



FOURTEENTH INSTALLMENT

SYNOPSIS: Ruth Warren, living in the East, comes into possession of three-quarters interest in an Arizona ranch, left to her in the will of her only brother, reported to have died while on business in Mexico. With her ailing husband and small child she goes to Arizona to take possession, thinking the climate may prove beneficial to her husband's weak lungs. Arriving at the nearest town, she learns that the ranch, "Dead Lantern," is 85 miles across the desert. Old Charley Thane, rancher and rural mail carrier, agrees to take them to the "Dead Lantern" gate which was 5 miles from the ranch house. As they wearily walked past a huge overhanging boulder in a gulch in coming to the ranch house, a voice whispered, "Go back! Go back!" their reception is cool and suspicious. Snaveley and Indian Ann are the only occupants. They hear the legend of the gulch. Snaveley is difficult to understand but regardless, Ruth takes up the task of trying to adjust their three lives to the ranch and its development. Kenneth, Ruth's husband, caught in a chilling rain, contracts pneumonia and passes away before a doctor arrives. Ruth tries to carry on. She is not encouraged by Snaveley in plans to try and stock the ranch or improve it. She writes to her father in the East asking a loan with which to buy cattle. She receives no reply. Will Thane comes home to visit his father. . . . and Ruth meets him. A rancher nearby decides to retire and offers to sell Ruth and Snaveley his livestock on credit. Snaveley tries to balk the deal but Ruth buys to the limit of her three-quarter interest in the Dead Lantern ranch.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

Old Charley himself had remarked to Ruth that the rains began about the end of June. Snaveley had admitted that it might rain around the twenty-fourth of June before the real drought set in; but Ann, Don Francisco, Alfredo, and Magda had stated firmly that the rain would come in abundance beginning with the Day of San Juan.

It was now the twentieth of July and since the single storm of more than two months before, there had not been a cloud in the sky the size of a pigeon. The grass which had sprung up so brave and green after the storm was now withered and the color of broomstraw. The lacy leaves of the mesquite curled on drooping branches, dust laden; the broad, flat leaves of the prickly pear were shrunken and yellowish; small bushes were as brittle as glass, and the twigs and weed stems underfoot rustled like dry paper. The birds, rabbits, coyotes and lions had left the country—all was desolation. Rattlesnakes abounded.

Each morning the sun rose naked above the eastern mountains and as it rose a wave of stifling heat swept over the desert as though a mighty oven door had slowly swung open.

Ruth had rather expected rain on the Day of San Juan and, when that passed cloudless, felt that in a day or so she would see the clouds billowing over the mountains and smell the indescribable perfume of desert rain. As day succeeded day, each hotter, dryer, more hopeless than the preceding day, her anxiety increased—she seemed trapped in a corner while disaster crept relentlessly nearer. The increasing awareness of her responsibility drove her to assume more and more the control of the ranch. Before she well realized it she was giving the orders for the day's riding. Snaveley left everything to her. He rode out each morning but he rode alone and he returned alone.

Occasionally as she rode about the ranch, Ruth came across him. Sometimes he was riding casually up some canon as though he cared not where he went, as long as he had no company; again, she had seen him sitting in the shade of a scrubby live oak high upon a ridge top. Whenever she saw him these days Ruth had an odd, uncomfortable feeling that Snaveley was waiting for something.

One day she met Old Charley and Will as she was riding the southern boundary of the ranch. The two men came up to the fence and talked with her. That evening she told Snaveley that he ought to go to town for a wagonload of cottonseed meal which could be given to such cows as needed it badly. She also suggested that he get a certain brand of dried milk—much advertised in the cattle raisers' magazines—which, mixed with water, could be given to the underfed calves and the orphans.

Snaveley thought for a long time, then said he would go. It seemed to Ruth that there was an undercurrent of eagerness in his voice in spite of his objections to the trip. He stated the next morning with team and wagon, returning a week later with the load. He appeared oddly satisfied.

Now, whenever the riders found a weak cow with a starving calf or some calf without a mother, these animals were brought to the home ranch turned into the small horse pasture, and fed. Some sixty cows were receiving their daily ration of meal, and above the ranch house and corrals wandered a band of nine or ten orphaned calves whom Ruth was bringing up on the bottle.

The gulch had been fenced by the Mexicans under Ruth's direction; also all the ponds were now deep—and all but the one in the south pasture was bone dry. Half of the herd watered at this pond, the other half at the corral troughs on the home ranch. The corral troughs could only water this number. Very little wind came to turn the windmill which fed the tank by the corrals. Even after Alfredo had constructed a primitive hand pump, it usually meant three hours of back-breaking labor to raise the required amount of water.

And no signs of rain. Each day, as she returned from the south pasture, sometimes driving a weak cow, or even carrying a day-old calf across her saddle, the swifling fear in her heart increased. A hundred times a day she looked for clouds; if her riding took her near a hill she went to the top, eagerly scanning the new-made horizon.

She knew that the Mexicans were praying for rain—she had given them all the candles in the house for the sacred picture they had hung in the barn. And once she had entered the gulch after a calf, which had gone through the fence, and upon the rock she had found a grotesque little mud image holding a tiny pot of cornmeal. Ann did not reply when Ruth asked her about it; but the girl had come to know the footprints of the giants.

There came a day when the water in the south pasture had shrunk to a thin sheet of wet mud. Then Ruth knew that the end had come; with the full herd trying to water at the home ranch where there was barely enough for half, there could be only one result. If no rain came within a week the cattle would begin dying by dozens.

For the last few days as she watered the water so reluctantly disappeared, Ruth thought less about meeting her note and more about the cattle themselves. The tears often started in her eyes these days. When the girl came upon a gaunt cow lying in the stifling shade at the bottom of some gully, with a shriveled, panting calf at her side, she wanted desperately to explain to these poor creatures that she could not help, that she was not to blame.

When the last of the water was gone in the south pasture, Ruth felt that she would gladly give every animal on the place to any one who could take them to green fields and running water. Feeling as she did, the blow which fell on the following mail day was robbed a little bit of its power to hurt.

She had written a letter to Parker explaining the situation and thanking him for his previous offer to extend payment. And although Old Charley would be bringing the mail and would not be going into town again until next week, the girl rode to the box.

But the mail had already arrived when she reached the box. There were two letters addressed to her. The one with the earliest postmark was from Parker who explained that for business reasons he had been obliged to take a loan on the note. It was now

in the hands of J. H. Witherspoon, Inc., brokers. The second letter was from the broker. After reading it the girl stared at the cloudless skyline, then rode home. Her lips were set and her face shone yellow under the tan.

"Consequently, the cattle situation being what it is owing to the present drought, we feel it necessary to call payment on the note when due, namely, November first, next."

"Well," said Will, "there's one thing certain—when the rains hold off as long as this they make up for it when they do begin."

Again, Ruth shook her head. Old Charley studied for a moment, then slowly climbed out of the car. Will followed. "I've seen some pretty bad times mended," remarked the old man. "Things most always seem worse than what they are. But—we're bound to get rain before long and when we do, it'll likely be a good one, same as Will says."

"The last pond went dry a week ago," said Ruth dully.

Old Charley tried not to show his surprise. "So? Well, they'll get a little thin waterin' at the well, but it won't hurt them."

"Oh!" Ruth suddenly turned away. After a moment she said slowly, "I gave my note to Parker for the cattle—my interest in the ranch will be gone by November—there's no water—the cattle will be dying in another week."

"Another week!" Both men stared at the girl. "You must be wrong," said Old Charley.

"No, the well's going dry—it gives out sooner each day."

"But, Mrs. Warren"—Will looked from Ruth to his father—"I don't understand. There was surface water there late last June, worlds of water. Why, there must be two or three thousand acres which drain into that well!"

"It's going dry," said Ruth.

"New wells sometimes give out quick," replied Old Charley slowly, "but it sure seems funny. You see, Will, here, helped your brother locate that well. You ought to be able to take care of a good half of your herd—let part of 'em water at the

corrals."

"At—the—corrals? But I don't understand—do you mean—what do you mean?"

Old Charley looked at his son and then at Ruth. "Why, just what I said; use the well at the corrals, the one with the windmill—the old well."

"But that's what we have been using," cried Ruth; "that's the one that is going dry!"

"What!" ejaculated Will. "Aren't you using the upper well at all?"

"Upper well—what upper well?" asked Ruth in a dazed voice.

"Well, I'll be—" Old Charley looked at his son.

"He never went on with it," said Will, softly.

Old Charley nodded and turned to Ruth. "The prospect Harry and Will found last summer was in the upper end of the north pasture—I guess Harry didn't get around to developing it before—he left. But didn't anybody tell you about it?"

"No—" Ruth's heart was beating wildly. "I never heard about any other water."

"Harry bought the pipe," said Will. "Remember, Dad? We passed a load of it on the way to town last fall."

"There's a big pile of pipe behind the barn," said Ruth. "Tell me quick! Is there water we can use in the north pasture?"

"It'll have to be developed," said Old Charley slowly.

"Shouldn't take more than a day or two," responded Will. He thought a moment, then pulled an envelope from his pocket and wrote on it with a pencil. "Here, Dad, you run on into town and send this telegram—I'll be staying over a few days." He turned to Ruth. "Suppose I ride back with you and show you that place. Seems to me you ought to develop plenty of water with a day's work or so."

Snaveley slowly arose as the riders came straight up to him. Ruth spoke: "Mr. Thane has told me of a place in the north pasture where there is indication of water—he and my brother found it last summer." She paused. "Why didn't you tell me of it?"

"I had reasons," said Snaveley, his eyes on Will. "I didn't want to go

gettin' your hopes up—there ain't no use diggin' in that gully bottom just because of a little rain seepage."

"But, Mr. Snaveley," said Ruth, "now that we have need of the water don't you think it would be wise to try to get it?"

"If you can—you won't find nothin', though. Maybe a little rock basin full of rain water under the sand."

"There had been no rains for several months when we located the prospect last summer," said Will; "the sand was wet and we dug far enough to see that water was running into it from that big dike. That dike is a natural underground dam."

"All right, all right—go ahead and dig all you're a mind to if you've got such an all-fired interest in the Dead Lantern, Mr. Thane."

Will made no reply and Ruth thanked him with her eyes. To Snaveley she said, as she started her horse, "Please have the two men follow us with picks and shovels."

It was not long before Will guided her into a small arroyo, one of the hundreds which led down from the mountains.

Continued next week.

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