

# WHISPERING ROCK

by JOHN LEBAR



**TWELFTH INSTALLMENT**  
After the noon meal Ruth had returned to the remains of the old adobe and was mourning over a mess of mud and clothes, when she was startled by the sound of an automobile. She could hardly believe her eyes when she saw a fine-looking machine climb out of the gulch. Visitors were not common on the Dead Lantern.

There were two men in the car which approached the ranch house. Before it stopped, and just as Ruth had started to walk in that direction, Snavelly rode out of the brush along the southern bank of the gulch, his horse on a dead run. Ruth paused and watched him bring his mount to a sliding stop by the machine.

"What d'you want?" his voice shrilled at the men in the car. One of the men replied, talking for some time, but his voice was low and Ruth could not understand. "Hell, no! We don't want nothin' to do with that—" Snavelly swung his arm back and pointed along the road—"There's th' way out of this place, stranger!"

"How do you do?" smiled Ruth, as she came up to the other side of car. The two men turned their heads in quick surprise, then smiled with pleasure.

"Are you Mrs. Warren?" asked the older man, lifting his hat. "Yes—won't you gentlemen come up to the house?"

"Why—er—thank you"—he half turned his head in Snavelly's direction—"My name's Parker of the Triangle T, and this is Mr. Harvey, our attorney. Your neighbor, Mr. Thane, thought perhaps you people might be interested in a cattle proposition—"

"Oh, I'm sure we should!" The three went to the ranch house porch where Snavelly joined them after tying his horse to a mesquite. The girl introduced him. He grunted, did not offer to shake hands and seated himself at one side.

"You see, Mrs. Warren," began Parker, "the triangle T is changing hands—do you know of the ranch?"



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"I'm afraid not," smiled the girl. "Don't make any difference," observed Parker. "We're on on the Mexican line about twenty-five miles east. Well, as I said, the ranch is changing hands. The man who bought it is going to do differently than I've always done. He intends to make a feeder ranch out of it, using Mexican stock—ah—do you see what I mean?"

"Well, no—I'm rather new to this business," said Ruth.

"Don't make any difference—he's going to buy cheap cattle and feed them to sell. The point is, he isn't going to breed Herefords and he won't pay me for the cattle already on the place—I mean he don't want them for breeding—he'll take all my steers and beef stuff, but you can see that good young cows and registered bulls are worth more than so much a pound—they're producers. Now, the man I'm selling to, Jesus Travina, don't care about that sort of stock. I was telling Charley Thane about it and he wants ten of my bulls and he said you people—"

Parker glanced from the girl to Snavelly and then back at the girl. "He thought you people might be interested in doing something. So I was taking Mr. Harvey, here, back to town, I just thought I'd drop in and see you."

"But," said Ruth, "just now we haven't much cash. We'd have to ask for time in which to pay—we'd have to pay out of the earnings the cattle bring us."

Parker nodded. "That often happens in the cattle business," he smiled. "But if I can make eight per cent on my money, I shan't be in too great a hurry to get the principal. If you like, we can draw the note to come due next November—after the fall selling. But if you're at all pressed I'll extend it to the spring selling. Even if I had to wait until a year from this next November, it would be better for me than to sell the stock for what I can get now. The ranch here would be my security, of course."

"I'm opposed to that!" Snavelly leaned forward. "I don't go putting up my interest on no such proposition as that."

For some time no one spoke. "Well, said Ruth at last, "I have no objection to risking my three-quarter interest in the ranch for as many cows and bulls as you'll give me for it."

Mr. Harvey, the lawyer, lifted his brows at this statement—as a general thing partners agreed.

Parker turned to the attorney. "It would be legal for Mrs. Warren to offer her interest even though Mr. Snavelly does not wish to offer his, wouldn't it?"

"Why, yes, it would be legal; it can be done. However"—he studied Snavelly—"it will be a rather unique state of affairs. Should the cattle come on the ranch they will increase the value of the ranch and likewise the value of the partnership interests. In other words, Mrs. Warren would be increasing Mr. Snavelly's property for him, while Mr. Snavelly, in refusing to offer his share as security, would be contributing nothing to the welfare of the partnership. However," he turned to Parker as though he had seen enough of Snavelly, "I think Mrs. Warren's note will be sufficient."

An hour later the machine was disappearing into the gulch and Ruth Warren had mortgaged her entire interests in the Dead Lantern ranch.

Snavelly came up behind her. What you jest done was ag'in' my advice, Mrs. Warren. Don't expect me to do nothin' if things don't turn out like you figger."

Ruth smiled. "Certainly, I understand. But you were there when Mr. Parker and I went over the situation—I know and you know the water is a little scanty, but if things don't go too badly I may even be able to pay off the note next November. I hope I shall, but if not, he agreed to give me a year."

"Seems like you're talkin' a lot about yourself," he replied tensely. "You talk like this was your ranch."

"I didn't mean it that way," answered Ruth lightly.

The look on Snavelly's face brought Ruth back to earth with a jerk. For a moment she thought he was going to leave her without speaking, but her relief was short-lived. Do you know somethin'? I come by the deep tank in the south pasture on my way home this mornin'. Well, it washed out last night—that's what it did. The water in that represa's gone to hell this minute. Them other shallow ones won't last two weeks! For a moment, his glinting eyes played over her sardonically. With a short laugh he walked to his horse and, mounting, rode away.

On the day after the cattle deal had taken place, Ann was not in the kitchen when Ruth arose. Neith-

er was she in her room. Nothing in the kitchen appeared to have been touched since the evening before, nor was the fire lighted. She built the fire. Soon Snavelly came to the door.

"Where's Ann?" "I'm sure I don't know; I thought perhaps she had to do something outside before breakfast and hadn't come in yet."

"Did you look in her room?" "I didn't look—I opened the door and called."

"Huh!" Snavelly went to Ann's room and returned shortly. "Her bed ain't been slept in—she's gone ag'in."

"Why, what do you mean?" "Bout every two months or so Ann goes away for a spell—don't know where. Well, you can get me somethin' to eat, I reckon."

For five days Ruth was cook on the Dead Lantern, and of the fifteen meals, twelve of them consisted of Mexican beans and boiled sundried beef.

On the morning of the sixth day Ann was in the kitchen when Ruth entered.

"Why, hello, Ann! When did you get back?"

"Last evenin'."

"I didn't hear you come in."

"No, Mrs. Warren."

"Where have you been, Ann?" "I've been away," answered the huge woman quietly.

Ruth said nothing more. The cattle had come—a long, winding river of brown and white flowed into the north pasture. There, the six Triangle T cowboys allowed them to spread out of their own choosing. A great hunting of cow for calf began. Each cow appeared to have lost her calf and each calf bawled as though it had lost two mothers. The calves, temporarily orphaned, made little effort toward reunion; they stood uncertainly on their limber legs and bawled to the world at large, while their mothers, sniffing, lowing, trotting nervously here and there, sorted them out. As soon as a family was united there were mutual sniffings and lickings; the bawling ceased and the cow led her offspring quietly away to graze.

When it seemed certain that every cow had found her calf, Snavelly, with the Mexican cowboys, rounded up the new bulls and drove them towards the home ranch corral. Ruth and David followed behind. The girl was deathly afraid of those twenty-two monsters. A cow seemed more of a pleasant creature—at least it loved its calf, and looked over the meadows with a rather satisfied, friendly expression. But those great lumbering bulls—a rolling avalanche of unfriendly power, as they plodded forward, singing their individual battle challenges deep in their throats. But the girl took a tremendous pride in them; it didn't seem possible that such a weak insignificant thing as herself could own those huge animals. Of course, Snavelly owned a quarter of them, legally; nevertheless, they were her bulls. And they were valuable—to lose one or two might mean the difference between meeting her note and not meeting it.

After the bulls had been driven into the smallest of the interconnecting corrals on the home ranch, they were forced, one at a time, to enter a narrow runway which opened out into the pasture. Just before a bull reached the open end of this runway and just as he was congratulating himself on his escape, a bar shot across in front of his nose, another was placed immediately behind him and he was a prisoner. The walls of the runway were already pressing his sides, and now three men took hold of a long lever with the result that one of the walls swung inward, holding the entire bull as though a great hand had closed upon him. A large animal can thus be doctored or branded with least danger to all concerned, particularly to himself.

Before the first of the bulls had been released, Ruth Warren appeared among the surprised cowboys at the branding fire with a bucket of white paint she had found in the barn.

"Wait, before you let him loose," she called to the man by the nose bar.

"What's the matter?" asked Snavelly.

"Well," said Ruth, "you see—how are we going to keep track of the bulls? I mean, suppose we do ride in the pasture and count them, they'll be so scattered that by the time we've counted the same one twice, and that maybe one is gone."

"Can't you tell by looking at an animal whether you've counted him before or not?" "Frankly, I can't. They all look alike to me."

"What do you aim to do with that paint?" "I'll show you!" Before Snavelly could protest,

Ruth ran forward and drew a numeral one on the animal's side, two feet high. "See," she called triumphantly, "now all we have to do is check their numbers on a piece of paper—we can't go wrong." Snavelly looked pityingly at Ruth, then turned away; the old cowman was too disgusted to speak. It seemed incredible to him that any

one could look at a bull—and not remember him as one remembers the face of a man.

Continued Next Week

Correct this sentence: "The thing that prompts me to let the women have their way," said the man, "is chivalry."

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