

CHAPTER XIV

"Lee! Lee! It's Virginia! I'm coming!"

Her piercing call beat at the solid barrier as she began to dig frantically, but a few seconds showed her helplessness. She jumped to her feet and ran fleetly back to the entrance, remembering those riding men.

"Ssst!"

The warning sibilance brought her up sharply, almost at the tunnel's mouth. There was a rustle in the scrub out there, and Slanty Gano lurched through.

"Shut up!" he said savagely.

She backed hastily away, sick with a new terror. Slanty Gano knew that Lee was back there, and he meant to kill her if she gave an alarm. Huge paws caught and dragged her, hot breath was on her neck as she twisted her head away for the one sure thing that would bring those riding men at top speed, a woman's frantic screams.

They ripped through the air like knives, keen with mortal terror, choking out as brutal hands gripped her throat. But she had done it.

"Help! Lee! Lee!"

From the far side of the ridge answering yells came.

Slanty stopped only long enough to fling her from him as

he leaped for the shelter of the scrub.

A little later men were digging and scooping with anything they could find.

That night a group of men rode into Turkey Gulch toward the light of a campfire, carrying a prisoner with them. On the other side of the fire a man was being lifted to his feet. A ghostly figure, swathed in bandages, gaunt and hollow-eyed. A dead man risen.

"That's the man," said Lee Hollister. "Lawler didn't have anything to do with it."

There was a stir toward Slanty, but Lee had not finished. His voice was low, but they heard it.

"First I'll take that knife you were using, back there in the Bonanza tunnel."

The knife had been taken away from Slanty, but someone produced it and handed it over.

"Open it."

Curly complied, showing two wicked looking blades. One of them was broken at the tip. Francisco was helping Lee take a bit of folded paper from his pocket and opening it to show a triangular bit of metal. Curly laid the scrap against the broken blade.

It fitted. Slanty moistened his lips.

"Slanty Gano, I accuse you of the murder of Matt Blair."

A murmur ran through the group like a low growl, but Lee went on.

"I never believed that Matt committed suicide. When I came back I found that knife point, nearly hidden in a crack in the drawer of the desk where Matt worked."

Lee swayed, fighting weakness, but his tired voice went on.

"You shot Matt Blair as he lay asleep in his chair, with everybody gone to the barbecue, and then you fired a shot from his own gun and dropped it beside him."

"Now, Slanty, we'll hear your confession."

"Confess nothin'! What about the fella that's been payin' me? Ye don't dare go after him, Lee Hollister!"

"I'm going after him now," said Lee, and sagged suddenly between the men who held him.

A little later two processions left. One, silent and unsmiling, went toward the county seat. The other, with strong and gentle hands, carried Lee to the ranch house and Virginia, who waited for him.

Through the rest of the night, Lee lay in the heavy sleep of weakness, barely rousing when the doctor came or when cups of strong hot broth were fed to him.

Others tiptoed in and out. A little after midnight "Curly and Francisco came in."

Curly bent down and cautiously slid a flat packet under the pillow. "It's Lee's. Better tell him about it, Miss Virginia, as soon as he wakes up."

Toward morning news came. Slanty Gano, desperate, had taken the desperate way out.

"Pretended he was dozin' off," the messenger said, "and then busted out like a crazy man. Grabbed a deppity's gun, handcuffs and all, and went down shootin'."

Dawn found Lee awake, insisting that he was strong enough to get up. They let him sit up in bed first, and there he read the closely written sheets in the packet that Curly had brought the night before. They had been taken from Slanty Gano.

For some minutes after he had finished, he sat there looking bitter and tired. Then he roused himself and called Curly, hovering just outside the door.

"I'm ready. Get my clothes on me. I've got work to do."

They awaited him in Matt's office, summoned by Curly, one by one. Milton Bradish was there, vigilant and squared for any emergency. Stanley, alertly nervous but noting with relief that his car, commandeered the night before to get the doctor, was now in front of the door; T. Ellison Archer, looking flabby and scared, his vast dignity gone; Virginia was there as a matter of course, and also Joey.

Lee came in, hollow-eyed and bandaged, moving slowly.

"I've asked you all to come here because there's something that I want to say to you."

"That's all right, young man, but you're in no shape to do it yet," Bradish was briskly solicitous. "Give yourself a day or two to recover."

"I'm obliged for your consideration, but it comes a little late."

Bradish reddened. Steady eyes held him as Lee began.

"Three days ago a man who has been acting as your agent shot me, rifled my pockets of the deed to this ranch and carried me into Number One tunnel of the Bonanza mine, where he had set a blast to bury me safely until he could levy blackmail on you for a big sum and make his escape. He had you where he wanted you. No, you wait until I'm through."

"I came to before he left and heard the last things he said, giving away some matters that you already know and that I needed to. One of them was that he had dropped me down beside Matt Blair's real samples, the stolen ones that never got to the Assay Office. When he had gone I had just sense enough and time enough to crawl away from the blast, taking a chunk of that ore with me."

He held out a rough, pale yellow lump.

"Carnotite," he said briefly. "I don't need to tell you that."

"Yes," Bradish admitted calmly. "I was after the Bonanza, but you're wrong about my knowledge of the methods that Lawler and Gano used. It was purely a business matter. The gold pocket that started the rush years ago was found on Matt's claim, and we divided according to agreement. All that I struck on my claim was a lot of rubble and then a vein of stuff that cropped up all over. But we were looking for gold and it didn't mean anything to us. Years later, looking over some samples of radioactive ores, I remembered those deposits and suspected their value."

Bradish talked crisply and directly now, a man sure of himself and his methods.

"And it never occurred to you to go to Matt Blair and offer to finance him on a partnership basis?"

"Certainly not!" Bradish snapped it back impatiently. "Matt had lived with the thing under his nose for twenty-eight years without waking up to it. It was

his property, but my find. I made him an offer for the whole ranch—through an agent, of course—and got the answer that it wasn't for sale. At his death I repeated my offer to his daughter. In the meantime, by way of being on the ground, and because it runs right up to the Circle V line along Turkey Gulch, I bought in the Rancho Ceballos when the old man died and installed an agent there."

"Why," Lee's voice demanded, "when you put in your manager, did you pick out a crook like Slanty Gano?"

"We took Gano on," said Bradish crisply, "because he knew too much. He found us in Number Three tunnel, using picks and putting samples in our grub sacks. It couldn't be helped, but it was a bad move. Gano was a quarrelsome loafer who turned out to be a scoundrel and a murderer. Nobody regrets that more than I do, but I'm not responsible for his actions."

Lee was looking at Stanley and slowly opening a little sheaf of papers.

"There is one thing more. A few days ago you made accusations which no man can overlook. You got your information from Slanty Gano. There was a thousand dollar bill in his pocket when he was caught and we know where it came from. But there was also something else which Slanty had stolen from Matt Blair's desk the night he killed him."

"He told me of his own accord," said Stanley angrily, "that you were Blair's son and that he could prove it."

"If you showed him your money first, he'd tell you anything you wanted to hear. I'm not Blair's son. I'm not Virginia's brother, and Slanty knew it. I happen to be—yours. And I'm not proud of it."

A chair rasped. Bradish leaped forward, staring at Lee.

"My mother," said Lee steadily, looking straight at Bradish this time, "was Anita Ceballos, Don

Luis' daughter, the girl you married secretly when you were down and out and deserted when you saw better fortune within your reach."

"I didn't know," Bradish said heavily. "She never told me that there was a child. I give you my word of honor—"

"I'd rather you didn't. Honor didn't count when you deserted my mother. You don't have to explain any circumstances. They're all there."

He pointed to the papers under his hand. They lay in a time-yellowed drift on the desk.

Bradish arose. It was the slow, heavy move of a beaten man.

"All right," he said, his voice expressionless. "I suppose I had it coming to me."

Joey's voice cut in: "An' now ye kin go, Milt Bradish, because Lee lets ye go. There's yore car. Get in it quick, for if ye stay here another five minutes I'll throw a gun on ye myself!"

It was a silent going. Stanley reached the car first and slipped hurriedly into the driver's seat.

Bradish followed his son—the only son he dared own.

The engine throbbed, the car shot forward.

Silence came, and then the stir of relaxed tension. Lee raised his head, bent moodily as he had watched the fleeting car. Ling stood before him, looking like a benevolent old idol in weathered ivory.

"Breakfas', Lee?"

"That sounds good to me, Ling. Breakfast for everybody, the best you ever got. Maria will help you."

He waved a friendly hand to the men outside and walked slowly back. Virginia was beside him, wanting him to lean on her shoulder.

Joey lingered for a moment, with a gulp of emotion, and then he went out on tiptoe.

"It's over," Lee said in a tired voice. "Thank God. We're starting again with a clean slate. . . . Honey—come here!"

She came blindly, shaking under the release from days of intolerable strain. . . . "Oh my dear, my dear!"

The last whisper of the closing door left them alone.

THE END

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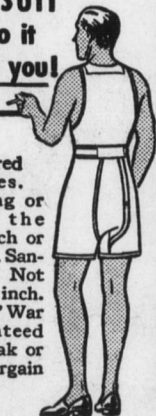
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Selected Shorts Admission 10c-25c

COMING—The Picture You've Been Waiting for—

"SWANEE RIVER"

LYRIC THEATRE

Saturday—

ACTION!



Richard Arlen Devine
DANGER ON WHEELS
PEGGY MORAN
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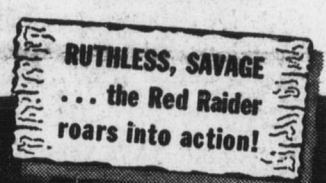
Cartoon - Serial

Comedy

Admission 10c-30c

Monday-Tuesday—

Next Week



RUTHLESS, SAVAGE
... the Red Raider roars into action!
GERONIMO!
with PRESTON FOSTER
ELLEN DREW
ANDY DEVINE
WILLIAM HENRY
Directed by Paul H. Sloan
A Paramount Picture

Sponsored by Senior Class Elkin High School

News - Cartoon

Admission 10c-30c

WEDNESDAY—FAMILY SHOW—

"LAUGH IT OFF"

Cartoon - Serial Admission 10c to All

THURSDAY—FRIDAY, APRIL 11-12—

LEAD AND LEGS RULED THE SIN CITY OF THE WEST!

