

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 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, 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 forsmen, 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. At supper, Ruth introduces Jeff to her father and Brand. Coming out into the street, they are greeted by sudden gunplay. Lee is wounded, and Jeff Gray appears with a smoking revolver. Two days later, Ruth tells her father of her projected elopement and her disillusionment. Later, Ruth meets Jeff Gray, whom she thinks tried to kill her father. Ruth accidentally wounds Jeff. She takes him to Pat Sorley's camp. Ruth is incredulous of Jeff's story of shooting at the assassin rather than at her father, and later pleads with Lee to listen to him. When Lee arrives at Pat Sorley's camp, he finds only a note to Pat from Jeff. Meanwhile, Jeff rides into Tall Holt and sends word to Sherm Howard he wants to see him. He shows Howard a poster with his picture, with the name of Clint Duke, wanted as the leader of a band of outlaws. The rest of the poster and asks their confidence. They agree to allow him to stay. Another raid on the L C cattle causes Lee to line up his men in pursuit, and to send his son Frank to town to reconnoiter. Pat Sorley finds Gray's horse's hoofmarks on the trail with the suspected rustlers. Jeff calls on Frank and warns him Norris and Lou are threatening him. Frank receives a message that his father wants him at Sanger's, and despite warning, starts out. Shooting starts, and Gray helps Frank hold off the killers until he and Frank can escape. Arriving at L C ranch Frank tells of the ambush and of the part played by Gray.

**CHAPTER VI—Continued**

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Gray said: "Ready to leave town yet? Or am I still too big a liar to believe?"

"I don't know what you are," Frank answered. "Hadden't been for you they would have got me. But you fired the first shot at me."

"You were walking right into their ambush. I fired to stop you. Lucky for you. It started them up before you were close enough to hit in the darkness."

Frank was still suspicious and ashamed of it. "You disguised your voice when you talked with them in the barn."

"So I did. I'm staying here. Would you want me to yell out my name to them?"

"You saved my life. No two ways about that. At the risk of your own."

"Oh, hell!" Gray said. "You're such a fool someone has to look after you. . . . Where is your horse?"

"At the Alamo corral." "Then get down there and saddle. Hit the trail for the L C—quick as you can."

The younger man agreed. "I'm much obliged," he added gruffly. "I won't forget it."

Gray watched him go, then cut across to the main street and joined those who were hurrying to the fire. He saw the roof of the barn crash in as he climbed over the wall.

His gaze swept the crowd. He caught sight of Morgan Norris and joined him.

"How'd the fire start?" he asked. Norris slid a look at him. "How would I know?"

"Thought maybe you were among those here early," Gray said lightly. It was important for him to find out whether he had been recognized by the ambushers. He thought not, since in the darkness he had not known any of them. But he had to be sure.

"No, sir, I wasn't."

The eyes of Norris were slits of shining light. This business tonight had got out of hand, and he had to watch his step. He had started out to kill one man, not three. Now there would be war to a finish with the L C outfit. Lee Chiswick would not rest until he had avenged the death of his son and the other two riders.

"Thought I heard some shooting," Gray said guilelessly. "I was down at Ma Presnall's fixing to turn in when things began to pop."

"I reckon some drunk was punctuating the scenery," Norris said, watching his words. "Me, I was playing seven-up with some of the boys."

"Likely some lad was bedding down in the hay and lit it from his cigarette," Gray suggested.

"Might be that way. If so, hope he got out."

"Time this town had a fire department," the red-headed man mentioned. "If a fire started when the wind was blowing hard, the whole main street would go."

"So it would," Norris agreed indifferently. "But I got no chips in this town's real estate."

A vaquero known as Kansas sidled up to them.

"Fire's burnin' out," he said to Norris.

Gray read fear in the man's shifty eyes. He decided that Kansas had

been one of those involved in the attack. Like Norris, he had been appalled at the swiftness with which three men had been wiped out so horribly. To shoot men was one thing; to burn them up another.

"Morg and I were just hoping nobody got caught in there," Gray told the cowboy.

The startled eyes of Kansas stabbed at Norris. "Why would there be anybody in there?" he asked hoarsely. "You don't figure that—that?"

"We don't figure a thing," Norris answered, his cold gaze fixing Kansas. "Crook-Nose here allowed that maybe someone sleeping in the hay might have lit it from a cigarette."

"Gray is the name, if you're meanin' me," the red-headed man drawled gently.

"That's right." The young killer's words dripped malice. "Clint Gray, isn't it?"

"No, sir. Nor Jeff Doke. Jeff Gray would be right. I'm a little particular about my name, Mr. Norris." The steady gaze warned the other that he was treading on dangerous ground.

"Call yoreself Paddy Ryan or John L. Sullivan for all I care," Norris said, his laugh insolently offensive. "Well, the show's over. I'm headin' back to the seven-up game. You comin' along, Kansas?"

Gray watched them go. "That's two of them," he thought. "Lou Howard is probably another."

He walked up the main street to the Golden Nugget and sat in at a poker game.

Sherm Howard slammed a big fist down on the table in front of him.

"Never saw anything more crazy in my life. That's no way to get a man—lie in wait for him right here in town so Lee Chiswick will know



"A fellow who calls himself Jeff Gray saved my life."

some of us must have done it. Couldn't some of you have bushwhacked him out on his own range? On top of that, you bump off three men instead of one. Bad medicine, Morg. These aren't the old days. We got to be more careful what we do. And you're not satisfied with shooting. You've got to burn 'em to death, like you were a bunch of Apaches."

"Ride yore son Lou," Norris said sulkily. "He was in it deep as any of us."

"I'll ride you all. It was the most foolish thing I ever heard of white men doing. We'll never hear the end of it. Were you all drunk?" demanded Sherman Howard.

"Not drunk. We'd been drinking some," Norris explained resentfully. "Not our fault three of them got caught. We laid for young Chiswick. The other two popped up out of nowhere. Nobody knows who they were. They got what was comin' to them for buttin' into a game where they weren't invited."

"We didn't aim to burn 'em," Lou Howard whined. "We told them to come out so as we could arrest Frank Chiswick."

"Arrest nothing," Norris said, snarling at young Howard. "We aimed to put him outa business. You egged us on because you were sore as a toad on a skillet account of his having whopped you. What's the use of lying among ourselves?"

"You're whistling right we meant to rub him out," Kansas admitted despondently. "But like Lou says, we didn't mean to burn him. The idea was to blast him as he walked up to Sanger's from the boarding-house. And we didn't figure on the two other guys who busted in and took chips."

"When did they come to town?" Sherman Howard snapped, his superabundance of stomach overflowing the table as he leaned forward

accusingly. "Who saw them after they got here? Does anyone know who they were?"

"I wouldn't know the answer to any of those questions, Sherm," answered Norris, sulkily defiant. "Better ask Lou. It was his party. Maybe he knows."

The opaque eyes of the older Howard rested on his son, not without contempt. It was plain that Lou was sweating fear. Maybe he had better get him clear out of this part of the country before he broke down. That could be arranged later. Just now he would send him up into the hills. The big man brought his mind back to the immediate business of the day.

"Mighty funny about these two mysterious L C men," he said, thinking aloud. "What did they come here for? Where did they leave their mounts?"

"Search me," Kansas replied. "I didn't see but one of 'em."

"How do you know there were two? Who saw the other? Did you, Morg?" challenged Howard.

"Sure I saw him. He was in the barn. Up in the loft. Saw him when we rushed the stairs." Norris rubbed tenderly the side of his head, where he had been pistol-whipped during that rush. To him it seemed that the loft had been full of defenders.

"But you don't know who he was?" "No, I don't. It was black as a manzanita gulch in the dark of the moon. No way of telling who was roosting up there."

"Hmp! Something here I don't get. Looks like Lee Chiswick has a card up his sleeve."

A knock sounded on the door. Sherm Howard barked, "Come in!"

Jim Reynolds, owner of the Alamo corral, walked into the room. He was a short, thickset man with slanted eyebrows that always seemed to be asking a question. He nodded a casual greeting.

"Just happened to be passing, Sherm," he said. "Don't know as it's important, but I thought I'd let you know young Chiswick has left town."

After Reynolds had gone, the big man turned on the others with bitter sarcasm. "Now we don't know where we are at. You're a fine bunch of warriors. Arbuttle hands, I would say. Why pack guns at all? Better shuck them and go back to Kansas and Iowa. All four of you plugging at this Chiswick and he gets off scot free. You'd better find out soon as you can about the other two fellows who were with Frank. Maybe they're getting sore sides laughing at you. Was there a back door to this stable?"

"No, there wasn't" Norris said, sullenly. "I don't see—"

He stopped, a sudden gleam of light in his smoky eyes.

"Well?" asked Sherm.

"They kept making a noise upstairs in the loft—some kind of pounding." Morg Norris ripped out a vicious oath. "I'll bet they knocked a hole in the dobe wall and got away."

"Sounds reasonable," jeered their leader. "You boys were having such a good time at the fire you never thought to watch the back of the barn."

"Why should we, Sherm, when there was no door and no window?" Kansas protested.

"What did you figure the hammering was about—that they were making toys to play with?"

"We didn't know. Looked like we had them trapped and we were watching the front door for the time when they made their break." Kansas added a heartfelt wish: "Hope you're right, Morg. I'm no Injun. I'd hate to think I was anyways responsible for those men being burnt."

"All right. Go find out the facts," ordered Howard.

Twenty minutes later his men reported that there were no bodies in the ashes and that a hole had been knocked in the stable wall.

**CHAPTER VII**

Frank Chiswick swung from the saddle stiffly.

"How's every little thing?" his brother Bob asked.

"All right with me." "Anything doing at Tall Holt?" "Plenty. Where's the old man?" "In the house writing a letter."

Frank unsaddled and turned his horse into a pasture.

"Better come along and listen to my story," he said.

From a kitchen window Ruth saw her brothers and followed them into the office. She heard her father's booming greeting.

"Lo, Frank," she said. "You haven't changed much. We still have the same old cat."

"You came mighty near not having the same old brother," he told her with a grin.

"Had trouble, did you?" Lee inquired.

"Some. Maybe it was my own fault. I had a fight. I've been shot at several times. I was cornered in a hayloft when the stable was on fire. A fellow who calls himself Jeff Gray saved my life."

The family stared at him. This category of adventures struck them dumb for a moment.

"Sit down, son, and tell it," his father suggested after he had found speech.

When Frank reached in his narrative the fight with Lou Howard, his sister cut in sharply.

"I told you to leave him alone—that it was my fault as much as his," she scolded. "Now you've made more trouble."

"Sorry it came out that way," Frank said, in penitent justification. "He was bragging around how he jilted you. It came to me from two different people. One was Ma Presnall. I thought I ought to stop it."

"You did right, son," his father approved. "I hope you whopped him good."

"He wouldn't fight—not to amount to anything," Frank said simply. "But I marked him up considerable. I reckon he made up his mind to have me rubbed out and took that killer Morg Norris in with him. They had two or three others along."

"Along when?" Bob asked. "When they ambushed me."

"You recognized Howard and Norris," Lee said, his eyes blazing with excitement.

"No, I didn't. No time for that. Jeff Gray warned me they were intending to bushwhack me."

Lee Chiswick's face was a map of bewilderment. "Jeff Gray! Why would he help you?"

"I don't know. I never did find out."

"Then what?" Ruth asked tensely. Frank told his story.

"Son, I ought never to have sent you to town alone," exclaimed Lee. "I knew there were a lot of bad hombres in that bunch of rustlers, but I didn't think they would go so far as to try to burn a boy to death. Well, I've had my lesson. I might have known that any outfit bossed by Sherm Howard would be rotten. About this fellow Gray. I don't get him at all. We no sooner get him pegged for a double-crossing scoundrel than he up and goes into the fire for you. What's his game? Who in time is he?"

"Two or three times I heard that he was an outlaw wanted in Texas for robbing a train," Frank said. "Name of Clint Duke, it was claimed. He's in with Howard's gang somehow. When we were in the barn he changed his voice so they wouldn't know who he was."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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