

THE BALLAD OF KATIE HOSKINS
by Bertha Raffetto (1948)

I

Now Moses got the written law
That guided Israel;
But Old Nevada got the rope
And swung the thief to hell,

For they were hard, red-blooded men
Who won, when the West was raw,
From the breed that scoured the open range,-
Bushwhackin' and quick on the draw.

And many a tale is told of a ride
That lasted from sun to sun,
When a posse out-rode a cattle thief
And did what had to be done.

But a woman rode, where there was no road
Since the day that time began,
When Katie Hoskins raced the law
To warn a wanted man.

Yet Katie learnt the rightful rules,
Her folks dished 'em up with the bread;
But her teething-ring was a bridle rein
A-slant a horse's head,

And she had a listening heart that knew-
When the goodness in men was still,
That they wouldn't stay for a woman's say
When the likkered-up to kill.

And lawful ways ran out of her mind,
As anyone might see
By the wary look in her stormy eyes
When she told this tale to me:

II

"Nels," said Katie, at milking time
One morning in eighty-four,
"The coffee's low and the sugar scant...
I'd better go to the store.

"With harvest hands so hard to keep,
And hay two hundred a ton,
"We'll have to feed with an open hand
To get the threshing done."

Nels stood and smiled before he spoke:
"And while you're over there,
Pick up a length for a brand-new dress
And a ribbon for your hair."

Blue eyes met brown in a loving look;
That had been their go-between
Since the day they wed, four years ago,
When Katie turned fifteen.

*And love is a candle that never grows dim
Though the tallow and wick burn low,
And its light is shed on all around
To the end of the after-glow.*

III

Away went Katie to do her trade
With her little baby by her,
And back she came before the dark
With nary a bundle nigh her.

"What's up," cried Nels, "you look done-up
And back before you went?"
"And its good I am, and good I did;
For I reckon it was meant.

"That I should hear and I should care
Before Old Henry's dead;
For at Lovelock City, more's the pity,
They fancy the worst that's said.

"Somebody's missing steers were found-
Fresh-branded, so they claim,
Up in that canyon where Henry mined
Before he got so lame;

"And the Humboldt Sheriff sent the word,
The posse rides at dawn,
With a proper writ to make it right
And a rope...to get it done.'

"And they'll hang him higher'n Haman's kite
Unless somebody tells;
For we can't prove what he didn't do."
She turned away from Nels,

To coax her baby away from the breast
And dandle him on her knee...
She musn't let him nurse his fill,
With her fretting for what might be.

Then up spoke Nels in a voice as dark
As the dusk a-creepin in:
“Sometimes a body feels called to do
What others say is a sin

But Nels, he wouldn't steal a pin
Besides he's deaf as a post.
You know what the posse is apt to do...
We've GOT to get there first!”

“But it's ninety miles to Henry's spread,
And where's the horse and who
can go that far, from where we are,
Before the night in through?”

“You're right, the night is short,” she said,
And the way around is long,
But that ornery roan is plenty tough-
He's young and his legs are strong.”

“That devil's a killer, sight unseen.”
Nels lit the lamp on the shelf;
“But the harvest moon is full tonight
And I have to live with myself ...

“I know the roan won't let you ride-
Nor any other man”;
She laid the sleepy baby down ...
“I'll do the best I can.”

“Then you're of a mind ...” he saw she was
Before she answered low;
“Yes, Nels, two wrongs won't make a right;
Someone's got to go.”

Then Nels drew close and side by side
They knelt by the trundle bed,
And he whispered a prayer of do and dare,
With his hand upon her head:

“You'll ride by the light of my faith in you
No matter what betide,
You'll ride by the night of my heart in your hand
That close will I be to your side.

“You'll ride by our love for this little one
And the other two ...under the sod;
You'll ride as you never have ridden before
But you'll RIDE by the grace of God.”

*And love is a candle that never grows dim
Though the tallow and wick burn low,
And the light is shed on all around
To the end of the after-glow.*

IV

Katie saddled and cin-ched the roan
By the lantern's yellow flare
And led him into the old corral
Sniffing her clothes and hair.

He tossed his mane from side to side,
Lifted his head with a fling
And snort of defiance to all the world-
A captive desert-king,-

A king that might would never rule,
Though the snaffle bars dripped red
And the rope about his throbbing throat
Tighted til he fell dead.

But many a king has given his crown
To run another course,
By the side of the woman who ruled his heart ...
And the roan was Katie's horse,

Her horse to gentle until he stood
Nuzzling her hand for a sweet,
Then swift as a homing bird to its nest
She was into the saddle-seat.

The stallion quivered and pawed the ground
And stomped his mighty hate,
Then reared and struck at the empty air ...
Nels was opening the gate.

But no horse ran the Rye Patch Range
That Katie feared to straddle,
And she didn't let him get his head
Though she logger-headed the saddle.

Out of the gate and onto the flat
She headed the frenzied roan
To the east of north where Piute Peak
Lifted a finger of stone,

Above the shadows that covered them both-
The girl with the auburn hair,
And the mottled horse, mad to the bone,
Fired by the heady air.

They ripped through clumps of twisted sage
That clung and clawed like a cat,
Through alkali scabs fouling the air
Above the sandy flat,

And clouds of choking dust arose With the
sting of a smoking brand;
The stallion buckled-up his rage,
But Katie had him in hand.

Ten miles, fifteen, another ten ...
Katie was clocking the flight
By the moon that topped the fluted hills
And flooded the desert with light,-

A moon that poured a platinum sheen
Into the sandy shell,
Where the untamed stallion ran with the speed
Of a hound unleashed from hell.

No scents there were but sage and sweat
From horse and sopping leather,
No living thing that stirred or ran
As they swept on together,

Until the beat of drumming feet
Rolled up unsteady and slow,
Then Katie eased the roan to a walk ...
He'd earned his right to blow.

In the coiling Humboldt's slimy side
She pulled up short and stopped,
For drink and rest a horse should have
Though he'd go until he dropped.

Beside the river, unknown fears
Ran through her mind like ghosts,
"What if he bolts ...and how to remount?"
Her legs felt stiff as posts.

A saddle eased, a blanket turned,
Rest and brackish water;
But the moon was over her shoulder now,
And Katie's heart turned over,

For a narrow chill whined out of a hill
Like a dart from a Piute's bow;
It dried the dripping hide of the roan
And weighted his will to go,

V

They rode the moon and stars from sight
Beyond Sierra's head;
They rode the gray dawn out of night
Above old Henry's spread

They rode their race with flying heels That
churned the desert land;
They rode to a stop with a clippity-clop
A- staggering through the sand

They rode and won by a length of life That
was left for a good old man,
And Henry holstered his forty-four
For his crooked pardner, Dan.

And when the posse thundered up
They found their bird had flown
And left them a girl with auburn hair
A-rubbing down a roan.

VI

And Moses got the stony law,-
"An eye for an eye, it reads;
And Old Nevada got range-law
By the rustler out of mis-deeds,

But Katie Hoskins got the law of love That
rules the promised land,
And she rode to give, that one should live,
And some might understand.

*And love is the candle that never grows dim
Though the talow and wick burn low,
And its light is shed on all around
To the end of the after-glow.*