



ELEVENTH INSTALMENT
SYNOPSIS: Slim Loyale is paroled from prison after serving 18 months for a crime he did not commit. He returns to his Circle L ranch to find his father dead and sinister forces at work, trying to make him violate his parole so that he can again be railroaded to prison.

The Brockwells and their gang are plotting to gain possession of Circle L ranch and the property of Mona Hall, a neighbor and life-long friend of Slim Loyale.

Slim discovers that Sheriff Starbuck has joined the plot against him. With the help of Dakota Blue and his cowboys, Slim Loyale defies the landgrabbers to do their worst.

Even Starbuck himself began to realize the futility of things. He also began to retreat slowly, throwing lead steadily at those mocking, fiery flashes. Dakota singling him out, closed in. At ten paces, he shouted, "Starbuck, yuh crooked rat, this way. It's Blue who's callin' yuh."

Starbuck twisted in his saddle, snarling and flung two lightning shots. One drew a crimson brand across the side of Dakota's neck. The other socked heavily into one of the bucking rolls of Dakota's saddle.

Dakota let loose one careful shot. Starbuck gasped, his snarling curses cut short abruptly. His guns thudded to the dusty earth. He loaded both hands about the horn of his saddle, his shoulders hunched, his bitter face draining white.

He drove home the spurs, trying to ride past Dakota. But the first

frenzied leap of his mount sent him swaying. Quite suddenly, he slithered head foremost from his saddle.

Instantly Dakota also swung to the ground, leaping apart from his bronco, crouching low. He knew that a hail of lead would be searching for him. In that he was right. The animal he had just left collapsed in its tracks, shot through the head. Dakota went flat on the ground, alert and waiting.

Lead whispered over and around him, one slug kicking his eyes full of dust. Still he held his fire, gambling that without Starbuck to lead them the remaining members of the posse would break and run for it.

In this he was also right. Realizing that their leader was down, the posse gave back faster and faster then finally turned and thundered away into the night. For a time Steve Owens and Charley Quinn warmed them on their way with the Winchester. But presently Slim's voice, calling out, stopped all shooting.

Slim came through the darkness warily. "Dakota, yuh all right?" he called.

"Sittin' pretty, Slim," was the laconic answer. "They've all sloped. Bring the boys out, I've got Starbuck."

Slim exclaimed in surprise "Leo Brockwell's back in the corral," he vouchsafed, as he came up. "Tisdale stopped a slug somewhere, but it can't be very bad; he's still cussin'." He raised his voice to a shout. "Hi, gang come on over. They've pulled out."

Tisdale was the first to reach them. "Got a furrow from my

wrist plumb to my elbow," he explained with profane punctuations. "She's bleedin' some, but I've got my neckerchief wound around it. It'll keep for a time."

Steve, Charley and Oscar reported, unhurt, except that Oscar had one boot heel shot off. He walked with a queer hitchy-hop that caused Steve to chuckle. "Ole step-an'-a-half Oscar."

As Dakota scratched a match and bent over Starbuck, he was surprised to see that Starbuck's eyes were open. The sheriff groaned. "Listen close," he whispered. "I'm done for an' I know it. Don't hold it agin yuh, Blue, yo're a pretty good man."

"Time was when I was a square-shooter myself. But the glitter of money an' a lot of slick talk made a sucker outa me. However, I am to get some of the dirt off my shriveled soul. I ain't got long but I'll do my best."

"Loyale, yuh were railroaded on perjured evidence. Arthur — George Arthur, he's got all the dope. Get a hold of him an' make him talk. He's a coward, an' he'll come clean. An' yuh better skin out to town. Sarg Brockwell an' some more of his crowd are aimin' to rob the bank tonight. Arthur's idee — to keep yuh from loanin' money to the Hall girl."

"Arthur an' Brockwell been runnin' this thing. Schemed to make a cleanup on them Big Bend herds. But they made a mess of things, an' got me into it. Leo Brockwell's the man who's been holding up the Vasco stage." His voice turned drowsy and plaintive. "I'm cold — cold as hell. Get me a blanket, somebody."

Steve Owens, subdued and a little awed, ran into the bunkhouse. But when he returned with a blanket, there was no need for it.

Slim Loyale made swift decision on the information Starbuck had given before he died. The bank hold-up did not exactly surprise Slim; for that matter, none of the information did. But it rendered his position all the more secure, to know that his conjectures had been right.

He had guessed that an attempt might be made to loot the bank. For that reason he had detailed Roy O'Brien and Stoney Sheard to guard it. But he knew the odds would now be greatly against them. They would need help, ferocious fighters though they were. So Slim turned to Dakota.

"Yuh an' me go to town, as quick as we can get there, Dakota," he snapped tensely. "Tisdale, yuh stay here an' let Oscar fix up that arm of yores. Steve an' Charley get some lanterns an' clean up things around here. But keep yore guns handy. There's no tellin' but what that crowd, bein' desperate, might make another try. Grab a bronc, Dakota."

Dakota's own horse was dead, but he soon secured another, as there were several riderless ones stamping and snorting around. In a fast, ground-eating gallop, he and Slim headed for town.

Slim knew human nature, and he knew that unless this full exoneration was made, there would always be some who would believe his incarceration had been legitimate. The only way to completely wipe out that stain against him was to get that confession from Arthur. Slim's face was grim as he considered it. He'd get what he wanted if he had to resort to Apache tricks to do it.

When Slim and Dakota reached Pinnacle, it was after midnight. The town seemed quiet enough. However, they took no chances, circling well around to one side and leaving their mounts ground-reined some two hundred yards away from the town limits. They went the rest of the way on foot, stealing in through the shadows carefully.

"Roy an' Stoney will be somewhere close to the bank," but by this time Brockwell an' his crowd are in town an' on the watch.

Best thing we can do is just lay out quiet here in this alley and wait developments. What d'yuh think?"

Dakota grunted assent. So they squatted down, their backs against a friendly wall close to the mouth of the alley. From time to time Slim would stick a careful head around the corner and survey the street. The bank was some fifty yards away, on the opposite side. Two doors from it was a cantina. The windows of the Mexican joint glowed yellow and there were quite a few broncos slouching at the hitching rail in front.

"Brockwell an' his gang are in that greaser joint," observed Slim softly. "I recognize that buckskin hoss of Cinder Alton's. Hope Roy an' Stoney don't take any chances with Alton. That crooked little devil is poison with a gun."

"I wouldn't do any worryin' about them two," answered Dakota. "They know Alton as well as we do. The first lead they throw will be heided his way. Wonder when they'll pull the job?"

"Most any time now. The town is pretty daid. I reckon they're figurin' on doin' it plenty quiet. They won't have an alibi in the world, should they get caught at it. Knowing this, Brockwell will play his cyards careful."

"Won't do him no good," chuckled Dakota. "He's gonan get caught. But somethin' tells me that he won't have no use for an alibi anyhow. Them things don't mean a darn to a daid man."

"Yuh must expect Roy an' Stoney to sorta spread a lot of destruction," observed Slim. "Roy's good, but Stoney is forked lightnin'." grunted Dakota. "Yuh've never seen him in action like I have, Slim. I tell yuh, hes' a holy terror. He ain't got those quiet cold eyes for nothin'. Besides yuh an' me oughta come in handy ourselves. Dakota yawned and stretched. "Wish they'd get started," he grumbled. "I'm gettin' sleepy and cold."

Silence fell and endured unbroken for a long hour. Dakota's head had sunk upon his chest and he was snoring softly. Slim was having trouble in keeping awake himself. The let-down in nervous tension, after the long day of momentous happenings, found him weary. Several times his head began to nod, his eyelids growing weighty.

And then, like a thunderclap, a single report echoed down the street. Following it came a shrill, yammering, high-pitched yell. A pair of guns began a staccato rumbling, in such cadence that it was easy to tell that one man with a practised pair of hands was wielding them.

Thump! thump! Thump-thrump! Thump-thrump!

Slim and Dakota were on their feet in a bound, guns drawn, poised in the alley opening. The measured roll of those first reports was now shattered to bits by a ragged roar of other gunfire. Slim saw shadowy figures darting about the bank in what appeared to be aimless confusion.

Then a stentorian yell echoed in a voice easily distinguishable as belonging to Sarg Brockwell. "Close in! Close in! There's only two of 'em. Close in, I tell yuh!" By the answering massing of those shadowy figures, Slim got Stoney Sheard and Roy O'Brien located. They were beyond the bank in the corral of the livery stable.

"C'mon," he snapped to Dakota. "They got Stoney an' Roy cornered."

Slim and Dakota went up the street at a run. With half the distance gone, Slim halted and began to shoot. Dakota stepped apart from him and followed suit. Someone in Brockwell's crowd yelled a warning. Immediately Slim and Dakota became the center of a lashing hail of lead. Dakota Blue grunted, cursed and went down in a heap.

Behind Slim came a bawl of warning. "Get him inside! Get him inside, Slim. I'll help yuh."

The next moment, fat Spud Dillon, still encased in white bartender's apron, was bending over Dakota, tugging at his shoulders.

"It's my right laig," snapped Dakota through set teeth. "Get me up, Spud, an' I can hobble inside. Give 'em hell, Slim, an' back up with us."

Quick to grasp the idea, Slim shot with smooth precision, backing up a step at a time. Just as his guns snapped empty, his shoulders struck the wall of a building. Then hands grabbed him, jerked him to one side and through an open doorway. The door slammed shut. He and Dakota were inside the Wild Horse Saloon. Old Joe Rooney was the man who had guided Slim to safety.

As Slim began hurriedly reloading his guns, Spud barked an order. "Git my old double-barreled Greener, Joe, an' fasten yoreself to that front window. Spray those buzzards by the bank with buckshot. That's keep 'em shuffed up."

It did. With the initial bellow of the shotgun, Brockwell's crowd scattered wildly. Slim, edging in beside Rooney, snapped shot after shot at this one and that. He saw two of them go down. From the livery stable-coral came a whoop of triumph and a sputter of words thick with the brogue of old Ireland.

"Whurroo! Give it to the spalpeens! Away with 'em the robbin' murderin' devils. Smoke 'em out." Surprised and confused, the bandit crowd were quick to realize that there was nothing to be gained by trying to fight matters out along this line. Any chance of looting the bank was entirely gone now.

In another minute or two, the entire town would be about their ears. The only thing to do was ride and ride fast. As the idea caught hold, they raced for their horses which were rearing and plunging with fright. They split, some riding north, and some south.

In the lead of those passing the

Wild Horse, came Cinder Alton, crouched low over his buckskin's neck. Slim tried two shots, but missed both. Joe Rooney calmly spat, cradled the Greener against his shoulder and pulled both triggers.

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