain to trot over rock for awhile. She might have worried on a horse with regular feet. She didn't worry at all about Copper. The pony's metal gait jarred a bit, so she stood up on her stirrups and rode through it. This way, no telltale trail of dust marred the sky. They passed down into one wash, up into another, until hard as she looked she couldn't see anyone following. Only then did she turn their path into the secluded gulch, tucked neatly between two low unassuming mesas that Uncle Harlow called home.

The one-room cabin that he and Father built a decade ago, where Uncle Harlow slept and cooked meals and stored his clothes and food, stood peaceful enough, but no smoke came out of the chimney. No smoke came out of the forge, either, set at the mouth of the cave in a big sandy stretch where stray sparks had no chance to cause mischief. Deeper in the cave were racks and cupboards, chests and drawers, piles of scrap metal and lanterns hung on hooks, every tool a person could name and some Harlow had invented just for himself. He had buckets of gears and sprockets and spindles, engines he was building, and prototypes of ships that could fly or swim underwater, though they were a hundred miles from anything bigger than a pond. Harlow Mason was an inventor, a good one, but he was not always the best judge of character. He depended on his family for that most times—Father brought him business, usually. Lord knew how he'd gotten mixed up with the outlaws. They might have asked for a powered wrench that would break into safes or a device to stop trains on a dime. It might not have occurred to him to wonder what a grizzled man with guns on his belt might use such gadgets for. He'd have been too fascinated by the challenge of making a gun that could shoot through a bank safe or an airship that could fly straight up and turn invisible for a fast getaway.

She left Copper to graze and searched. Harlow must have had some warning that something was amiss, but the only message she found were the things that were missing: clothing tossed out of a trunk, as if someone had packed in a hurry; the rusted tin can behind the bed where Harlow kept his money—empty; and the great silk balloon he always said he was going to use to lift his airship. A powered balloon he could use to fly around the world, he bragged when he came to the ranch for dinner once a week. Father would laugh and Mother would shake her head, and younger brother and sister would beg for stories. Annie'd watched him sewing at it for months.

It was gone now, along with one of his engines and a whole barrel of pieces and parts.

Finally, she found a note hidden in a toolbox, tucked under a hammer. "Burn it," he wrote. "Burn it all, Annie."

"He's gone," she murmured wonderingly. Her feelings were mixed. First came relief that the outlaws wouldn't find him. But then came anger; Harlow was gone and looked like he wasn't coming back, which wasn't fair at all because she needed him: She could make little repairs to Copper's legs, adding oil and tightening bolts when she brushed him down and checked his feet. But for the bigger things—changing out belts, cleaning valves and pistons, making sure the strange widgets of his creation stayed good—she needed Harlow for that. If he wasn't here, who would keep Copper well and safe? She kicked at a toolbox and screamed a curse at the man, because that kept her from crying. Just like Harlow, not thinking ahead at all.

Meanwhile, Copper might have looked like he was grazing, but he kept himself pointed to the head of the gulch and had one ear up, listening hard. Anything came along that way, he'd know it. And something did, because it was that kind of day. A half a dozen strangers galloped up, and Copper raised his head and hollered a warning to his girl to come quick, to tell him if they were going to stay and fight or get the hell out.

The men pulled back on their reins and the horses rolled wild eyes at him because he looked like a horse but smelled of rubber and oil. One of the men said, "Lord, look at that thing." The pony stood his ground when one of them dismounted—he couldn't get his own mount to come any closer—and grabbed his reins. Copper planted his four mechanical legs like tree roots while he waited for his girl to return.

Annie ran out of the cave to find the horseman surrounding her pony and blocking her way out. The men had dusters over neat suits, clean hats and boots. Well-trained mounts standing politely—except when they pinned their ears at Copper. They weren't outlaws, though they carried just as many weapons. These men had women to wash and mend their clothes, to tell them it was time to trim their mustaches.

The one in front flicked back the flap of his coat to show the brass star on his vest.

"U.S. Marshal, ma'am," he said calmly. "Name's Kearney."

Copper's head was straight up, pulling against his captor. His ears were pinned back, angry, and he looked at the girl as if to apologize for not giving warning sooner. Wasn't his fault, not if the marshal and his crew already knew about Harlow's workshop. Not if they'd been waiting in ambush.

"You're Miss Annie Mason," the marshal said.

"Yes, sir."

"That's a fine animal there. Unusual." He nodded at the buckskin with the mechanical legs.

"One of a kind. He's not for sale," she said, because she'd been asked before.

"It's one of Harlow Mason's gadgets, isn't it?"

"No," she said. "He's my pony."

"Is Mason here?" He gazed past her, studying the homestead.

"No, sir."

"And exactly where is Harlow Mason right now, Miss Annie?"

"I don't know," she said, truthfully. She'd left the note he'd written under the toolbox and hoped the marshals didn't search for it. She needed to send these men away, so she could do what Harlow asked her to.

"But you know where he was."

The pony stamped the ground with a whirring of gears and hissing of pistons.

"Sir, I know you're looking for my uncle—but so were some other folk, a whole gang of the rowdiest outlaws you ever saw. I need to get home, to see that there's no trouble—"

"That right? I imagine we'll get to them soon enough. Right now, I'm authorized to take possession of Harlow Mason's property. In the interest of national security, you understand."

Mind you, these were the good guys.

"I imagine that gang was after the same thing. Engines, yeah? Weapons?"

"Mechanics," Kearney said. "Like this here buckskin."

"He won't run for anyone but me."

He nodded at the man holding the cowpony. "Nelson. Why don't you get on that cowpony, give him a turn, see how he rides."

Annie could step away because she knew what would happen next.

Likely, the marshal had picked this particular one of his deputies to ride the mechanical buckskin because he was the best horseman—the one who could tame mustangs, the one who could whisper young colts into halters. He took it entirely for granted that this deputy would be able to murmur to the clockwork horse, lead him off, get on him and trot a circle, pretty as anything. But that didn't happen.

The man was young and had a kind face. The miles were in his hands, calloused from years of work. He stroked the cowpony's cheek, just like anyone would upon meeting a new horse. Said gentle words, and the horse's cupped ears flickered willing enough. But when the man tugged on the reins and urged him forward, the pony didn't move. He did the first trick you always try—move in another direction, pull the reins at an angle the horse isn't expecting so he walks off in spite of himself. He got insistent, his voice rising just a bit, "Come on, you." He clicked his tongue, moved to the horse's side and flicked the ends of the reins at his belly. None of it worked. Annie and Copper were both impressed that he didn't resort to yelling and whipping.

They could all see the locked legs, the frozen gears, the belts that didn't waver, the pistons that wouldn't budge. Pony had the brakes on.

Annie took the reins from the deputy, spoke softly, "Come on, kid," and the pony walked on like it was nothing.

"Well, shoot," the marshal said, but Nelson laughed.

"Sorry sir, can't do a thing about it," he said. He understood, and the pony nodded at him in respect. But he wouldn't walk on for the man.

"All right then. Nelson, you and Jack stay here and keep watch over the place. No one goes in. The rest of us—we're going to get some answers. You too, Miss Annie."

She could outrun them. With this pony she could outrun anybody. But if they knew Harlow's homestead, then they knew the ranch, and Annie couldn't run forever.

Rather than stand on the porch with rifles as they had with the outlaws, Mother and Father invited the marshal and his crew in for coffee and biscuits. That didn't change how Kearney looked Father up and down as if studying him for weapons, trying to figure out what he was hiding. But Father wasn't hiding anything. For once the younger siblings sat quietly, staring at the strangers with their big brass stars.

"Mr. Mason, your brother has a place out behind the wash by the mesas. You know what he gets up to out there?" He was asking questions he already knew the answer to.

"He does some smith work, some tinkering. Fixes things—you seen the windmill and gates right here on the farm."

"You know where he's got off to?"

"If he's not out at his place, then I don't know." Father glanced at Annie, trying to ask the question, but she wouldn't meet his gaze.

Kearney took out a sheaf of papers from inside his vest and spread them on the table.

Father studied them. "It's a contract."

"Yes. Between your brother and the United States government, for some of his inventions. Engines, tools. Gadgets like those automated gates you have out there. Harlow was paid for his efforts, but the U.S. government has yet to receive any of the promised goods."

And didn't that sound like something Harlow would do? Found a way to get easy money—maybe to finish that airship he kept on about—and he might have had every intention in the world of delivering what he'd promised, but between one thing and another he couldn't follow through.

"There's more," Kearney said. "We got testimony that says Harlow Mason made a similar deal with Edward Canton."

"The outlaw?" Mason said.

"That's right."

Father turned away and swore softly. "That's what they wanted."

"Edward Canton was here?"

"Never met the man and can't say that was him. But someone rode up here guns blazing not two hours ago."

Now it was Kearney who swore. "Where'd he go? And pardon me for asking but why'd he leave you all standing?"

Father looked back at Annie, which she wished he wouldn't have done. "My girl ran off and led 'em on a fine chase, I reckon."

Kearney nodded in acknowledgment if not understanding.

Dealing with outlaws also sounded like something Harlow would do, for much the same reason he'd dealt with the government folk. An easy way to make some fast money, and never mind if he'd deliver or not. Uncle Harlow didn't always think too far ahead, which was how he put together the horse with the clockwork legs, without thinking what such a thing could do or be.

Easy, to be furious with Harlow, who couldn't be sensible when it mattered. But if he was generally sensible, then Copper wouldn't be breathing. For that, Annie would forgive him anything. She understood the note now: he didn't want anyone to get hold of his gadgets. He was gone; best the rest of it go too. Fair enough.

How much time did she have, then, to get back to Harlow's place and follow his instructions? Not to mention going behind the backs of the deputies Kearney'd left behind.

The pony still had its saddle on; she'd left Copper in a corral when she'd brought the marshal and his men straight to the house. How did she get outside with no one asking her questions?

Kearney went outside to two of his deputies who were standing watch on the front porch. The whole family stayed very quiet to listen.

"They can't be too far away," Kearney said. "They'll be back. We'll wait."

Mother put on another pot of coffee.

Father said to the man when he came back in, "I do sympathize with you, Marshal, but I can't keep up with my brother at the best of times. He doesn't tell me much—this contract, this deal with Canton, it's all news to me."

"You don't mind, then, if we wait around for a bit? See if he comes back here, to see his beloved family?"

Father frowned. Mother tensed. Annie very much refrained from mentioning the missing airship balloon and engine.

"Don't suppose it matters if I mind or not," Father said.

Kearney smiled. "I appreciate your outlook."

While they talked, Annie put her hand on the back door, but then her mother said, "Annie," in that curt low tone, and everyone looked, and she had to stand still after that.

Along with the pair of deputies keeping watch on the porch, the cowpony stood watch from his pen. A horse has ears that can hear trouble coming across miles of prairie, and eyes that spot movement that shouldn't be there, and shadows in bright light where people don't think to look. You see a horse spook at nothing, it may not be nothing but a thing only horses can see.

The cowpony saw the outlaws returning. He was watching for 'em. Knew they'd be back because they had no place left to look for Harlow, and they wouldn't have found the cave. Not unless they'd followed Annie, and he made sure they couldn't.

He trumpeted, and anyone who'd been around horses knew that sound of warning.

Annie knew it right off and ran out the door. Took everyone else a minute or two to follow.

"Annie, get back here!" Mother called but the girl didn't listen. Ignored everything else but the cowpony and her path to get to him.

There was no standoff. There were no words exchanged, no time to look across an open dusty space and size each other up. Canton's gang came in firing.

This all happened at once: The outlaws rode up the drive, guns firing; the deputies took cover; and the cowpony jumped clean over the corral fence. This startled the regular horses so profoundly they all spooked: the picketed horses belonging to the marshal and his deputies, the crowd of horses under the outlaws, the ranch horses penned up in the corral. They all set to bucking and pulling against reins and crashing into each other. Briefly, briefly, the outlaws stopped firing, and Annie had her chance to take a look around and decide what to do next.

The cowpony came to meet her and decided for the both of them.

Mother and Father were both on the porch with rifles, taking aim at Canton and his gang—figuring it was a matter of self-defense now, with the marshal as witness. They could take care of themselves, and so Annie rode. Copper knew which way to go, back to the cave at the back of the gulch.

She was not alone.

It was a measure of how important Uncle Harlow's place was to both sides of the standoff that neither Kearney nor Canton stayed behind at the ranch to see how the gunfight played out. They left that to their gangs. For his part, Canton used his men as cover, even as one, then two of them went down, shot in hip and shoulder, falling out of their saddles. Their horses galloped off showing the whites of their eyes.

Kearney's horse was bucking at the end of the rope that held him to the hitching post. He didn't try to settle him. Just cut the rope and swung into the saddle as the animal launched away, spinning on hind legs as the marshal reined him around and sent him after Canton, and Annie ahead of him.

It would serve Harlow right for Annie to just hand over his workshop. Let Kearney and his men come and pack everything up, take it away to some government building where no one would ever see it again. But her loyalty to him, however misplaced, was absolute, because of what he'd done for Copper.

Copper's loyalty to Annie was simply absolute.

She did not worry about the men behind her—the pony would outrun them. She would have to worry about the deputies Kearney left at the gulch; she would do that soon enough. The sounds she heard: the drumbeat of her horse's hooves on the prairie; the billows of her horse's breath; and a faint sort of squeaking, growing louder.

Today, this moment, the cowpony was running harder and faster than it ever had, and there was a squeaking noise coming from his left front, and a rattle coming from the right hind, and the pony's stride was bumpier than it should have been. She should have stopped, dismounted and got out the tool kit she kept in her pocket and the little can of oil she kept in the saddle bag, checked everything over and made it all good. Any usual day she'd go ask Uncle Harlow if something was wrong. But today was just her and Copper and they'd have to make do on their own. Copper didn't slow down a whit. As fast and hardy as those legs were the cowpony's heart was more powerful. So they kept on.

Annie knew this stretch of prairie; her pursuers didn't. This was her main advantage. Theirs were their guns. Her second advantage had to be the hope that they wouldn't shoot a mere girl. Kearney wouldn't, she was almost certain. Canton was another story, so when a gunshot fired from behind her, she flinched, waiting for the pain. A glance over her shoulder showed her one of Canton's outlaws jerking back and falling out of the saddle. The marshal's men had taken the offensive.

Somehow, even with the worrisome clicking in his legs, Copper went faster. More gunfire thundered behind them. At the first stand of cottonwoods at the head of the wash, she told Copper to turn. This was another thing her cowpony could do that no other horse could: He spun hard without slipping, jumped, launched again and from the point of view of anyone watching the girl and her pony might as well have vanished into the wash.

They galloped through a maze after that, through gullies and channels that would be rivers after a good rain, but only then. It wasn't just Annie had them all mapped out in

her mind; the pony did, too, and she didn't so much steer as think on where she wanted to go, and Copper went.

Those two deputies that Kearney'd left behind at Harlow's place? They heard the gunshots and came to see the cause. There was never a man in law enforcement who would not go toward the sound of gunfire.

That was how Annie and her pony came upon a horse and rider standing direct in their path. She did not wait for words, she would not provide an explanation. She reined around, and the pony turned on unnatural legs and galloped on in the same movement. A shout followed but was quickly left behind.

By the time they were done ducking and dodging, wending and winding, avoiding both the men in front of them and the men behind, instead of coming up on the homestead from the front, they were standing at the edge of the mesa above it.

Annie knew they'd get cornered because Copper's ears pinned hard, pointing at the two horses running on the plain. Kearney and Canton, firing pistols at each other—and then coming at her. With the deputies angling in to trap her.

She and her pony had no place to go but straight down. She wouldn't have done it; she wouldn't have asked him to do it. But the cowpony pinned his ears forward at the open space and gathered up his metal legs, and Annie bent low and wrapped her legs tight to hold on. He jumped.

All the horsemen riding to converge on that spot stopped to watch what should not have been possible. Girl and pony, leaping off the edge of the mesa, seemed suspended in air. One could not tell if they were falling, or if they had taken flight. If maybe those legs could do more than run, and Harlow had done more than create a mechanical horse, had indeed made something the world had never seen before, a horse that could run on air itself. The girl on the pony seemed unsurprised, sticking to her seat like she had done this before, that the two of them jumped over cliffs all the time. Wasn't any evidence to say they, girl and pony, hadn't. And so the marshal and his men, and the outlaw Canton, stopped to stare, all amazement.

No regular cowpony could have done it. But Copper had legs of steel and a heart that was buoyed by the faith of his own girl.

He did not fly, and he did not fall. His mechanical legs stretched out and his steel hooves touched down on that nigh vertical wall. He slid, rump to the earth. The girl let him have his head and the pony reached, throwing his weight back. Rocks and dirt from the cliff side fell with them, but they were faster, and they kept their heads, and their balance.

The pony reached; the ground leveled out, and they ran.

A standoff between Marshal Kearney and the outlaw was progressing at the top of the mesa, but Annie couldn't be bothered to worry about that. She had so little time. But if she had thought to turn around to watch what happened, she would have seen Canton spur his horse forward, shoving past the marshal, giving a wild awful shout as he aimed for the edge of the cliff, apparently ready to prove that riding off the mesa was not such an unusual thing. His horse, a fiery chestnut, rolled his eyes and pinned his ears, gave his own wild snarl, and Canton did not recognize the warning, did not guess that his horse had no faith in him at all. His horse did not make the leap, but instead dug all his hooves into the earth and threw back his weight to slide to a stop. Canton, as anyone who has spent time with horses would know, did not stop. He launched past his horse's neck and over the edge of the mesa as he intended, but he did not have a good cowpony to carry him the rest of the way. And that was the end of Canton.

Uncle Harlow had plenty of stuff around his cabin and forge that could start a fire. Burning the place to the ground as he requested wouldn't present any kind of problem. But first, she collected a few things. She found a canvas bag, emptied it of the scraps of rope and chipped flint he'd collected in it, then went through all the cabinets and drawers, boxes and shelves in his workshop. She collected belts and gears, small bands of steel and lengths of wire. Anything that looked like it might be part of Copper's legs, she saved. Anything she might need to keep her pony whole, she collected. Harlow wouldn't be here to make repairs, so she would have to learn. When she got all she could, she closed up the bag and tied it to Copper's saddle.

Only then did she see about the fire, knocking over cans of oil and tipping over boxes filled with straw packing. She lit a match in the house, and another in the cave, waited just long enough to see that both caught fire, and in moments walls of flame rose up. The pony didn't twitch a muscle, but trumpeted a whinny when he saw her running back from the smoke. As soon as her weight touched the saddle he took off, didn't need a click of the tongue or a touch of a heel to tell him so.

Fire roared behind them. Penned in by the clear stretch of rock and sand Harlow had built up to protect his work from the world, it stayed contained and burned out everything. No one would pick apart the things he'd made; no one would learn his secrets.

She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around the neck of her Copper.

He would have run forever but she made him walk. She needed to stop to oil his gears and tighten the pistons and screws, bolts and flywheels. He'd run too far and fast today, and didn't seem to realize his legs weren't working quite right. If she asked, he'd keep running until he broke.

She made him walk.

Kearney found her. Didn't say a word but walked alongside, and she wondered if she was under arrest, or if this was an escort to make sure she didn't run off again. At first, he didn't ask about the smoke rising up behind them, the glow in the back of the wash. He was waiting her out, expecting her to fill the silence, but she didn't say a word.

"I reckon," he said finally, when the ranch with that tall complicated windmill and the pipes and gates with the wires and pulleys came into view, all painted bronze by the setting sun, "that Harlow Mason's place was full up with oil and matches, flint and tinder. A hundred things that'll catch fire if you look at 'em wrong."

"I reckon," Annie said cautiously.

"That forge—I never did get a good look to see if it was cold. Harlow Mason strikes me as the kind of man who'd run off and leave his forge still hot behind him. No matter the mischief it might cause."

She looked at him. "He is. Lose his head of it wasn't attached."

"Thought so. I know you couldn't have had anything to do with it 'cause you were standing up on the edge of that mesa, not down in the wash."

"Yes, sir," she said, and didn't say anything else.

Kearney gave a satisfied grunt and smiled.

The marshal and his deputies returned to the ranch with the outlaws they hadn't shot and killed all tied up and strapped to their saddles, ready to be led off to jail. Harlow Mason, they declared, was a wanted man.

"You should send word if you hear anything at all about him, if he comes back this way," Kearney said to Father and Mother.

"We surely will," Father said. But like Annie, he was almost certain none of them would ever see the man again.

Annie was in the corral brushing down the mechanical cowpony. He had legs of steel, but the coat on his body was all horse, hairy and warm and smelling of hay and life. He still needed sweat and dust cleaned off him, and he stood with one leg cocked and his lip flopping loose, enjoying the attention.

Kearney came up to say goodbye, leaning on the fence to watch in a way that made

her nervous. She tried to ignore him, until he decided to say his piece, which he finally did.

"Your Uncle Harlow's machines. They wouldn't work for anyone but him, would they? I mean if someone else tried to build them."

"That might be so," Annie agreed. She rubbed Copper's neck and the cowpony sighed.

"I also think this pony here wouldn't work even for Harlow Mason."

Annie looked up and smiled. She reckoned not, but Harlow didn't fix up Copper for himself.

Kearney said, "You take good care of this pony, you hear? He's something special."

"Yes, sir."

He rode off with his men and prisoners, and Annie was glad to see the back of them all.

Mother called from the front porch. "Annie! Supper!" And sure enough after the day's rides back and forth, she was starving, ready for biscuits and whatever else her mother had fixed.

Still, she called back, "Just a minute!" and fetched Copper another armful of hay and checked his legs over for loose screws and broken bits that might need fixing. She'd keep him fixed up, as best she could, until his heart and the rest of him gave out.

But that would be a long way off yet.