

WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE'S

To Ride the River With

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SYNOPSIS

Ruth Chiswick of L C ranch, obsessed by fear of danger to her outspoken and bull-headed father, Lee, from a band of lawless rustlers headed by Sherm Howard, decides to save him by eloping with young Lou Howard, Sherm's son, and comes to the town of Tall Holt to meet him. While in Yell Sanger's store, a crook-nosed stranger enters, sizes up the situation, and when a drunken cowboy, Jim Pender, rides in and starts shooting, protects Ruth, while Lou Howard hides. Disgusted with Lou's cowardice, Ruth calls off the elopement, and sends the stranger for her father at the gambling house across the street. There the stranger, calling himself Jeff Gray, meets Morgan Norris, a killer, Curly Connor, Kansas, Mile High, Sid Hunt, and other rustlers, and Sherm Howard. Lee Chiswick enters, with his foreman, Dan Brand, and tells Sherm Howard of his orders to shoot rustlers at sight. Jeff Gray returns to Ruth and coldly reassures her of her father's safety.

CHAPTER II—Continued

"I'm grateful to you for your advice, sir, and I'm sure Father will be," she said, the sting of a small whiplash singing in her voice. He disregarded her jeer. Apparently he was as oblivious of her annoyance as he was of the pristine glamor of her vital youth.

"Bull-headed was the word you used," he went on evenly. "It suits Lee Chiswick fine. When Pender busted into the Golden Nugget, yore father was reading the riot act to a dozen scalawags waiting for the signal to cut loose at him."

"Whose signal?" she asked, the blood driven from her face.

"Seemed to be Sherm Howard's say-so. Get me right. I'm playing my own hand, and I don't give a cuss whether you smile or snap. I'll tell the old man his dear daughter is here, and you can feed him any story you've a mind to, at any time. If he goes back across the road and gets rubbed out, it is none of my business."

She had lorded it over boys with a high hand. That she could not break through his callousness irritated her. Surprisingly, she felt young and immature, was moved by an impulse to defend herself.

"I'm not ashamed of what I've done," she said, bridling. "That's nice. Tell him you came to town to buy a paper of pins."

"You're impudent."

"Am I?" He faced her anger with a long look of amused scorn, then turned away, insolently indifferent. The girl wanted to call him back, to lash out at him with pelting words that would sting, but she was aware that nothing she could say would penetrate his impassivity. His opinion of her had not been swayed by any personal pique.

Gray walked back into the gambling-hall.

Sanger had the floor. "Who did this, Curly?" he asked.

Curly pushed a hand through his black hair. "Couldn't tell you for sure, Yell. Half a dozen of us took a crack at him. He rode in asking for trouble and got it. Blazed away with his rifle and handed in his checks pronto. Maybe you better make yore verdict read, committed suicide while temporarily insane."

Norris volunteered information, slanting a sneer at Chiswick. "No objections anywhere, I reckon. We can be bullied just so far."

"No objections from me," Sanger agreed.

"Pender came in on my horse Black Diamond, so if you want to make the killing more legal you can claim he was a horse-thief," Curly suggested humorously.

"Or self-defense," Sanger amended seriously.

"Who cares how legal it was?" Norris said. "No four-flusher can come in here and hurrah me."

Dan Brand recognized this as a personal challenge flung at his employer. "Only a crazy fool would try, Morg," he answered amiably.

"You don't need to be carrying a chip on yore shoulder, Morg," Howard said, with a warning glance. "If there is rustling going on, we all want to back up Lee."

"Did you say 'if' there was any rustling?" Chiswick inquired, harsh irony in his voice.

Howard laughed without mirth. "You're hard to please, Chiswick. I don't pick my words like a professor. If you're not on the prod, as Brand claims, you sure have a funny way of being pleasant."

"Did I say I was aiming to be pleasant?" The cattleman let his hard gaze shift from Norris to Howard. "Someone ran off a bunch of 50 of my cows last night. If you expect me to grin and say, 'Help yourselves, boys,' you can have another guess. I'm going to fight."

"When a bull gets to pawing the ground he most generally gets accommodated," Norris insisted, not shifting his narrowed gaze from the owner of the LC.

"Shut up, Morg," interposed Curly affably. "Can't expect a man to sit quiet while he is being stole blind. Tell you what, boys. Some of us will be heading into the hills soon. We'll keep our eyes skinned. Like as not some of us will spot this bunch of L C stuff."

"I wouldn't wonder if some of you did," Chiswick said bluntly.

The cattleman turned to leave the saloon.

Gray stopped him with a gesture. "Just a moment, Mr. Chiswick."

"What you want?" the ranchman asked.

Gray lowered his voice. "There's a young lady over at Sanger's who says she is yore daughter. She would like to see you right off."

"My daughter? What's she doing here?"

"Better ask her."

The red-headed man had nothing more to say. He turned to the bar and ordered a schooner of beer. Chiswick and his foreman walked out of the place.

Out of the corner of his mouth Mile High said to his chief, "That's the guy I was telling you about."

Howard nodded. He observed that Curly was sauntering to the bar. So was Norris.

The big black-haired man gave an order to the bartender. "A Curly special."

Selecting a bottle, the man in the white apron pushed it across the top of the bar. Curly poured a drink and tossed it down his throat.

"Hot enough to melt the tallow

him to town because she was afraid he would get into trouble with the rustler group.

"I know, but—you're so bull-headed, Father!"

"Nothing of the kind," he protested hotly. "You wouldn't expect me to let these dirty thieves drive off a bunch of 50 cows at one crack without a squawk, would you?"

She shuddered. "When all those guns roared—"

"They weren't shooting at me, honey." His mind harked back to the reproof she needed. "You had no business coming to town—not to Tall Holt. We stay away from this place. You know that."

"You didn't."

"Dad gum it, girl, I'm your father. You don't have to tell me what-all I can and can't do." He slammed his fist down into the palm of the other hand. "You act like you rule the roost. Well, you don't. Not by a jugful. Understand?"

"Yes," she said, with more humility than was customary, since her mind was still full of the crazy thing she had done.

Ruth was still thinking of her escapade with Lou Howard. She could not understand how it had ever gone so far. She knew now that she did not love him, never had. That she had not seen through his shallow weakness earlier hurt her pride.

Later she knew she would flog herself with her own scorn. She was a lying little cheat for not telling her father the truth. But she dared not confess without preparing his mind first. It would be like Lee Chiswick to walk across to the Golden Nugget to have it out with Sherm Howard.

"We'll go over to Charley Wong's restaurant for supper," Lee Chiswick said. "Dan is waiting for us over there."

Back of the restaurant they found a bucket of water, a tin pan, a thin piece of dirty soap, and a roller-towel much the worse for use.

The cattleman called Wong. "This towel has half of Arizona on it, Charley. Bring a new one—and another piece of soap."

The Chinaman grinned. "Velly good," he said.

Inside the restaurant Dan Brand was waiting at a table in a corner. Across the aisle from him sat Gray.

Ruth touched the cattleman on the arm by way of calling his attention. "This is Mr. Gray, Father. When that drunk man came shooting into Sanger's store he looked after me."

"Looked after you—how?" asked Chiswick.

"Pushed me back of some sacks of potatoes and stood in front of me."

Chiswick offered his hand. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Gray. I reckon my daughter has thanked you, but I'll do it again."

"Nothing worth mentioning what I did, but she thanked me proper," the crook-nosed man said dryly.

"Since you haven't eaten yet, won't you join us?" the cattleman invited.

Gray moved to the other table. "My foreman, Dan Brand," Chiswick introduced. "Dan, this is Mr. Gray."

The two men shook hands, estimating one another with their eyes. Chiswick motioned Gray to the vacant chair beside his daughter.

They fell at first into casual talk of cows, grass, markets.

"Looks like a country of small ranches," Gray said presently.

"Yes," Chiswick confirmed. "Plenty rough in these hills. Cut up by gulches and canyons where nesters have settled."

"Your ranch is lower down?"

"Yes. Runs up from the Sweet Spring valley into the hills."

"From what I heard at the Golden Nugget I gather the L C is a big outfit."

"My brand is on a lot of stock—or was," the cattleman said grimly.

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The food is generally excellent

"Still is," Brand amended.

"I reckon." Anger flamed in Chiswick's tanned face. "Won't be long unless we can stop this big steal that is going on. A few of those rustlers will have to be strung up as a warning."

"Better not talk," advised Brand in a low voice.

"Why shouldn't I talk?" Chiswick demanded. "This is a free country, and I've never yet seen the color of the scoundrel's hair that could keep me from saying my mind."

"You don't mean red particularly, do you, Father?" Ruth asked, slanting impudent eyes at Gray. "Or do you?"

The cattleman smiled, ruefully. "Figure of speech, Mr. Gray. No, I don't mean red." He turned to his daughter. "You little minx."

"None of my business, Mr. Chiswick," Gray said bluntly. "But what Mr. Brand says is good medicine. Why talk any more? You've said yore little piece. I'm an outsider, and never saw one of those gents at the Golden Nugget before. But there were some present who didn't take yore remarks kindly. I am of opinion that the chuckle-headed false alarm who rode in and got filled with lead did you a considerable service."

"His chunk sure went out sudden," Brand commented. "I wouldn't say you're not right, Mr. Gray. While Lee was on the prod I didn't feel anyways lead immune myself. They're not bad boys, in a way of speaking, but they are some quick on the trigger."

"No, they're not bad," Chiswick replied scornfully. "Practically all of them are thieves, and some are killers, and a few have robbed trains and stages. Maybe 40 per cent of them have shot down Mexican vaqueros who were defending their masters' herds. But what is a Mexican here and there? Remember the Alamo! Yes, sir. Just a bunch of nice cowboys who take no pleasure in killing unless someone gets in the way of what they want."

The summit of Mule mountain had been a rag of fire in the sunset when they had gone into the restaurant. As they came out, Ruth noticed that the crochets between the peaks were lakes of imperial purple. Soor darkness would sift down from the hills.

"We're out of coffee and baking soda," Ruth told her father. "Better get some while we're here, don't you think?"

"Yes. Enough to last us till someone can get to Tough Nut. Anything else you need?"

"I'd like some nutmegs, and a box of matches."

Chiswick asked the foreman to get Ruth's cow-pony and tie it at the hitchrack with the other two. Gray walked with the father and daughter as far as Sanger's store.

"I'll be saying adios," he told them, and added, his ironic smile on Ruth: "Nice to have met up with you."

She said the pleasure was hers, said it very coolly, and turned into the store. The place was lit by two coal-oil lamps suspended from the ceiling. Near the rear something covered by a sheet lay on a cot. Ruth guessed that what was resting there so still had been roaring with drunken life less than an hour ago.

Two customers were in the store. One was a slim, graceful, fishy-eyed man, neatly dressed, with a silk bandanna tied loosely round his brown throat. His companion called him Morg. The other she had met at a dance. He was a fine figure of a man, slender and broad-shouldered, with black, curly hair that