

Bower B. M.

Rim o' the World



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Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	5
CHAPTER TWO	10
CHAPTER THREE	15
CHAPTER FOUR	20
CHAPTER FIVE	25
CHAPTER SIX	28
CHAPTER SEVEN	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

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CHAPTER ONE

THE RIM AND WHAT LAY BENEATH IT

Not all of the West is tamed and trained to run smoothly on pneumatic tires and to talk more enthusiastically of the different “makes” of cars than of bits and saddles. There are still wide stretches unknown of tourists and movie men hunting locations for Western melodrama where men live in the full flavor of adventure and romance and never know it, because they have never known any other way to live.

In the Black Rim country there is such a place,—a wide, rough, sage-grown expanse where cattle and horses and sheep scarce know the look of barbed wire, and where brands are still the sole mark of ownership. Set down between high mountain ranges, remote, sufficient unto itself, rudely prosperous, the Black Rim country has yet to be tamed.

Black Rim country is called bad. The men from Black Rim are eyed askance when they burr their spur rowels down the plank sidewalks of whatever little town they may choose to visit. A town dweller will not quarrel with one of them. He will treat him politely, straightway seek some acquaintance whom he wishes to impress, and jerk a thumb toward the departing Black Rim man, and say importantly: “See that feller I was talking with just now? That’s one of them boys from the Black Rim. Man, he’d kill yuh quick as look at yuh! He’s bad. Yep. You want to walk ’way round them birds from the Rim country. They’re a hard-boiled bunch up that way.” And he would be as nearly correct in his estimate as such men usually are.

Tom Lorrigan’s father used to carry a rifle across his thighs when he rode up the trail past Devil’s Tooth Ridge to the benchland beyond, where his cattle fed on the sweet bunch grass. He never would sit close to a camp-fire at night save when his back was against a huge boulder and he could keep the glare of the fire from his eyes. Indians he killed as he killed rattlers, on the range theory that if they did not get him then they might some other time, and that every dead Indian counted one less to beware of. Tom Lorrigan’s father was called a bad man even in Black Rim country,—which meant a good deal. Hard-bitted men of the Black Rim chose their words wisely when they spoke to Tom’s father; chose wisely their words when they spoke of him, unless they had full faith in the listener’s loyalty and discretion.

Tom Lorrigan’s father lived to be sixty,—chiefly because he was “quick on the draw” and because he never missed anything that he shot at. But at sixty, when he was still hated by many, loved by a very few and feared by every one, he died,—crushed under his horse when it fell on the Devil’s Tooth trail one sleety day in midwinter.

Young Tom Lorrigan learned to shoot when he learned to ride, and he was riding pitching horses before he could be certain which was p and which was q in his dad’s old spelling book. Which does not by any means prove that young Tom was an ignoramus. Tom once had three brothers, but these were somehow unlucky and one by one they dropped out of the game of life. The oldest brother died with the smell of burnt black powder in his nostrils, and Tom’s father stood over the body and called his dead son a fool for wearing his gun so it could stick in the holster. “If I ever ketch yuh doin’ a trick like that, I’ll thrash yuh till yuh can’t stand,” he admonished young Tom sternly. Young Tom always remembered how his dad had looked when brother Bill was shot.

The second brother was overtaken while riding a big sorrel horse that did not happen to carry the Lorrigan brand. So he too died with the smell of powder smoke in his nostrils, taking three of his pursuers with him into the Dark Land. Him Tom's father cursed for being caught.

So young Tom learned early two lessons of the Black Rim book of wisdom: His gun must never stick in the holster; he must never get caught by the law.

He was twenty when Brother Jim was drowned while trying to swim his horse across the Snake in flood time on a dare. Young Tom raced along the bank, frantically trying to cast his forty-foot rope across sixty feet of rushing current that rolled Jim and his horse along to the boil of rapids below. Young Tom was a long, long while forgetting the terror in Jim's eyes, the helplessness of Jim's gloved hand which he threw up to catch at the rope that never came within twenty feet of him, and at the last, the hopeless good-by wave he sent Tom when he whirled into the moil that pulled him under and never let him go. Tom learned on the bank of the Snake another lesson: He must never be so weak as to let another man badger him into doing something against his own desires or judgment.

Jim's pitiful going left Tom in full possession of the Devil's Tooth ranch and the cattle and horses that fed on the open range of the Black Rim country,—and they were many. Young Tom was lonely, but his loneliness was smothered under a consuming desire to add to his possessions and to avoid the mistakes of his brothers and of his father who had carelessly ridden where he should have walked.

Men of the Rim country frequently predicted that young Tom Lorrigan would die with his boots on; preferably in mid-air. They said he was going to be like his dad in more than looks, and that times were changing and a man couldn't steal cattle and kill off anybody that argued with him, and get away with it as Tom's father had done. They complained that the country was getting too damn Sunday school, and young Tom had better tame down a little before he got into trouble.

As Black Rim defines the word, Tom was quite as bad as they called him. A handsome young dare-devil he was, slanting his glance downward when he looked into the eyes of a six-foot man,—and every inch of him good healthy bone and muscle. Women eyed him pleasantly, wistful for his smile. Men spoke to him friendlywise and consciously side-stepped his wrath. On the Black Rim range his word was law, his law was made for himself and the wealth he hankered for. That wealth he named a million dollars, and he named it often because he liked the sound of the word. Without any ifs he declared it. There was a million to be had in Idaho, was there not? Very well, he would have his million, and he would have it in cattle and horses and land. He would not go mucking in the gold mines for it; his million should graze on the bunch grass. He wanted, he said, to see a million dollars walking around. And since old Tom Lorrigan had left him a mere forty thousand—according to the appraisers of the Devil's Tooth estate—young Tom had a long way to go to see his dream a reality.

Men of the Black Rim hinted that young Tom rode with a long rope; meaning that his rope would reach the cattle of his neighbor cowmen if they came in his way. But they only hinted, for unless they could prove beyond the doubt of any twelve men in the county that his brand was burned on any cattle save his own, they had no wish to offend. For young Tom had learned well his three lessons from the fate of his three brothers; his gun never stuck in its holster; he was wily and not to be caught; he could neither be harried nor coaxed into setting aside his own judgment while it seemed to him good.

You would think that young Tom would speedily find himself a mate amongst the girls of the Black Rim country,—though they were as scarce as princesses of the royal blood and choice was of necessity restricted to a half-dozen or so. None of the girls he knew pleased his fancy, untrained though that fancy might be. Instinct told him that they were too tame, too commonplace to hold his interest for long. A breathless dance or two, a kiss stolen in a shadowy corner, and blushes and giggles and inane remonstrances that bored him because he knew they would come. Tom had reached the sere age of twenty-two when he began to wonder if he must go beyond the Black Rim world for his

wife, or resign himself to the fate of an old bachelor. None of the Black Rim girls, he told himself grimly, should ever have a share in that million.

Then that purple-lidded, putty-face jade we call Fate whimsically sent him a mate; curious, I suppose, to see what would happen when the two whose trails had lain so far apart should meet.

A girl from some far city she was; a small star that had twinkled behind the footlights and had fled—or had fallen—to the Black Rim country. Like many another, she had gone as far as her money would take her. That it took her to the end of the little branch railroad that stopped abruptly with its nose against a mountain twenty miles from the Devil's Tooth ranch was a coincidence,—or the whim of Fate. There she was, as strange to the outland as young Tom would have been to the city whence she had come; thinking perhaps to start life afresh in some little Western town; with no money to carry her back to the outskirts of civilization, and no town wherein she might win fresh successes. The train that had brought her panted upon a siding, deserted, its boiler cooling, its engineer, fireman, conductor and brakeman leaning over a bar in the shack that called itself a saloon. To-morrow it would rattle back to the junction, if all went well and the rails held fast to the ties, which was not certain.

The station's name was Jumpoff. The train's conductor, who had the misfortune to be considered a humorist, liked to say that Jumpoff was a knot at the end of the road to keep the track from unraveling. He had told the girl that, on the long, jolty ride from the junction. The girl replied that at any rate she liked the name.

What really held Jumpoff on the time-table in those days before it became a real town were the stockyards, where the Black Rim cattle came to start their journey to market. The trail over the mountains to the main line was rough, with a two-day drive without water. Yet the Black Rim country had many cattle, and a matter of a few tunnels and a trestle or two let the railroad in by a short cut which minimized the distance to the main line. The branch line paid a fair interest on the investment,—but not with its passenger service.

The girl found herself stranded in a settlement whose business was represented by one saloon, one section house, one stable, one twelve-by-twelve depot and a store that was no more than an addition to the saloon, with the bartender officiating in both places as customers required his services. Times when cattle were being shipped, the store was closed and the saloon had no rival.

It was while the girl was hesitating half-way between the store-saloon and the section house, wondering which she would choose, that young Tom Lorrigan galloped up to the hitch rail, stopped his horse in two stiff-legged jumps, swung down and came toward her. Like a picture on a wall calendar she looked to young Tom, who had never seen her like in flesh and blood. He lifted his big, range hat, and she smiled at him,—though it must have been a stage smile, she had so little heart for smiling then.

Tom blinked as though he had looked at the sun. Such a smile he had never seen in his life; nor such hair, like real, gold-colored silk all in curls around her face; nor such eyes, which were blue as the sky at twilight when the stars first begin to show.

“Jumpoff is not much of a town,” said the girl and laughed to hide how close she was to tears.

Young Tom caught his breath. He had thought that women had only two forms of laughter, the giggle of youth or the cackle of age. He had never dreamed that a woman could laugh like a mountain stream gurgling down over the rocks. Immediately he visioned young ferns dripping diamonds into a shadowed pool, though he did not attempt to formulate the vision in words. His answer was obvious and had nothing to do with gurgling brooks, or with ferns and shadowed pools.

“It sure ain't, Miss. Might you be looking for somebody in particular?”

“No-o—I'm just here. It would be a poor place to look for anybody, wouldn't it?”

“Sure would.” Young Tom found his courage and smiled, and the girl looked at him again, as though she liked that white-toothed smile of Tom's.

“Well, I started out to find the jumping-off place, and this sounded like it on the railroad map. I guess it's It, all right; there's nothing to do but jump.”

Young Tom pulled his black eyebrows together, studying her. By her speech she was human; therefore, in spite of her beauty that dazzled him, she was not to be feared.

“You mean you ain’t got any particular place to go from here?”

The girl tilted her head and stared up the mountain’s steep, pine-covered slope. She swung her head a little and looked at Tom. She smiled bravely still, but he thought her eyes looked sorry for something.

“Is there any particular place to go from here?” she asked him wistfully, keeping the smile on her lips as the world had taught her to do.

“Not unless you went back.”

She shook her head. “No,” she said, firmly, “I’ll climb that mountain and jump off the top before I’ll go back.”

Young Tom felt that she spoke in sober earnest in spite of her smile; which was strange. He had seen men smile in deadly earnest,—his dad had smiled when he reached for his gun to kill Buck Sanderson. But women cried.

“Don’t you know anybody at all, around here?”

“Not a soul—except you, and I don’t know whether your name is Tom or Bill.”

“My name’s Tom—Tom Lorrigan. Say! If you ain’t got any place to go—why—I’ve got a ranch and about twenty-five hundred head of cattle and some horses. If you didn’t mind marrying me, I could take you out there and give yuh a home. I’d be plumb good to you, if you’re willing to take a chance.”

The girl stood back and looked him over. Tall as Tom was she came almost to his chin. He saw her eyes darken like the sky at dusk, and it seemed to him quite possible that stars could shine in them.

“You’d be taking as great a chance as I would. I haven’t any ranch or any cattle, or anything at all but myself and two trunks full of clothes and some things in my life I want to forget. And I have sixty cents in my purse. I can’t cook anything except to toast marshmallows—”

“I’ve got a cook,” put in young Tom quickly.

“And the clothes I’ve got would be a joke out here. And the things I came out here to forget I shall never tell you—”

“I ain’t interested enough to ask, or to listen if you told me,” said Tom.

“And myself can sing to you and dance to you, and I’m twenty years old by the family Bible—”

“I’m twenty-two—makes it about right,” said Tom.

“And if you should count fifty and ask me again—”

“Ten, twenty, thirty, forty-fifty, will you marry me?” obeyed Tom with much alacrity.

“You might call me Belle. Belle Delavan. Well, I came to Jumpoff because—I meant to jump. Yes, I’ll marry you—and the Lord have mercy on you, Tom Lorrigan, if I live to regret it.”

“Amen. Same to you,” grinned Tom. “It’s an even break, anyway. They don’t claim I’m sprouting wings. They say I’ve got split hoofs in my boots instead of feet, and wear my ears pointed at the top. But—but no girl has got any loop on me. I’ve been straight, as far as women goes. That’s my record up to the present. If you can stand for a little drinkin’ and gamblin’ and shootin’—”

Belle waved aside his self-depreciation. Young Tom was a handsome devil, and his eyes were keen and clear and looked right into her own, which was sufficient evidence of good faith for any woman with warm blood in her body.

“Tom Lorrigan, I’ve eaten just three soda crackers, six marshmallows and one orange since yesterday noon,” said she irrelevantly. “I can’t be emotional when I’m half starved. Is there any place where I can get a piece of bread or something?”

“My Lord! Think of me standing here and not thinkin’ whether you’d had dinner or not! Sure, you can have something to eat.”

He took her by the arm, too penitent to be diffident over the unaccustomed gallantry, and hustled her toward the section house. His mind registered the fact that the bartender, the fireman, the brakeman and the conductor would shortly apologize abjectly for standing outside the saloon gawping

at a lady, or they would need the immediate ministrations of a doctor. He hoped the girl had not noticed them.

“They’ll throw some grub together quick, over here,” he explained to the girl. “Everybody eats at the section house. It ain’t much of a place, but there ain’t any other place. And while you’re having dinner I’ll have the operator wire down to Lava for a marriage license to be sent up on the next train. The saloon man is a justice of the peace, and he’ll marry us right away, soon as you eat. And—”

“Without a license? I know it’s always done that way on the stage, but—but this isn’t going to be any stage marriage.”

“Well, but the license will be all made out and on the way, and he’ll take my word for it and go ahead with the ceremony. If I tell him to, he will. It will be all right; I’ll *make* it all right. And then I can get a team from a ranch back here a ways, and take you right out to Devil’s Tooth. It’s the best way. This ain’t any place for a lady to stay. You’ll be comfortable out at the Devil’s Tooth—it’s clean, anyway.” He looked at her honest-eyed, and smiled again. “Yuh needn’t be afraid uh me. We’re rough enough and tough enough, and we maybe shoot up each other now and again, but we ain’t like city folks; we don’t double-cross women. Not ever.”

She said nothing, and when they had walked four steps farther he added with a sincere wish to set her at ease: “I could take you to some ranch and leave you till the license comes, if you think it wouldn’t be all right to get married now. But the womenfolks would talk your arm off, and you wouldn’t like it. And they’d talk about you when your back was turned. But if Scotty goes ahead and married us, I don’t see why—”

“Oh, I’m not worrying about that. It’s just cutting a corner instead of walking around. I was thinking,” said Belle Delavan, while she dabbed at her lashes as though they were beaded with paint instead of tears and she must be careful not to smear them, “I was just thinking how—how *good* you are. My God, I never knew they grew men like you, outside of plays and poetry.”

“Good!” echoed young Tom Lorrigan, feared of his kind for his badness. His tone was hushed with amazement, all aglow with pleasure. “*Good!*— my Lord!”

CHAPTER TWO

THE LORRIGAN TREE GROWS THRIFTILY

Young Tom Lorrigan had found his mate. Had he known more about life in the big world beyond the Rim, he must have been amazed at his luck. Once a man dropped dead in a poker game when he had staked his last blue chip and drawn a royal flush. In the great game of hearts Tom had drawn a royal flush, but he did not drop dead. Instead, he went right on living, more determined than ever to own a million dollars' worth of cattle and horses before he died, considerably before he died, because he wanted to enjoy that million with Belle. And because of her he wanted that million to be honest money.

Everything he did now, he did for Belle more than for himself. As a matter of course she became his real reason for living. She was like the sun. He took her for granted, never questioning the blessed warmth of her presence, never stopping to wonder what life would be like if he lost her. She was beautiful, with a beauty that never palled and never paled. She laughed a great deal, and he never could keep laughter from his own lips while he listened. When she sang she put the meadow larks to shame, and afterwards when he rode the range alone Tom would whistle strange, new melodies that the Black Rim country never had heard before,—melodies which Belle had taught him unconsciously with her singing. He did not know that it would have astonished a city dweller to hear the bad man of Black Rim Country whistling Schubert's "Serenade" while he rode after cattle, or Wagner's "Prize Song," or "Creole Sue," perhaps, since Belle, with absolute impartiality, sang everything that she had ever heard sung. On billboards before eastern theatres Belle Delavan had been called "The Girl with a Thousand Songs." Audiences had been invited by the stage manager to name any selection they might choose, assured that Belle would sing it from memory. No wonder that her singing never grew stale to Tom Lorrigan!

But mostly she busied herself with little domesticities that somehow never included cooking, and with driving helter-skelter over the range with two horses hitched to a buckboard, following Tom when he rode after cattle. Do you think she should logically have learned to ride? She did try it once on the gentlest horse that Tom owned, which was not too gentle to run away with Belle. She rode that horse just two hundred yards before she jolted so far from the saddle that she could not find it again until some time after, when they had caught the horse and led him to the corral.

"Not any more for me, Tom Lorrigan!" she gasped, flapping her two pretty hands in eloquent disgust when Tom rode up to her. "I wouldn't get on a horse's back again to star for the Queen of England! I'll take that team of he-devils you've been breaking to drive, and I'll drive 'em or break every bone in their bodies. I'm willing to get behind any horse you've got; but to get on their backs—excuse me!" She limped painfully to the house with her yellow hair blowing around her shoulders and across her lips that would smile in spite of her mishap.

After that Belle drove the "he-devils" and others quite as devilish, and risked her bones with perfect equanimity. She drove horses that had to be thrown before the collar could be buckled on, and "forefooted" before they would submit to the harness. Indeed, Belle seemed to prefer that kind of horses. She wanted a team that could keep pace with Tom,—and she had it. Her buckboard lasted a year, with luck. She strewed the Devil's Tooth range with wheels and doubletrees and splinters and hairpins, and scattered sunshiny smiles and cuss-words and snatches of song wherever she went. And since she went wherever eight bronco feet could take her, Black Rim country came to know Belle Lorrigan as it knew Tom. Came to fear Belle Lorrigan's wrath, which bettered the lightning for searing, lashing sword-thrusts of venom; came to know her songs well enough to hum snatches of them; came to laugh when she laughed,—and to hope that the next laugh would not be aimed at them; came to recognize her as a better shot than any one save Tom, who taught her.

At the country dances on the various ranches, Belle never missed quadrille, two-step, waltz or schottische, and she danced by herself or sang songs during the intervals, while the women of the range sat stiffly along the walls on benches, stared at Belle and whispered behind their weather-reddened hands, and tittered. She taught big-jointed, bashful boys how to waltz, and she slapped a half-drunken miner who squeezed her too tightly in a square dance. Slapped Tom also when he came hurrying up to kill the miner, and told him to keep to his own quarrels and save his powder for something worth while. She didn't need help to step on a worm, she added, and took a youth by the arm and led him off to dance. The miner, I may say to the curious, was next seen in Hailey, heading south. He left a very good prospect up in the hills and never went back to work out his assessments.

As you have probably guessed, Belle Lorrigan and the women of the Black Rim country did not get on very well together. Black Rim women thought that a woman who wore her hair in curls down her back—yellow hair at that!—could not be any too good if the truth were known. They declared to one another that a woman who did not talk about her past life, who never so much as mentioned past illnesses, even, must have a great deal to cover up. How did Tom Lorrigan get acquainted with her, anyway? Through some marriage agency, they were willing to bet. And how did a decent woman happen to have all the fancy clothes which Belle Lorrigan possessed? And jewelry enough to stock a store with! Three rings on one finger at one time and the same time was going it pretty strong, in the opinion of the Black Rim ladies. They also believed that she used paint and powder, which damned her beyond all hope of redemption.

Poor Belle Lorrigan (Black Rim country spoke of her always as Belle Lorrigan without in the least understanding why she remained an individual personality to them instead of becoming merely Mrs. Lorrigan—Mrs. Tom, even, since many of the Black Rim women were designated by the nicknames of their husbands)! She would have been glad to be friendly, simply because friendliness was in her blood and would out. She would have been glad to receive them at the Devil's Tooth ranch for one of those all-day visits which were the custom of the country. But for a long while they did not come. Sometimes she would meet a family bundled to the eyes against the chill winds of Idaho, bumping over the rough roads on their way to visit some near neighbor who lived only ten or fifteen miles away. She would flash them a smile while she pulled up her bronco team out of the trail to make a generous room for their passing, and she would shout something pleasant as they went by. And after they had gone on she would shrug her fine, broad shoulders and call them cats, going out to a scratching, with all the kittens mewing along. She would flap a hand—providing the bronco team left her a hand free to flap—and shake her head, and say, "Not for mine, thank you!" And would be hurt down deep in her heart where it did not show, because they never stopped at her door.

But when the boys began to come, then came the neighbor women, making formal two-hour calls upon the new mother, eager to see and to hear and to go away and compare notes afterward. They talked much of the names that Belle Lorrigan called her children. The first one she named for the hero in her first play; wanting, I suppose, a souvenir of the time when she was fifteen and had her first speaking part on the stage. She called her first-born Algernon Adelbert. Algernon Adelbert Lorrigan, grandson of old Tom Lorrigan! Think of that!

But Algernon Adelbert no sooner outgrew his cradle than he was known to all and sundry as Al Lorrigan, so that no harm was done him in giving him such a name. He grew up lusty and arrogant, a good deal of a bully, six feet tall, a good rider—though, not so good a rider as his dad—a good shot, willing to help gather that million together on the chance that he might have a share in the spending.

Al was a youth who hunted trouble for the thrill of meeting it more than half-way, but since Tom Lorrigan happened to be his father, Al rode off the Devil's Tooth ranch before he became the rampant young trouble-hunter. Belle had some anxious hours during the time Al was gone, but she never once betrayed her anxiety; which is doing pretty well for a mother.

The second was Marmaduke LeRoy, and the third and last she recklessly christened Lancelot Montgomery. Marmaduke never learned to spell his name correctly, and sometimes complained that

Belle had gone and named him after a mess of preserves,—meaning marmalade, I suppose. But as he grew older he forgot his grievance. Belle was the only person who could remember offhand his full name, and she never called him by it except when she was very angry; when she usually attached so many adjectives that Marmaduke LeRoy was quite submerged. Commonly he was called Duke, which did well enough.

Tom used to study Duke through half-closed lids and the smoke of a cigarette, and wonder which side of the family had a yellow streak; not the Lorrigan side, so far as Tom could judge. Nor the Delavan side either, if Belle lived true to type. To be sure, Belle refused to ride a horse; but then Belle was a woman and women had whims. There was no yellow about Belle, except her hair which was pure golden.

Duke would invariably lie to dodge punishment. According to his own theory, Duke was always blameless, always the injured party, the boy who does right and never is given credit for his virtues. Even Belle, who would fight for her boys as a tigress fights for its young, looked askance at Duke while she tried, motherlike, to cover his faults from the keen eyes of Tom.

"I'd just like to know how you come by it," she once exclaimed exasperatedly, when Duke was ten and Lance eight. "I'd sure chop one limb off the family tree, if I knew which one gave you the gall to lie to me and Tom. Duke, for heaven's sake take a licking just once without trying to lay the blame on Al or Lance—and see how proud you'll feel afterwards!"

"Aw—lickins hur-rt!" Duke had protested, rubbing the arm Belle had gripped none too gently, and sidled away from her.

With her hands to her hips—gracefully posed there, as became an actress—Belle regarded him fixedly. "My Gawd!" she whispered, owning defeat before that invulnerable selfishness of Duke's.

Her tone stung even his young crocodile-hided sensibility. "You're always blamin' me. You'n Tom think I do everything mean on this ranch! You think Lance is an angel! He's your pet and you let him pick on me an' you never say a word. Lance can do any darn thing he pleases, an' so can Al. I'm goin' to run away, first thing you know. You can have your sweet little angel pet of a doggone ole cowardly-calf Lance!" Then he whined, "Aw—you lemme go! I never done it, I tell yuh! It was Lance!"

Belle gritted her teeth while she shook him. "You yellow-hearted little whelp. I *saw you* chasing that colt around the corral till he broke the fence! If Tom was to know about it he'd lick you good! Duke, why *can't* you be a man and take the blame yourself, just once? I'd be—I'd be so proud o' you if you only told the truth about things. Don't you know—it's only a coward that will lie to save his own skin?"

"Lance is a bigger coward than I am, an' you never say a word to him. You think Lance is perfect."

"I guess you're hopeless all right," Belle retorted. "It's just a yellow streak in you somewhere. Living with the Lorrigans, I'm hoping you'll outgrow it. The Lorrigans sure ain't yellow!"

"I chased Blackie some, Belle," Lance volunteered, peering down over the stable eave at his irate mother. "Duke started in and got him going good, and when he come fogging over to this side I flopped my arms at him. Gee, but he did stop quick! I guess if you're going to lick Duke, you better give me about four good licks for that, Belle. And take 'em off Duke's licking. No use licking us both for the same thing."

Belle tilted her yellow head and looked up at her beloved youngest, grinning down at her cheerfully from the hay roof where he sprawled head downward, flat on his stomach.

"Well, thank the Lord one Lorrigan has got the nerve to own up to a thing. Come on down and get your four licks, then. I can be as square as the next one. But Duke's got it coming to him for lying to me. Tell me, Lance, did Duke chase Blackie through the fence?"

"Aw go on, Belle! What's matter with you, asking me what Duke done? He's the feller to ask about that. I chased Blackie about four licks' worth. Hurry up and let's get it over with. You know it ain't pleasant for either of us!"

“Smarty!” yelled Duke, quick to read in Belle’s face what softening effect Lance had on her temper. “Tryin’ to be smart—tryin’ to be George Wash’nton! You little liar, you know you chased Blackie more’n what I done. Sneak out of it—yeah, that’s you, every time. Own up just enough to make Belle think you’re an angel. Doggone the whole doggone outfit!”

“*Now* what?” Tom’s voice broke in upon Duke’s shrill tirade. From the back of his horse Tom looked down quizzically upon them. “Duke, what you been up to?”

“Aw, you always think it’s me! Why don’t you ask Lance what he’s been up to? Why don’t you lick Lance for being on the stable? If I was to get up there and tromp around in the hay and make it leak, I know what *I’d* git!”

Tom sent a glance up to where Lance was hastily scrambling down a corner. “You’d better!” he commented sternly. Then he looked at Belle, his eyes twinkling under his scowl.

“If you can’t handle these young devils, Belle, turn ’em over to me. I’ll mighty quick settle their hash for ’em.”

Belle gripped tighter the squirming Duke. “I’m not a cripple yet, Tom Lorrigan. They’ve both got a licking coming to ’em, and if you’ll kindly walk off stage R. C. I’ll go on with the scene. You weren’t cued to come on here.”

“It’s your show, Belle,” Tom assented, and very obligingly rode to the other side of the stable to unsaddle his horse, and grinned to himself when the sound of wailing and pleading and promises of the “I’ll-never-do-it-again” variety came to his ears. Belle’s lickings were distinguished chiefly by their uproar.

“Belle wallops ’em like brandin’ calves,” Tom used to chuckle. “They beller a plenty while it’s going on, and kick up their heels when it’s all over. I wish’t my dad had licked me like that when I was a kid. You can gamble, when I was thrashed, I knowed it!”

Duke grew up to be a very good cowpuncher, however. He knew every draw and dry wash, every creek bottom and every canyon on the Black Rim range; knew almost as well as the owner how many cattle carried every brand. In the Devil’s Tooth round-ups Duke held his place alongside Al as a top hand,—disputing now and then the right of young Lance to compete with him, but never quite daring to bring his dispute to the point where action would take the place of words.

“Duke’s sure enough a bad man—with his face,” Tom once snarled to Belle. “Make it a talking match, and Duke could lick any old woman, in the Black Rim country.”

“There’s been enough fighting Lorrigans, don’t you think?” Belle smiled back at him. “Duke’s dad can fight hard enough for the whole family. I didn’t think you wanted your boys to be fighters.”

“I don’t. But I sure do want ’em to have the fightin’ stuff in ’em, whether it ever comes out or not. Take Lance, there. Lance ain’t a fighter, either; but by the Lord John, it’s there! Once get Lance started, and I’d back him against any three men in the Black Rim. It’s in him, if the play ever come up. And it’s in Al. The Lorrigan is strong in Al. But that Duke—”

“Honey, I think maybe it’s the Delavan in Duke. I remember an old maid aunt of mine that used to bolt the door and quarrel with my mother through the keyhole. I guess maybe Duke has got a little touch of Aunt Jane.”

“Oh, sure! First I ever heard of Aunt Jane, Belle. Takes you to think up a reason.”

“And the Lorrigan will come out, honey. He’s got the look, now and then. It’s in him, you’ll see.”

So that is how the Lorrigan boys grew up. They thought Belle the most beautiful, the most wonderful woman in the world,—though they never called her mother. Belle would not have it. She refused to become a motherly, middle-aged person, and her boys were growing altogether too big and too masterful to look upon a golden-curled, pink-cheeked, honey-throated Amazon as other Black Rim sons looked upon their faded, too often shrewish maternal parent. She was just Belle. They knew no other like her, no one with whom they might compare her. We do not compare the sun and the moon with other suns and moons. Like Tom, they worshipped her in their hearts, and chummed with her even before they had outgrown her stormy chastisements. They mended her buckboards and her

harness; they galloped alongside while she drove careening across the range, her hair flying in the wind, her mouth smiling and showing her white teeth. They danced with her,—and having Belle for a teacher from the time they could toddle, you may guess how the Lorrigan boys could dance. They sang the songs she taught them; they tried to better her record at target practice and never did it; they quarreled with her when her temper was up and dodged her when it became too cyclonic.

They grew up without ever having ridden on the cars, save once or twice to Lava. Black Rim was the rim of the world to them, and their world held all that they yearned for. Belle sheltered them from too much knowledge of that other world, which held the past she hated and tried to forget. Much she taught them of city manners and the little courtesies of life. She would box the ears of the boy who neglected to rise and offer her a chair when she entered a room, and would smoke a cigarette with him afterward. Once she whipped her six-shooter out of its holster and shot a hole through the crown of Al's hat, as a tactful reminder that gentlemen always remove their hats when they come into a house. Al remembered, after that. At fourteen even the hardiest youth feels a slight shock when a bullet jars through his hat crown two inches above his hair.

CHAPTER THREE

MARY HOPE DOUGLAS APPEARS

Devil's Tooth ridge, which gave the Lorrigan ranch its name, was really a narrow hogback with a huge rock spire at one end. Crudely it resembled a lower jaw bone with one lone tooth remaining. Three hundred feet and more the ridge upthrust its barren crest, and the wagon road from the ranch crawled up over it in many switchbacks and sharp turns, using a mile and a half in the climbing. They called it the "dug road." Which meant that teams and scrapers and dynamite and much toil had been necessary in the making, distinguishing it from most Black Rim roads, which followed the line of least resistance until many passings had worn a definite trail; whereupon that trail became an established thoroughfare legalized by custom and not to be lightly changed for another.

Over in the next valley, beyond Devil's Tooth ridge, Alexander Douglas had made a ranch for himself and his family. Aleck Douglas was as Scotch as his name. He shaved his long upper lip, so that it looked longer and more uncompromising than was necessary even to match the Aleck Douglas disposition. His hair was wiry and stood up from a forehead that might be called beetling. His eyebrows were heavy and came so near to meeting that Mary Hope used to wish that she dared lay one small finger between father's eyebrows, just to see if there would be room. His eyes were as close together as his thin beak of a nose would permit, and his ears were long and narrow and set flat against his head. He was tall and he was lank and he was honest to his last bristling hair. He did not swear—though he could wither one with vituperative epithets—and he did not smoke and he did not drink—er—save a wee nip of Scotch "whusky" to break up a cold, which frequently threatened his hardy frame. He was harshly religious, and had there been a church in the Black Rim country you would have seen Aleck Douglas drive early to its door every Sunday morn, and sit straight-backed in a front pew and stare hard at the minister through the longest of sermons,—providing, of course, that church and minister were good Presbyterian.

He loved the dollars, how he did love his dollars! He loved his cattle, because they represented dollars. He nursed them, dollars and animals alike, and to lose one wrung the heart of him.

His wife was a meek little thing in his presence, as the wives of such men as Aleck Douglas usually are. She also was rigidly honest, dogmatically religious and frugal and hard-working and intolerant of the sins of others.

Early she taught Mary Hope that beyond Devil's Tooth ridge lived those wicked Lorrigans, whose souls were bartered to the devil and whose evil ways were a stench in the nostrils of God. Mary Hope used to wonder if God turned up his nose when there was a stench in his nostrils,—for instance, when Belle Lorrigan hurtled past with her bronks and her buckboard and her yellow hair flying. Mary Hope wondered, too, what the Lorrigan boys had got from the devil in exchange for their souls. Some magic, perhaps, that would protect them from death and accident. Yet that seemed not true, for Al Lorrigan broke his leg, one spring round-up. The devil ought to have saved his horse from falling down with him, if the devil had Al Lorrigan's soul.

That had happened when Mary Hope was twelve and Al Lorrigan was eighteen. She heard her father tell her mother about it; and her father had set his whiskered lip against his long, shaven upper lip almost with a smack.

"They'll come to a bad end, all of them," he declared sententiously. "Violent deaths had all the Lorrigans before them—all save Tom, and the Lord but stays his hand for a time from that man. The wicked shall flourish as a green bay tree."

"Father, how can a tree be green and then bay too!" Mary Hope ventured to inquire. "Is it just a Bible tree, or does it flourish somewhere really?"

Aleck Douglas hid his mouth behind his palm and coughed. "'Tis not bay like a horse, child. 'Tis not the color that I'm speaking of."

"That painted Jezebel, Belle Lorrigan, drove past the house to-day within a stone's throw," Mrs. Douglas informed her husband. "I wush, Aleck, that ye would fence me a yard to keep the huzzy from driving over my very doorstep. She had that youngest brat of hers in the seat with her—that Lance. And as they went past on the keen gallop—and the horses both in a lather of sweat—the boy impudently shook his fist at me where I was glancing from my window. And his mother lookit and laughed, the Jezebel!"

"Mother, Lance only waved his hand."

"And why should Lance be waving his hand when he should pass the house? Did he think that a Douglas would come so low as to wave at a Lorrigan?"

Mary Hope ducked her sleek little pig-tailed head outside the door and shooed vehemently at a dingy black hen that happened to be passing. Mary Hope knew that a Douglas had stooped so low as to wave back at Lance Lorrigan, but it seemed unwise to tell her mother so.

When Mary Hope was permitted to have a gentle old cow-pony of her own, she rode as often as she dared to Devil's Tooth ridge. By short cuts down certain washes which the trail avoided with many winding detours, she could lope to the foot of the ridge in forty minutes by the old alarm clock which she carried one day in her arms to time the trip. She could climb by another shortcut trail, to the Devil's Tooth in twenty minutes. She could come down in fifteen, she discovered. In a three-hour ride she could reach the-Devil's Tooth, spend a whole hour looking down upon the ranch house of the wicked Lorrigans, and ride home again. And by choosing the short cuts she practically eliminated the chance of being observed.

If she could see Belle go tearing down the trail with her bronks and her buckboard she would be horrifiedly happy. The painted Jezebel fascinated Mary Hope, who had read all about that wicked woman in the Bible, and had shivered in secret at her terrible fate. Belle Lorrigan might never be eaten by dogs, since dogs are few in cattelands and are kept strictly at home, but if Mary Hope's mother was any true prophetess, the painted Jezebel's final doom would be quite as horrible.

At the infrequent parties which the Douglas household countenanced,—such as Christmas trees and Fourth of July picnics, Mary Hope would sit and stare fixedly at Belle Lorrigan and wonder if all painted Jezebels were beautiful and happy and smiling. If so, why was unadorned virtue to be commended? Mary tried not to wish that her hair was yellow and hung in curls, and that she had even white teeth and could sing and dance so wonderfully that everything stopped and every one looked and listened from the minute she began until she stopped.

More than anything else in her starved young life, Mary Hope wanted to see the inside of the Lorrigan house. The painted Jezebel had a real piano, and she could play it, people said. She played ungodly songs, but Mary Hope had a venturesome spirit. She wanted to see an instrument of the devil, hear the painted Jezebel play on it and sing her ungodly songs.

One day when she had ridden to the top of the Devil's Tooth a great, daring plan came to her. She wanted to ride down there—a half mile down the bluff, a mile and a half by the road—but she would never dare take that trail deliberately. Her father might hear of it, or her mother. Nor could she ask the Lorrigans not to tell of her visit. But if her horse ran away with her and took her down the ridge, she could ask them to please not tell her father, because if he knew that her horse ran away he would not let her ride again. It seemed to Mary Hope that all the Lorrigans would sympathize with her dilemma. They would probably ask her into the house. She would see the piano, and she could ask the painted Jezebel to play on it. That would be only polite. It did seem a shame that a girl thirteen years old, going on fourteen, should never have seen or heard a piano. Mary Hope looked at the sun and made breathless calculation. Having just arrived at the Devil's Tooth, she had an hour to spend. And if she took the steep, winding trail that the Lorrigans rode, the trail where old man Lorrigan's horse had fallen down with him, she could be at the house in a very few minutes.

“Ye look little enough like a runaway horse, ye wind-broken, spavined old crow-bait, you!” she criticized Rab as he stood half asleep in the sun. “I shall have to tell a lee about you, and for that God may wither the tongue of me. I shall say that a rattler buzzed beneath your nose—though perhaps I should say it was behind ye, Rab, else they will wonder that ye didna run away home. If ye could but lift an ear and roll the eye of you, wild-like, perhaps they will believe me. But I dinna ken—I wouldna believe it mesel!”

Rab wagged an ear when she mounted, switched his tail pettishly when she struck him with the quirt, reluctantly obeyed the rein, and set his feet on the first steep pitch of the Devil’s Tooth trail. Old as he was, Rab had never gone down that trail and he chose his footing circumspectly. It was no place for a runaway, as Mary Hope speedily discovered when she had descended the first dip and entered the cleft which the Lorrigans called the Slide.

A slide it was, and down it Rab slid on his rump. An old watercourse, with sheer rock walls that formed the base of the Tooth itself. Had there been room Mary Hope would have turned back. But the cleft was so narrow that a pack horse must be adept at squeezing past protuberances and gauging the width of its pack if it would travel the trail. A sharp turn presently showed her the end of the cleft, and they emerged thankfully upon a sage-grown shelf along which the trail proceeded more gently.

Then came another cleft, with great boulders at the end, which a horse must negotiate carefully if he would not break a leg or two. It was here that old Tom Lorrigan had died under his horse before help came that way. But Rab had covered many rough trails, and he picked his way over the boulders safely,—though not as a runaway horse should have traveled.

After that there came a treacherous bit of shale, across which Mary Hope thought it best to lead her runaway steed which refused for a time to venture farther. Being a Douglas she was obstinate. Being obstinate, she would not turn back, especially since the trail would be even worse in the climbing than it was in the descent. Rab, she realized worriedly, could not slide up that narrow, rock-bottomed cleft down which he had coasted so readily.

“They must be devil horses that ride this way, Rab,” she sighed when she had remounted on the lower margin of the shale. “And the Lorrigans na doot have magic. But I dinna think that even they could run away down it.”

She struck Rab sharply with the quirt and dug in her heels. If Rab was to run it must be immediately, for the level valley lay just below and the Lorrigan house was around the next point of the hill.

Rab would not run. He stopped abruptly and kicked with both feet. Mary Hope struck him again, a little harder, and Rab kicked again, more viciously. The trail was much better for kicking than for running, but Mary Hope would not accept the compromise, and at last Rab yielded to the extent of loping cautiously down the last steep declivity. When he reached level ground he laid back his ears and galloped as fast as his stiffened shoulders would let him. So Mary Hope very nearly achieved a dashing pace as she neared the corrals of the wicked Lorrigans.

“Well! Yuh traveling, or just goin’ somewhere?” A young voice yelled at her as she went past the stable.

“My horse—is—he rinned away wi’ me!” screamed Mary Hope, her pigtails snapping as Rab slowed up and stopped.

“He rinned away wi’ you? When? You musta been purty young for riding when *that* horse rinned away!” Lance came toward her, grinning and slapping his hat against his fringed chaps before he set it upon his head; an uncommonly handsome head, by the way, with the Lorrigan’s dark eyes and hair and his mother’s provocative mouth. “Well, seeing your horse ain’t going to rin no further, you might as well git down and stay awhile.”

“I will not. I didna come to visit, if you please.”

Mary Hope’s cheeks were hot but confusion could not break her Scotch spirit.

“Want to borrow something?” Lance stood looking at her with much enjoyment. A girl in short skirts was fair game for any one’s teasing, especially when she blushed as easily as did Mary Hope. “Want to borrow a horse that will rin away wi’ you.”

“Lance, you devil, get out and leave the girl alone. I’m ashamed of you! Haven’t you got any manners at all?—after all the willows and the good powder I’ve wasted on you! Get back to that pasture fence before I take a club to you for such acting!”

Before Belle’s wrath Lance retreated, and Mary Hope found the courage to wrinkle her nose at him when he glanced her way. “He rinned away to save himself a whupping,” she commented, and made sure that he heard it, and hoped that he would realize that she spoke “Scotchy” just for his special benefit.

“All right for you, Belle Lorrigan!” Lance called back, retaliating for Mary Hope’s grimace by a kiss thrown brazenly in the expectation of seeing her face grow redder; which it did immediately. “Careful of that horse—he might rinned away again!”

“That’ll do for you, young man!” Whereupon Belle picked up a small stone and threw it with such accurate aim that Lance’s hat went off. “Good thing for you that I haven’t got a gun on me, or I’d dust your heels for you!” Then she turned to Mary Hope, who was listening with titillating horror to the painted Jezebel’s unorthodox method of reproving her offspring. “Get right down, honey, and come in and rest. And don’t mind Lance; he’s an awful tease, especially when he likes a person. Tie your horse to the fence—or turn him in the corral, if he’ll let you catch him again.”

“I—I don’t believe I could stop. I—I only came by because I—my horse—” Mary Hope stammered and blushed so red that her freckles were invisible. After all, it was very hard to tell a lie, she discovered.

“There’s something I like about this horse,” said Belle, running her plump white hand down the nose of Rab. “He’s neighborly, anyway. He brought you here against your will, I can see that. And now he’s here he sort of takes it for granted you’ll be friendly and stop a while. Don’t you think you ought to be as friendly as your horse, honey?”

“I—I am friendly. I—I always wished I could come and see you. But mother—mother doesna visit much among the neighbors; she—she’s always busy.”

“I don’t visit much, myself,” said Belle dryly. “But that ain’t saying I can’t be friendly. Come on in, and we’ll have some lemonade.”

Sheer astonishment brought Mary Hope down from her horse. All her life she had taken it for granted that lemonade was sacred to the Fourth of July picnics, just as oranges grew for Christmas trees only. She followed Belle dumbly into the house, and once inside she remained dumb with awe at what seemed to her to be the highest pinnacle of grandeur.

There was the piano with a fringed scarf draped upon its top, and pictures in frames standing upon the scarf in orderly rows. There were many sheets of music,—and never a hymn book. There were great chairs with deep upholstery which Mary observed with amazement was not red plush, nor even blue plush, yet which appealed to her instincts for beauty. There was no center table with fringed spread and family album and a Bible and a conch shell. Instead there was a long table before a window—a table littered with all sorts of things: a box of revolver cartridges, a rifle laid down in the middle of scattered newspapers, a bottle of oil, more music, a banjo, a fruit jar that did duty as a vase for wild flowers, a half-finished, braided quirt and four silver dollars lying where they had been carelessly flung down. To Mary Hope, reared in a household where dollars were precious things, that last item was the most amazing of all. The Lorrigans must be rich,—as rich as they were wicked. She thrilled anew at her own daring.

Belle brought lemonade, wonderful lemonade, with an egg beaten to yellow froth and added the last minute. Mary Hope sipped and marveled. After that, Belle played on the piano and sang songs which Mary Hope had never heard before and which she thought must be the songs the angels sang in Heaven, although there was nothing to suggest harps or hallelujahs. Love songs they were, mostly.

The sun slipped around and shone through a window on Belle's head, so that her yellow hair glistened like fine threads of gold. Mary Hope watched it dreamily and wondered how a Jezebel could be so beautiful and so good.

"You'd better run along home now, honey," Belle said at last when she had finished her eighth song. "I'd love to have you stay all night—but I reckon there'd be trouble. Your dad ain't any too mild, I've heard. But I hope you won't wait until your horse runs away with you again. I want you to come real soon. And come early so you can stay longer. I'll teach you to play the piano, honey. You ought to learn, seeing you love it so."

That night Mary Hope dreamed of playing strange, complex compositions on a piano which Lance Lorrigan had given her. The next morning and for many days after she still dreamed of playing entrancing strains upon a piano, and of Lance Lorrigan who had thrown her a kiss. Belle had said that Lance always teased a person he liked, and in that one remark lay the stuff of many dreams.

CHAPTER FOUR

A MATTER OF BRANDS

On the grassy expanse known locally as Injun Creek, fifteen hundred head of cattle were milling restlessly in a close-held herd over which gray dust hovered and settled and rose again. Toward it other cattle came lowing, trotting now and then when the riders pressed close, essaying a retreat when the way seemed clear. From Devil's Tooth they came, and from Lava Bed way, and from the rough sandstone ridges of Mill Creek. Two by two the riders, mere moving dots at first against a monotone of the rangeland, took form as they neared the common center. Red cattle, black cattle, spotted and dingy white, with bandy-legged, flat-bodied calves keeping close to their mothers, kicking up their heels in sheer joy of their new life when the pace slowed a little, seeking a light lunch whenever the cows stopped to cast a wary glance back at their pursuer. A dozen brands were represented in that foregathering: The NL brand of Tom Lorrigan on most, with its various amendments which differentiated the property of other members of the family, since all of the Lorrigans owned cattle. There was the NL Block of Belle Lorrigan, the ANL which was Al's brand, the DNL of Duke and the LNL which belonged to Lance; monograms all of them, deftly constructed with the fewest possible lines. There was that invitation to the unlawful artistry of brand-working, the Eleven which Sleek Douglas thought quite sufficient to mark his cattle. It was merciful to the calves, he maintained, and as to thieves, the dishonest would be punished by law and the Douglas wrath. The Miller brand, a plain Block, showed now and then upon the rump of some animal. The AJ fled occasionally before a rider, and there were brands alien to the Black Rim; brands on cattle that had drifted down from the Snake through the Lava Creek pass, or over the sage-grown ridges farther north.

His rifle sheathed in a saddle holster under his thigh, his black eyes roving here and there and letting no small movement of men or animals escape their seeing glances, Tom Lorrigan rode to the round-up, lord of the range, steadfast upon the trail of his "million on the hoof" of which he dreamed. Beside him rode Al, and the two of them were talking while they rode.

"He ain't safe, I tell you," Al was saying in the tone of reiteration. "And you needn't ask me how I know. I know it, that's all. Maybe he's too damn' agreeable or something. Anyway, I know I don't like the way his eyes set in his head."

"A man that wasn't safe wouldn't dare come into the Black Rim and make the play he's makin'," Tom contended. "I've had my eye on him ever since he come. I've checked up what he says at different times—they tally like the truth. I can't find nothing wrong."

"I've got him set down for a spotter," said Al.

"If he ain't on the level it'll show up sooner or later," Tom contended. "I've got my eye on him. I dunno what you pin your argument on, Al, I'll be darned if I do."

"Well, watch out for Cheyenne. That's all. You're pretty keen, all right, but all a man's got to do to get on your blind side is to blow in here with his chin on his shoulder and his horse rode to a whisper and claim to you he's hidin' out. Cheyenne ain't right, I tell yuh. You take a tip from me and watch him."

"Takes a kid to tell his dad where to head in at!" growled Tom. "How do you reckon I ever got along before your time. Ever figure that out, Al?"

"Now, what's eatin' on old Scotty Douglas, do yuh reckon? That's him, all right. I could tell him on horseback ten mile off. He rides like a Mormon."

Tom grunted. His boys, he had long ago discovered, were very apt to find some excuse for changing the subject whenever he mentioned the past which had not held their arrogant young selves. Tom resented the attitude of superior wisdom which they were prone to assume. They were pretty

smart kids, but if they thought they were smarter than their dad they sure had a change of heart coming to them.

“Supposin’ it is old Scotty. Do you reckon, Al, I’ve got you along for a guide, to point out what my eyes is getting too poor to see? As for Cheyenne,” he reverted angrily to the argument, “as for Cheyenne, when you’ve growed to be a man, you’ll find it’s just as much the mark of a fool to go along suspecting everybody as it is to bank on everybody. You think now it’s funny to put the Judas brand on every man you don’t know. It ain’t. It’s a kid’s trick. Boys git that way when they begin to sprout hair under their noses. I been pretty patient with yuh, Al. You’re growing up fast, and you’re feeling your oats. I make allowances, all kinds. But by the humpin’ hyenas, don’t you start in telling me where to head in at with my own outfit! If you do, I’ll jest about wear out a willer switch on yuh!”

This to a youth almost old enough to vote was dire insult. Al pulled up his horse. “Run your own outfit and be darned to yuh!” he cried hotly, and spurred off in the direction of the ranch.

Tom laughed shortly and rolled a cigarette. “Thinks now it’ll bust up the round-up if he goes,” he opined. “Lucky for my kids I ain’t as strict as my old dad was; they wouldn’t have any hide left, I reckon.”

Up loped Aleck Douglas then, riding stiff-legged, his bony elbows jerking awkwardly with the motion of his horse, a rusty black vest dangling open under his coat which flapped in the wind. That the Douglas wrath rode with him Tom saw from the corner of his eye and gave no sign.

“Hello,” said Tom casually and drew a match along the stamped fork of his saddle. “You’re quite a stranger.” He lighted his cigarette, holding his reins lightly in one hand while he did so; gave the reins a gentle flip to one side and sent his horse after a cow and calf that showed symptoms of “breaking back.”

“Mister Lorrigan, ’tis about a spotted yearlin’ that I’ve come to speak with ye. I’ve found the hide of her in the brush beneath yon hill, and the brand is cut from it. But I wad swear to the hide wi’out the brand. ’Twas a yearlin’ I ken weel, Mister Lorrigan.” He rode alongside, and his close-set little eyes regarded keenly Tom’s face.

“A spotted yearling with the brand cut out, hey? That looks kinda bad. Have you got the hide with you?”

“I have no got the hide wi’ me, but I ken weel whaur it lies, Mister Lorrigan, and I thinkit so do you.”

“Hm-m. You’d ought to of brought it along.” Tom’s glance went out toward the herd and the cattle lumbering toward it far and near. “The range is plumb lousy with spotted yearlings, Scotty. What do you expect me to do about it?”

The Douglas face worked spasmodically before he spoke. “I expect ye, Mr. Lorrigan, to pay for yon beastie. I ken weel ye could name the mon that stickit the knife in her throat. An’ she made fine eatin’, I have na doot. But ’tis the law, Mister Lorrigan, that a mon should pay for the meat he consumes.”

“Meaning, of course, that you think I’m feeding Douglas meat to my outfit. Don’t you think you’re kinda hasty? I kill a beef about every three or four days in round-up time. The boys work hard and they eat hard. And they eat NL beef, Scotty; don’t overlook that fact. Hides ain’t worth anything much, but salt’s cheap, too. I ain’t throwin’ away a dollar when it’s no trouble to save it. If you’re any curious at all, you ride over to ranch and count all the green hides you can find. Belle, she’ll show ’em to you. Take a look at the brands, and figure it out yourself, I don’t know how many you’ll find, but I’ll gamble you a dozen cows against one that you’ll wonder what went with all the beef that was in them hides. Humpin’ hyenas! Ain’t I got cattle enough of my own, without rustlin’ off my neighbors?”

“Aye. Ye ha’ cattle, Mister Lorrigan; I ken weel ye should no’ be put to it for a wee bit meat—but I ken weel yon spotty yearlin’ was mine. I ken ye’ve been campin’ thereabout—and it wad seem, Mister Lorrigan, that the salt was no sa plentifu’ when the spotty yearlin’ was kilt.”

The downright foolhardiness of the Douglas wrath held Tom's hand,—though of a truth that hand trembled and crept backward. Nor was Aleck Douglas nearsighted; he saw the movement and his bearded underlip met his shaven underlip in a straight line.

"Ye do weel to be reachin' for the gun, Mister Lorrigan. I dinna carry aye weapon save the truth."

Tom flushed. "Blame your oatmeal soul, if I reached for my gun, you wouldn't be telling me about it!" he exploded. "Carry the truth, do yuh? You've got to show me where you keep it, then. If you wasn't an old man—and a darn fool on top of that."

"'Tis no brave to cover shame wi' bitter words, Tam Lorrigan. 'Tis the way of ye to bluster and bully until the neighbors all are affrighted to face ye and yere ill deeds."

Toward them clattered two riders hotly pursuing a lean, long-legged steer with a wide spread of horns and a gift of speed that carried him forging past the disputants. Tom wheeled mechanically and gave chase, leaving the Douglas wrath to wax hotter or to cool if it would. It was a harsh accusation that Aleck Douglas had made, and that he did make it seemed to prove that he had what he considered very good evidence that he was right. Tom was well schooled in troubles of that kind. He did not take the matter so indifferently as Douglas believed.

Duke and Mel Wilson, riding hard, came upon Tom just as he had roped and thrown the steer in a shallow draw that hid them from the level where Aleck Douglas waited.

"Hey!" Tom beckoned them close. "Old Douglas says there's a hide in the willows this side of Squaw Butte, with the brand cut out; a spotted yearling, and he claims it's his and he can swear to it without the brand. I don't know a darn thing about it. Nobody does in this outfit; I'll stake all I've got on that. But he's on the fight—and a mule's a sheep alongside him when he's got his back up. He left the hide where he found it. Haze this steer and ride over there and see what there is to his talk. If you find a hide cachéd in the willows, put it outa sight. We don't want any rustling scraps started on this range; that's bad medicine always. If he can't produce any hide, he can't start anything but talk—and talk's cheap."

A few moments later they came tearing up out of the draw, the steer running strong, the three riders still hotly pursuing. Duke and Mel rushed it on to the herd, and Tom dropped out of the race and came along across to where Douglas wrath had not cooled but had smoldered and waited for the wind of opposition to fan it to flame again.

"Well, you still mournin' over your spotty yearlin'?" Tom called. "You must have more time than you know what to do with to-day. Us, we have to *work*."

"If it's to the round-up ye're going, then I'll ride wi' ye, Tom Lorrigan. I'm a fair mon and I wush na ill to my neighbors. But I canna twiddle the thumbs whilst others fare well on Douglas beef."

"You can ride where you please; it's open range. But if you ride to the herd I'll show you forty yearlings that I'll bet are dead ringers for the one that you claim was killed. I never seen that hide neither, unless maybe when the critter was using it."

"Now, I don't want any trouble with yuh, Scotty. But I tell yuh right now I can't stand for much more of this talk about beef rustling. Thief's a pretty hard word to use to a man's face—and get away with it."

"'Tis a hard mon I'm usin' it tae," the Douglas retorted grimly.

"Braggin' about your nerve, are yuh, Scotty?"

"I have a name, Tam Lorrigan, and 'tisna Scotty." The Douglas face twisted with anger. "I will no bandy worrds with ye. 'Tis ill I should descend to the level o' them that deespitely use me."

"Deespitely!—why, humpin' hyenas! Ain't I letting yuh *live*? And do yuh reckon any other man could walk up to me and call me a thief and live long enough to take it back? Just because you're old, and such a blamed fool you go around without a gun on yuh, I'm keepin' my hands off you. I call yuh a coward. You wouldn't a dared to come over here with a gun on yuh and talk the way you've

done. You've got me hog-tied. You know it. And damn yuh, I'll fight yuh now with the law—which is the only way a coward will fight.

“You've done a heap of chawin' around about the Lorrigans, Scotty. Don't think I ain't heard it. Maybe it's your religion to backbite yore neighbors and say what you wouldn't dare to say to their face with a gun on you so we'd be equal. I've passed it up. I've considered the source and let it go. But when you come belly-achin' around about me stealin' a spotty yearlin'—jest as if there wasn't but one on the Black Rim range!—why, damn it, *you'll prove it!* Do you get that? You'll prove it before a jury, or I'll sue yuh for libel and bust yuh. I don't go much on the law, but by Henry, I'll use it on you!”

The Douglas eyes flickered uncertainly, but the Douglas mouth was unyielding. “The law can no be cheatit so easy, Tam Lorrigan. I hae no wush to send ye tae jail—but ye ken weel that wad be the penalty for killin' yon beastie in the willows. I came to settle the matter fair between neighbors, and tae warn ye to cease your evil doings on the range. I wadna see yer woman come tae grief—”

“You can cut out that mercy talk, Scotty. And don't try to bring Belle into this. If it comes to a showdown, lemme advise you, you'd better sidestep Belle. The grief would all be yourn, if you and Belle lock horns, and I'm telling yuh so.”

They had reached the nearest margin of the herd. Cheyenne, a nameless estray from the Wyoming ranges, chanced to be holding herd where the two rode up. At him Tom looked, suspicion for the moment sharpening his glance.

“You can ask this man what he knows about any spotted hide over by Squaw Butte,” he invited the Douglas stiffly. “He's practically a stranger to the outfit—been here about a month. Maybe his word'll be worth something to yuh—I dunno. You can ask him.”

Douglas rode over to Cheyenne and said what he had to say. Tom meanwhile held the herd and meditated on the petty injustices of life—perhaps—and wished that a real he-man had come at him the way Douglas had come. It irked Tom much to be compelled to meet hard words with tolerant derision. Toleration was not much of a factor in his life. But since he must be tolerant, he swung his horse to meet the Douglas when the brief conversation with Cheyenne was over. The Douglas head was shaking slowly, owning disappointment.

“Well, yuh might as well make the rounds, Scotty. Go on and ask all the boys. If I asked 'em myself you might think it was a frame-up. And when you've made the rounds, take a look through the herd. The chances are that you'll find your spotty yearlin' walking around with her hide on her. And when you're plumb through, you make tracks away from my outfit. My patience is strainin' the buttons right now, looking at your ugly mug. And lemme tell yuh—and you mark it down in your little red book so yuh won't forget it—after you've peddled your woes to the hull outfit, you bring in that hide and some proof, or you get down on them marrow bones and apologize! I'm plumb tired of the way you act.”

Aleck Douglas scowled, opened his hard lips to make a bitter answer and reconsidered. He went off instead to interview the men, perhaps thinking that adroit questioning might reveal a weak point somewhere in their denial.

Tom rode over to Cheyenne. “Scotty's got his war clothes on,” he observed carelessly.

“Shore has,” Cheyenne grinned. “But that's all right. He didn't make nothin' off me. I never give him any satisfaction at all.”

Tom's brows pulled together. “Well, now, if you know anything about any hide with the brand cut out, you'd better come through, Cheyenne.”

“I never said I knowed anything about it. I guess mebbly that's why I couldn't give him no satisfaction.” Cheyenne still grinned, but he did not meet Tom's eyes.

“You spoke kinda queer for a man who don't know nothing, Cheyenne. Did yuh think mebbly it wasn't all NL beef you been eating?”

“Why, no. I never meant anything like that at all. I only said—”

“Straight talk don’t need no explainin’, Cheyenne. The Devil’s Tooth outfit shore likes the taste of its own beef. If any man fails to agree with that, I want him to speak up right now.”

Cheyenne pinched out the fire in his cigarette and flipped the stub away from him. He did not look at Tom when he said:

“NL beef shore suits me. I don’t know about any other brand. I ain’t et none to judge by.”

“You bet your life you ain’t,” snapped Tom, as he turned away. “When you sample another brand you won’t be drawin’ wages with this outfit.”

He rode away to the wagon, where a fire was already burning and the branding irons heating. Cheyenne, with his hat pulled down over his forehead so that he looked out from under the brim that shaded his face, watched Tom queerly, a corner of his lips lifted in a half smile that was not pleasant.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY RIDE AND THEY DO NOT TELL WHERE

Aleck Douglas, having questioned the crew as Tom had suggested, and having inexorably ridden through the herd—in search of brands that had been “worked,” or for other evidence of the unlawful acquisition of wealth, rather than in hope of finding his spotted yearling—rode away with the parting threat that he would “gang to the shuriff and hae a talk wi’ him.” Tom had advised him of one or two other destinations where he hoped the Douglas would arrive without any delay whatever, and the branding proceeded rather slowly with the crew three men short.

Duke and Mel Wilson rode in about three o’clock with a few cows and calves which they had gleaned from some brushy draw to cover their real errand. By the time they had snatched a hasty meal at the wagon a mile away, and had caught up fresh horses, the afternoon’s work was nearly over. A little earlier than usual, Tom kicked the branding fire apart, ordered the herd thrown on water and grazed back to the bed-ground that had been used during round-up time ever since he could remember, and rode slowly toward camp, whither the lucky ones not on herd were speeding.

Cheyenne, Tom observed, seemed in a greater hurry than the others, and he beckoned to him a slim, swarthy-skinned youth who answered to the euphonious name of Sam Pretty Cow, who was three-quarters Indian and forgiven the taint for the ability to ride anything he ever tried to ride, rope anything he ever swung his loop at, and for his unfailing good humor which set him far above his kind.

“Cheyenne’s in a hurry to-night, Sam.”

“Yeah. Ride hell out of his horse. I dunno, me.” Sam grinned amiably at his boss.

“I wish you would camp on his trail, Sam. He’ll maybe ride somewhere to-night.”

“Yeah. Uh-huh. You bet,” acquiesced Sam, and leaned forward a little, meaning to gallop after Cheyenne.

“Hold on a minute! What did Scotty have to say, Sam?”

“Him? Talk a lot about spotty yearlin’ he says is dead. Asking who kills them calf. Search me, I dunno.”

“Hear any talk among the boys about beef rustling?”

“Uh-huh. First I hear is them sour-face asking me who kills them critter. Me, I dunno.”

“If you hear anything about it, Sam, let me know. Scotty thinks we done it.”

“Yeah. Uh-huh. Anybody does something mean, everybody says, ‘Damn Lorrigans done it.’ Too much talk in the Black Rim. Talking under their hats all the time but no liking to fight them Lorrigans. Uh-huh. They’re scared, you bet.”

“They’ll have something to get scared at, if they ain’t careful. I’m getting tired of it,” said Tom gloomily.

“Yeah, you bet!” agreed Sam, his voice all sympathy. Then seeing that Tom had no immediate intention of saying more, he touched his horse with his long-shanked spurs and hurried on to “camp on the trail of Cheyenne.”

Tom had nearly reached camp when Duke came pounding up behind him, coming from the herd. Duke set his horse up, in two jumps slowing from a gallop to a walk. Tom turned his head but he did not speak. Nor did Duke wait for questions.

“Dad, we didn’t find any hide over by Squaw Butte,” he announced abruptly. “Mel and I hunted every foot of the willows. I saw where a critter had been killed, all right. There was some scuffed-out tracks and blood on the ground. But there wasn’t any hide. Scotty musta cachéd it somewheres.”

“Scotty claims he left it where he found it, for evidence,” Tom said gloomily.

“Darned if I’d take the blame for other folks’ rustling,” Duke declared. “I wisht he’d of come to me with his tale of woe. I’d a showed him where to head in, mighty darned sudden. I’d of asked

where was his proof; there's other cow outfits in the Black Rim besides the Devil's Tooth, I'd tell him. And if he didn't have mighty darned good evidence, I'd of—"

"Yes, I expect you would of tore the earth up all round him," Tom interrupted drily. "You boys shore are fighty, all right—with your faces. What I'm interested in, is whereabouts you and Mel hunted. That hide wouldn't show up like the Devil's Tooth—understand. And Scotty was bawling around like a man that's been hurt in the pocket. He found a hide, and if it ain't his he shore thinks it is, and that's just about the same. And we camped over there three days ago. Where all did you and Mel look?"

"All over, wherever a hide could be cachéd. There ain't any over there. Scotty musta dreamt it—or else he buried it."

"Scotty ain't the dreamy kind. Might be possible that the ones that done the killing went back and had a burying—which they'd oughta have had at the time. I can't sabe a man rustling beef and leaving the hide laying around, unless—" Tom pulled his eyebrows together in quick suspicion. "It kinda looks to me like a frame-up," he resumed from his fresh viewpoint. "Well, you and Mel keep it under your hats, Duke. Don't say nothing to any of the boys at all. But if any of the boys has anything to say, you listen. Scotty made the rounds to-day—talked to the whole bunch. They know all about his spotty yearlin', gol darn him! I'd like to know if any of 'em has got any inside dope. There's strangers in the outfit this spring. And, Duke, you kinda keep your eye on Cheyenne. Al seems to think he ain't right—but Al has got to the suspicious age, when every man and his dog packs a crime on his conscience. You kinda stall around and see if Cheyenne lets slip anything."

"What would happen to old Scotty Douglas if he lost a bunch, for gosh sake? Drop dead, I reckon," grumbled Duke. "He's sure making a lot of fuss over one measly yearlin'."

"Yeah—but I've saw bigger fusses made over smaller matters, son," Tom drawled whimsically. "I saw two men killed over a nickel in change, once. It ain't the start; it's the finish that counts."

"Well, looking at it that way, uh course—"

"That's the only way to look at it, son. Did you think, maybe, that I hazed you over to find that hide and bury it, just to keep it from scentin' up the scenery? It's what I could smell farther ahead that I was after. If you'd looked ahead a little further, maybe you'd of looked a little closer in the willers."

To this Duke had nothing to say; and presently he loped on, leaving Tom to ride slowly and turn the matter of the spotted yearling over and over in his mind until he had reached some definite conclusion.

Tom had the name of being a dangerous man, but he had not earned it by being hasty. His anger was to be feared because it smoldered long, rather than because it exploded into quick violence. He wanted to see the trail ahead of him—and just now he thought he saw Trouble waiting on the turn. No Lorrigan had ever ridden the other way because Trouble waited ahead, but one Lorrigan at least would advance with his eyes open and his weapons ready to his hand.

"Bring your proof," he had said in effect to Aleck Douglas, "or stand trial for libel. Since you won't fight with guns, I'll fight you with the law." Very good, if he could be sure that the Douglas would fail to produce his proof.

Tom knew well enough the reputation he bore in the Black Rim country. Before the coming of Belle, and later, of the boys, Tom had done his share toward earning that reputation. But Belle and the boys had changed his life far more than appeared on the surface. They had held his rope from his neighbors' cattle, for one thing, though his neighbors never had credited him with honesty.

It is true that Tom could remember certain incidents of the round-up that had added to his herd and brought him a little nearer the million-dollar mark. Without remorse he remembered, and knew that any cowman in the country would do the same, or worse if he dared. For branding irons do not always inquire very closely into the parentage of a calf that comes bouncing up stiff-legged at the end of a cowpuncher's rope. Nor need a maverick worry very long because he belongs to no one, so long as cowmen ride the range. Cattle would always stray into the Black Rim country from ranges across the mountains, and of these the Black Rim took its toll. He supposed strange irons were set now and

then on the hide of an NL animal across the mountains—but the branders had better not let him catch them at it! On the other hand, he would see to it that they did not catch him branding mavericks on his own range. To Tom that seemed fair enough,—a give-and-take game of the rangeland. According to Tom's code he was as honest as his neighbors, and that was honest enough for practical purposes.

It happened that he had not killed Aleck Douglas' spotted yearling. And to be accused of the theft hurt.

“Why, humpin' hyenas! If I'd a beefed that critter, old Scotty wouldn't ever have found no hide to catch me on! What kinda mark does he think I am! Rustle a beef and leave the hide laying around? why, any darn fool would know better than that!”

It was characteristic of the Lorrigan influence that when Tom rode into camp every one of the crew save his own sons quieted a little; not enough to suggest timidity, but to a degree that told how well they knew that their master was present.

That master quietly took stock of his men while they ate their supper and loafed and smoked and talked. Cheyenne had unobtrusively retired to the bed tent. With his thumbs pushed down inside his belt Tom strolled past and slanted a glance inside. Cheyenne was squatted on his heels shaving with cold lather and a cracked looking-glass propped against a roll of bedding, and a razor which needed honing. In turning his head to look at Tom he nicked his chin and while he stopped the bleeding with a bit of old newspaper the size of a small finger-nail he congratulated himself in the mistaken belief that Tom had not seen him at all.

Cheyenne did not know Tom very well, else he would have taken it for granted that Tom not only had seen him, but had also made a guess at his reason for shaving in the middle of the week.

Tom walked on, making a mental tally of the girls within riding distance from camp. Jennie Miller was reported engaged to an AJ man, and besides, she lived too far away and was not pretty enough to be worth the effort of a twenty-five mile ride just to hear her play hymns distressingly on an organ with a chronic squeak in one pedal. There was Alice Boyle at the AJ, and there was Mary Hope Douglas, who was growing to be quite a young lady,—pretty good-looking, too, if she wouldn't peel her hair back so straight and tight. Mary Hope Douglas, Tom decided, was probably the girl. It struck Tom as significant that she should be the daughter of the man who mourned the loss of the yearling. He had not reached the rear of the tent before he decided that he himself would do a little riding that night. He caught and saddled Coaley, his own pet saddle horse that had never carried any man save Tom—never would, so long as Tom had anything to say about it—and set off toward the Devil's Tooth ranch. Cheyenne ducked his head under the tent flap when he heard the sound of hoof beats passing close, saw that it was his boss, noted the direction he was taking, and heaved a sigh of relief. While he labored with the knot in his handkerchief which must be tied exactly right before he would leave the tent, Cheyenne had been composing a reason for leaving camp. Now he would not need a reason, and he grinned while he plastered his hair down in a sleek, artistically perfect scallop over his right eyebrow. Tom was going to the home ranch,—to round up Al, very likely. He would be gone all night and he would not know how many of his men rode abroad that night.

So presently Cheyenne saddled the freshest horse in his string and loped off, making an insulting sign with one hand when the boys wished him luck with the girl and offered to go along and talk religion with “feyther” just to help him out.

Very soon after that Sam Pretty Cow drifted away, and no one noticed his absence. Sam Pretty Cow's wanderings never did attract much attention. He was Injun, and Injuns have ways strange to white men. For instance, he did not sleep in the tent, but spread his blankets under whatever shelter he could find within hailing distance from the others. He was always around when he was wanted, and that seemed to be all that was expected of him. Sleep settled on the Devil's Tooth round-up camp, and the night guard sang to the cattle while they rode round and round the herd, and never dreamed that this night was not as other nights had been.

CHAPTER SIX

BELLE MEETS AN EMERGENCY IN HER OWN WAY

A Meadow Lark, his conscience comfortable after a generous breakfast of big and little worms carried to his mate hidden away under a thick clump of rabbit weed down by the creek, spread rigid wings and volplaned to the crooked post beside the corral gate, folded his feathers snug and tilted his head aslant. “*Cler, cler, cler, cler-ee, cler-ee!*” he sang, and perked a wary eye toward the low-roofed stable.

“Oh, I hear you, you sassy little sinner! I wouldn’t think you’d have the nerve, after what you’ve done to my radishes. I’m sure going to mix with you, if you—Rosa! Lift a heel at me and you die! Stand over—don’t you try squeezing me against the wall, or I’ll take my quirt to you! Get over there, before I brain you! Hay-ah-h, you—”

From the sounds one would imagine that a bear, two lions and a mule had come to handgrips in the stable, and that a woman of the Amazons was battling with them all. The meadow lark knew better. This was his second season on the Devil’s Tooth ranch, and he knew that Belle Lorrigan was merely harnessing her pinto team in the stable, and that nothing out of the ordinary was taking place. Being a wise bird as well as an inquisitive one, he fluttered up to the ridge-pole of the roof and from that sanctuary listened beady-eyed to the customary tumult.

Certain staccato epithets meant merely that Subrosa was objecting to the crupper. A sudden stamping testified that Belle had approached Rosa with the bridle. A high-keyed, musical voice chanting man-size words of an intimidating nature followed which proved that the harnessing was progressing as well as could be expected. Then came a lull, and the meadow lark tilted forward expectantly, his head turned sidewise to see what came next.

First came Belle Lorrigan, walking backward, a shot-loaded quirt raised admonishingly to the chin of Subrosa who walked stiff-legged and reluctant, his white-lashed, blue eyes rolling fearsomely, his nostrils belling in loud snorts of protest. A complexity of emotions stirred Subrosa. Afraid to lunge forward, hating to walk circumspectly, eager for the race yet dreading the discipline of rein and whip, Subrosa yielded perforce to the inevitable. As his heels flicked over the low doorsill he swung round and landed one final kick against the log wall, threw up his head in anticipation of the quirt, stepped on a dragging trace chain and jumped as though it was a rattler.

“None of that, you cantankerous brute! One of these days I’m going to just naturally brain you, Sub. I’m getting good and tired of this circus business. You settle down, now, and act human, or—”

Subrosa kicked at the trace and flipped it up so that it struck him smartly on the rump. He jumped straight forward at Belle, who dodged and landed the quirt none too gently on his nose. Subrosa sat down violently, and Belle straightway kicked him in the paunch by way of hinting that she preferred him standing. Then they had it out, rampaging all over the round-pole corral until Belle, breathing a bit fast but sparkly-eyed and victorious, led Subrosa through the gate and up to the post where she snubbed him fast. She was turning to go after Rosa when a young voice called to her anxiously.

“Oh, Mrs. Lorrigan! Quick, I’m in a hurry. I mustn’t stay, because they’ll be here in a little while. But they’re coming by the road and I came down the trail, and that gave me time. I can’t take any more music lessons, Mrs. Lorrigan. Father is that angry wi’ your husband—and oh, Mrs. Lorrigan! If you have any hide that isna your own, ye should hide it away at once! Because the shuriff—”

Belle laid her palms on her hips and stared blankly up at Mary Hope, who sat nervously on old Rab at the gate.

“Heavens, child! My hide is my own—and at that it’s pretty well hidden. What about the sheriff? What’s he got to say about it?”

“It’s the stealing, Mrs. Lorrigan. Father has the shuriff wi’ him, and they are going to search the ranch for the hides—”

“Good Lord! *What* hides?”

“The hides of my father’s cattle. And if you have any, put them away quick, where the shuriff canna find them, Mrs. Lorrigan! It’s ill I should go against my father, but you have been so good to me with the music lessons, and—”

“Don’t let the music lessons bother you, Hope. And I guess we’re entitled to all the cowhides we’ve got on the place, if that’s what you mean. What do you think we are—thieves, Hope Douglas?”

“I dinna say it. I only came to warn ye, so that you may have time tae put your hides way oot o’ their sight when they come. I dinna want that your husband should go to prison, Mrs. Lorrigan. But father is that angry—”

“Well, say! Let me tell you something, Hope. If there’s any talk of stealing and prison for the Lorrigans, your dad had better keep outa my Tom’s sight. And outa mine,” she added grimly. “There’ll be no searching for anything on this ranch when my Tom’s not here to see what goes on. You better go back and tell your dad I said it. If you don’t and he brings the sheriff on here, don’t blame me if somebody gets hurt.”

“Oh, but it’s the law they’re bringing on ye! Ye canna go contrary to the law!” Mary Hope’s voice quavered with fear.

“Oh, can’t I!” Belle gave her head a tilt. “You beat it, while the going’s good. I hear voices up on the road. If you don’t want your dad to come and catch you here—”

That settled it. Terror drove Mary Hope into the Devil’s Tooth trail at Rab’s best pace, which was a stiff-legged lope. Her last glance backward showed her Belle Lorrigan taking her six-shooter belt off the buckboard seat and buckling it around her waist so that the gun hung well forward. Mary Hope shuddered and struck Rab with the quirt.

Belle had led Rosa from the stable and was cautiously fastening the neck yoke in place when the sheriff and Aleck Douglas rode around the corner of the stable. Rosa shied and snorted and reared, and Belle used the rein-ends for a whiplash until Rosa decided that she would better submit to authority and keep her hide whole. She stood fairly quiet after that, with little nipping dance-steps in one spot, while Belle fastened buckles and snaps and trace chains. Subrosa, having had his tantrum, contented himself with sundry head-shakings and snorts. When the team was “hooked up” to Belle’s satisfaction, she tied them both firmly to the corral with short ropes, and finally turned her attention to her visitors.

“Howdy, Mr. Douglas? Fine day we’re having,” she greeted the dour Scotchman amiably.

The sheriff coughed behind his hand, looked sidelong at his companion, rode a step or two nearer to Belle, swung a leg over the cantle of his saddle. Perhaps he expected Aleck Douglas to introduce him, but he did not wait for the formality.

“Mrs. Lorrigan, I’m sheriff of the county,” he began ingratiatingly, when his two feet were on the ground.

“You are?” Belle flashed a row of very white teeth. “You sure don’t look it. I’d have taken you for a regular human being.”

“Mr. Douglas, here, would like to take a look at some hides Mr. Lorrigan has got curing. He thinks possibly—”

“Tis useless to cover the truth wi’ saft words, shuriff,” Douglas interrupted glumly. “Tis stolen cattle we are tracing, and ’tis here we wad look for the hides of them. I hae guid reason—”

“You’ll find my husband at the round-up. Before you do any searching, you had better go and have a talk with him. When he’s gone strangers don’t go prowling around this ranch.”

“We’ll have our talk with him after we’ve taken a look around,” the sheriff amended, grinning a little. “It’s just a matter of form—nothing you need to object to, one way or the other. I don’t suppose we’ll find anything—”

“No, I don’t suppose you will. Not unless you find it on the road back. I hate to seem unfriendly, but I’ll just have to ask you to crawl on your horse and go see Tom about it.”

“Now, we don’t want any unpleasantness at all, Mrs. Lorrigan. But this man has swore out a warrant—”

“Shucks! What he does never did interest me one way or the other, and does not now. I’m telling you there’ll be no snooping around here while Tom’s away.”

“Oh, well, now!” The sheriff rather prided himself on his ability to “handle folks peaceable,” as he expressed it. He injected a little more of the oil of persuasiveness into his voice. It was his standard recipe for avoiding trouble with a woman. “You don’t think for a minute I’d take advantage of his absence, Mrs. Lorrigan? Nothing like that at all. We just want to see if a certain cowhide is here. If it isn’t, then we won’t need to bother Tom at all, maybe. Get down, Mr. Douglas, and we’ll just have a look around. Mrs. Lorrigan ain’t going to make no objections to that.”

Belle smiled. “Oh, yes, she is. She’s going to do quite a lot of objecting. You better stay right where you are, Scotty. You’re a heap safer.”

The sheriff began to lose patience. “Now, look here, Mrs. Lorrigan! You’re dealing with the law, you know. We can’t have any nonsense.”

“We won’t have,” Belle assured him placidly. “That’s what I’ve been trying to beat into your head. Why, good Lord! Can’t you take the hint and see I’m trying not to have any trouble with yuh? I don’t want to have to *run* you off the ranch—but as you say, there’s not going to be any nonsense. I said, *go*. I’m waiting to see if you’ve got sense enough to do it.”

“Sa-ay! Just look here now! Do you know it’s a State’s prison offense to resist an officer!” The sheriff’s face was growing red.

Belle laughed. “Sure. But I’m not. You—you’re irresistible! And I don’t know you’re an officer.”

This went over the sheriff’s head and was wasted, though Aleck Douglas pulled down his mouth at the corners as though he was afraid he might smile if he were not careful.

The sheriff took up his bridle reins, preparing to lead his horse over to a post and tie him. He glanced at Belle and saw that she had a six-shooter in her hand and a glitter in her eyes. Quite naturally he hesitated. Then, at a perfectly plain signal from the gun, he turned his palms toward her at a level with his shoulders.

“You needn’t tie up. Crawl into the saddle and drift.”

“I’ve got a search warrant—”

“You can keep it and show it to Tom. And get off this ranch just as quick as that horse can take you. I’ll have you both arrested for trespassing. I’m not taking your word for anything, you see. *I* don’t know anything about your warrant—hey, Riley!” This to the cook, who came, taking steps as long as his legs would let him, and swinging a damp dishcloth in one moist red hand.

“Riley, here’s a man claims he’s the sheriff and that he’s got a warrant to search the ranch. I don’t believe a word of it, and I’ve ordered him off the place. I wouldn’t for the world resist an officer of the law—put your hands up a little higher, Mr. Man!—but when Tom ain’t home no stranger is going to come snooping around here if I can stop him. Ain’t that right, Riley?”

“That’s right, Belle,” Riley acquiesced, working his oversized Adam’s apple convulsively. (Riley, by the way, would just as readily have approved of murder if Belle had asked for his approval.)

“Well, you’re a witness that I’m from Missouri. I’ve told this man to go tell his troubles to Tom. If he’s honest he’ll do it. If he don’t go in about ten seconds, I’m going to throw a bullet through his hat. *Then* if he hangs around, I shall shoot him in his left leg just about six inches above the knee. I can do it, can’t I, Riley?”

“Well, now, you shore can, Belle!” Riley nodded his head emphatically. “If you say six, I’d shore gamble a year’s wages it won’t be five, or seven. Six inches above his knee goes, if you say six.”

“All right. I’m just defending the ranch when Tom’s gone. You hear me, Mr. Man. Now, you git!”

The sheriff turned and opened his mouth to protest, and Belle shot the promised bullet through his hat crown. The sheriff ducked and made a wild scramble for the stirrup.

“Open your mouth again and I’ll be awfully tempted to shoot that crooked tooth out of it,” Belle observed. “And in ten seconds, remember, you’re going to get—”

The sheriff still had two of the ten seconds to spare when he left, Aleck Douglas following him glumly.

“It’s him, all right. It’s the sheriff, Belle,” Riley informed her, while they watched the two clatter up the road to where the real grade began. “What’s eatin’ on ’em? Likely he did have a search warrant.”

“He can use it, after I’m through. Old Scotty is trailing some rustled stock, they claim. They came here looking for hides. You keep an eye out, Riley, and see if they keep going. I guess they will—they’ll go after Tom. I’m going to have a look at those cowhides in the old shed.”

“Better let me,” Riley offered. “It ain’t any job for a woman nohow. You watch the trail and I’ll look.”

Belle would not even consider the proposition. The Lorrigan reputation never had troubled her much,—but it sent her now to the shed where hides were kept stored until the hide buyer made his next annual visit through the country. She did not believe that she would find any brand save the various combinations of the NL monogram, but she meant to make sure before any stranger was given access to the place.

The *job* was neither easy nor pleasant, but she did it thoroughly. Riley, roosting meditatively on the top rail of the corral where he could watch the road down the bluff, craned his long neck inquiringly toward her when she returned.

“Nothing but NL stuff, just as I thought,” said Belle, holding her hands as far away from her face as possible. “I knew Tom wouldn’t have any stolen hides on the place—but it was best to make sure.”

“No ma’am, he wouldn’t. I’m shore surprised they’d come and try to find any. Looks bad to me, Belle. Looks to me like somebody is shore tryin’ to start somethin’. There’s plenty in the Black Rim would like to see Tom railroaded to the pen—plenty. Looks to me like they’re aimin’ to pin something on him. No, sir, I don’t like it. Uh course,” he went on, letting himself loose-jointedly to the ground, “they couldn’t get nothing on Tom—not unless they framed something. But I wouldn’t put it a-past ’em to do it. No, ma’am, I wouldn’t.”

“Your bread’s burning, Riley. I can smell it. Don’t you never think they’ll frame on Tom. They may try it—but that’s as far as they’ll get. They don’t want to start anything with the Lorrigans!”

“Well, I left the oven door open. She ain’t burning to hurt. Yuh see, Scotty Douglas, he’s religious and he don’t never pack a gun. Them kind’s bad to tangle up with; awful bad. There ain’t nothing much a man can do with them religious birds. Them not being armed, you can’t shoot—it’s murder. And that kinda ties a man’s hands, as yuh might say. They always take advantage of it, invariable. No, ma’am, it looks bad.”

“It’ll look worse—for them that tries any funny business with this outfit,” Belle assured him. “Go along and ’tend to your baking. You know I hate burnt bread. I’m going to drive over and see what they’re up to.”

She untied Rosa and Subrosa, and because she was in a hurry she permitted Riley to hold them by the bits while she climbed in, got the lines firmly in one hand and her blacksnake in the other. Not often did she deign to accept assistance, and Riley was all aquiver with gratified vanity at this mark of her favor.

“Turn ’em loose—and get to that bread!” she cried, and circled the pintos into the road. “You, Sub! Cut that out, now—settle down! Rosa! Stead-dy, I ain’t any Ben Hur pulling off a chariot race, remember!”

At a gallop they took the first sandy slope of the climb, and Belle let them go. They were tough—many’s the time they had hit the level on top of the ridge without slowing to a walk on the way up. They had no great load to pull, and if it pleased them to lope instead of trot, Belle would never object.

As she sat jouncing on the seat of a buckboard with rattly spokes in all of the four wheels and a splintered dashboard where Subrosa landed his heels one day when he had backed before he kicked, one felt that she would have made a magnificent charioteer. Before she had gone half a mile her hair was down and whipping behind her like a golden pennant. Her big range hat would have gone sailing had it not been tied under her chin with buckskin strings. Usually she sang as she hurtled through space, but to-day the pintos missed her voice.

Five miles out on the range she overtook the sheriff and Aleck Douglas riding to the round-up. Aleck Douglas seldom rode faster than a jogging trot, and the sheriff was not particularly eager for his encounter with Tom Lorrigan. For that matter, no sheriff had ever been eager to encounter a Lorrigan. The Lorrigan family had always been counted a hazard in the office of the sheriff, though of a truth the present generation had remained quiescent so far and the law had not heretofore reached its arm toward them.

The two men looked back, saw Belle coming and parted to let her pass. Belle yelled to her team and went by with never a glance toward either, and the two stared after her without a word until she had jounced down into a shallow draw and up the other side, the pintos never slowing their lope.

“Well, I’m darned!” ejaculated the sheriff. His name, by the way, was Perry. “I’ve heard tell of Belle Lorrigan drivin’ hell-whoopin’ over the country with a team of bronks, but I kinda thought they was stretching the truth. I guess not, though, if that’s a sample.”

“The woman hersel’ is no so bad. ’Tis the men folk that are black wi’ sin. Drinkin’, swearin’, gamblin’ thieves they be, and ’tis well they should be taught a lesson.” The Douglas head wagged self-righteously.

“Maybe it would be a good idea to go back and search the ranch now, while she’s gone.” The sheriff pulled up, considering. “I didn’t want any trouble with her; I never do quarrel with a woman if I can get around it any way. She’s a holy terror. I guess I’ll just ride back and take a look at them hides.”

Aleck Douglas eyed him sardonically, thinking perhaps of the black-edged bullet hole that showed plainly in the sheriff’s hat-crown.

“’Tis a deal safer wi’ the woman oot of the way,” he agreed drily.

The sheriff nodded and turned back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NAME

Tom Lorrigan may have seen bigger fusses made over smaller matters than the hide of a spotty yearlin', but his boys never had.

No country is so isolated that gossip cannot find it out. The story of the spotted yearling went speeding through the country. Men made thin excuses to ride miles out of their way that they might air their opinions and hear some fresh bit of news, some conjecture that grew to a rumor and was finally repeated broadcast as truth. Children cringed and wept while necks were scrubbed relentlessly, for a fever of "visiting" attacked the women of the range. Miles they would travel to visit a neighbor. And there they talked and talked and talked, while the guest in neighborly fashion dried the dinner dishes for the hostess in hot, fly-infested kitchens.

Aleck Douglas, infuriated by the contemptuous attitude which Tom had taken toward him and his spotty yearling, and by his failure to find any incriminating evidence on the Devil's Tooth ranch, swore to a good many suspicions which he called facts, and had Tom arrested. The sheriff had taken two deputies along with him, because he fully expected that the Lorrigans would "go on the warpath" as Belle had done. He was vastly astonished and somewhat chagrined when Tom gave a snort, handed over his gun, and turned to one of his boys.

"Al," said Tom, "you go ahead with the round-up while I go in and fix this up. May take a few days—depends on the gait I can get 'em to travel. I'll have to rustle me a lawyer, too. But you know what to do; keep 'er moving till I get back."

Black Rim country talked and chortled and surmised, and wondered what made Tom so darned meek about it. They did not accuse him of any lack of nerve; being a Lorrigan, his nerve could scarcely be questioned. Opinion was about evenly divided. A few declared that Tom had something up his sleeve, and there would be a killing yet. Others insisted that Tom knew when he was backed into a corner. Old Scotty Douglas had him dead to rights, they said, and Tom knew better than to run on the rope. Men and women assumed the gift of prophecy, and all prophesied alike. Tom Lorrigan would go "over the road"; for how long they could only guess according to their secret hopes. Some predicted a fifteen-year term for Tom. Others thought that he might get off lightly—say with five or six years. They based their opinion on the fact that men have been sent to the penitentiary for fifteen years, there to repent of stealing a calf not yet past the age of prime veal. And it is not so long since men were hanged for stealing a horse; witness Tom's brother, who would surely have been lynched had he not been shot. Witness also divers other Lorrigans whose careers had been shortened by their misdeeds.

Much of the talk was peddled to Tom and the boys under the guise of friendship. Having lived all of his life in the Black Rim country, Tom knew how much the friendship was worth, knew that the Black Rim folk had drawn together like a wolf pack, and were waiting only until he was down before they rushed in to rend him and his family. Old grudges were brought out and aired secretly. It would go hard with the Lorrigan family if Tom were found guilty. Although he sensed the covert malice behind the smiles men gave him, he would not yield one inch from his mocking disparagement of the whole affair. He laid down a law or two to his boys, and bade them hold their tongues and go their way and give no heed to the clacking.

"The show ain't over till the curtain's down for good," he said, borrowing a phrase from Belle. "We got a long time yet to live in the Black Rim. We'll be right here when the smoke lifts. Hang and rattle now, and keep your mouths shut. This here's the law-sharp's job. I'm payin' him darn good money for it, too. When he's through, then we'll play. But mark this down in yore little red book, boys: The less yuh say right now, the stronger we can play the game when we're ready."

“If they do railroad yuh, dad, leave it to us. They’ll be a sorry looking bunch when we’re through,” said Lance, and meant every word of it.

“They won’t railroad me.” Tom snorted and laughed his contempt of the whole affair. “I ain’t ever used the law to fight with before—but shucks! When a scrap gets outside of gun range, one club’s about the same as another to me.”

Optimism is a good thing, but it does not altogether serve, as Tom discovered at the trial.

Evidence was produced which astonished him. For instance, an AJ man had seen him riding over by Squaw Butte, on the night after Douglas had accused him of stealing the spotted yearling. The AJ man seemed embarrassed at his sudden prominence in the case, and kept turning his big range hat round and round on one knee as he sat in the chair sacred to those who bore witness to the guilt or innocence of their fellow men in Black Rim country. He did not often look up, and when he did he swallowed convulsively, as though something stuck in his throat. But his story sounded matter-of-fact and honest.

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