

Leathered Guns of Circle L

by Perry Westbrook



FIFTH INSTALLMENT
SYNOPSIS: Slim Loyale is in the clearing a fire glowing and over it crouched a tall, leathery-faced old timer.

Slim Loyale was trembling as he left the prison behind him. 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 lifelong friend of Slim Loyale. Slim discovers that Sheriff Starbuck has joined that plot against him. With the help of Dakota Blue and his cowboys, Slim Loyale defies the land-grabbers to do their worst.

He only knew that he had this hated fellow where he wanted him, and that a keen, savage joy flooded him every time his flailing fists found their mark.

He was insensible to the fact that Mona was tugging and crying at him. And even when Abe Fornachon at the frantic behest of Mona, grabbed Slim by the shoulders and dragged him from his prey, Slim still fought.

But the foreman was powerful. Between him and Mona, they finally got Slim into a chair, where Mona retained him by the simple method of sitting on his lap and wrapping both arms about his neck, at the same time pleading with tearful words.

"Slim!" she cried. "Slim, you don't know what you are doing. They'll take you back—back to Jarillo."

Abe Fornachon, who had been leaning over Leo Brockwell, securing his guns, now looked up. There was a queer pain in Abe's eyes as he watched Nona.

"Not this time they won't Miss Mona," he said quietly. "Remember; if anybody goes to askin' questions, it was me who hit Brockwell—not Slim."

These words, more than anything else, served to quiet Slim. Suddenly the hard-strung tautness went out of him and he sagged wearily. "I—I'm sorry Mona," he panted. "I reckon I shouldn't have paid no attention to him. But I'm all raw inside, an' that dawg drives me loco! Abe, I'm shore findin' out who my friends are. However, I can't let yuh take the blame on yore shoulders."

"Yuh shut up an' be good," growled Abe gruffly. "Brockwell had it comin' to him. Was I in yore place, I'd a been just as red-eyed."

With none too gentle power, Abe dragged Leo Brockwell erect and slammed him into a chair. Leo's eyes were glassy and his head rolling, but consciousness was returning. Slowly the light of complete comprehension showed in his eyes, and his bruised, swollen face twisted into a mask of hate and rage.

"When Starbuck hears of this—of this," he gasped, "yo're all through, Loyale, yuh damned ex—"

Abe Fornachon shook him roughly. "Best thing yuh can do is close yore mouth an' keep it so, Brockwell. If Starbuck comes snoopin' around here I'll tell him it was me who whaled yuh, not Slim. Now yuh take yore rotten poison off this ranch an' stay off. I told yuh something; get goin'."

Leo Brockwell went, with Abe Fornachon in close attendance. As the door closed behind them, Mona awoke suddenly to the somewhat embarrassing position she had taken, and slipped away from Slim, faint color whipping through her cheeks.

Slim did not appear to notice her confusion. His head was bent and his eyes staring at floor. "Mebbe it'd been best if he had plugged me," he said heavily. "Seems like all I'm good for now is to be a liability to my friends. Shore, they can't pack my load forever. Better I reckon that Starbuck should take me back to Jarillo."

Mona stamped her foot. "Stop that kind of talk, Slim Loyale.

You're no quitter. You've got a hard fight ahead, but it's worth while, isn't it? You see how your real friends feel about it. They are willing to back you to the limit, believing in you utterly. And if you don't do your part you are throwing them down, rendering their faith in you a worthless, empty thing."

Slim's head came up slowly. "Yo're right, Mona," he agreed grimly. "I never guessed what real friendship meant until now. Shore, I'll play the game. Dakota Blue tells me that Leo Brockwell has been hangin' around yuh a lot. That don't mean yuh care in particular about him, does it?"

"Does it appear like it?" she retorted. "No, I don't care for him; I should say not. Lie gives me the shivers, always did. But I've got to get money from elsewhere, things have been going so bad for me. And I've been tolerating him merely to put over this sale of stock that Abe was taking with him about. I—I guess it's all off now."

Mona shoulders sagged a little wearily. Slim stood up and went over to her. "My friends ain't haltin' at nothin' to help me," he stated quietly. "An' I ain't gonna halt at nothin' to



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help them. How much money do yuh need? Yuh can have all I've got."

Mona's eyes grew a little misty. "I could use five thousand dollars very nicely, Slim," she acknowledged. "But I won't take a cent from you. You may need it yourself, later. Courtney and his gang may start in rustling you to pauperishness any time, the same as he has me."

"Courtney!" exclaimed Slim. "Yuh mean Flash Courtney from over past Battle Mountain?"

Mona nodded. Slim was silent, thinking. "Yeah," he muttered finally, "it could be done. Flash Courtney, eh?" He looked at Mona. "How come yuh ain't been able to fight them off? Have yuh taken it up with Jigger Starbuck?"

Mona shrugged. "I've seen Starbuck about it, but so far he hasn't done a great deal. And because of lack of funds, I haven't been able to keep anything like a full crew for the past year.

"You know how Dad got roped in on mining stock deal. When he died he left a lot of debts. Those whom he owed money to weren't very patient about it. It got to where I couldn't stand being haggled at any longer. So I borrowed five thousand dollars and paid off all of those old debts.

"I thought that owing the money in one lump sum to the right sort of a person would enable me to get more time and pull through. But I find it was merely robbing Peter to pay Paul. This sale I was dickerin' with the Brockwells for, would have helped some, but I imagine it was just a matter of stalling off the inevitable a little longer. I'm afraid I'm going to lose my ranch, Slim." Mona's voice was choked and teary as she finished.

"Who'd yuh borrow that money from?" asked Slim.

"From—from the lawyer, George Arthur."

"George Arthur!" exploded Slim. "Why he was the lynin' polecat who sold out me at my trial an' let 'em railroad me for somethin' I never did. I didn't think yuh'd have anythin' to do with him after that, Mona," Slim's words were bitter.

"I don't think you understand, Slim," she said wearily. "I was desperate. I had to get the money somewhere. Mr. Arthur was the only one who would loan me that much on a straight mortgage. Remember, Slim; it was a case of fight to live. I had no other recourse. Dad's creditors gave me sixty days to produce the money before they called a sheriff's sale. In my place yuh'd have done the same."

"But Arthur ain't givin' yuh a whole lot of time," argued Slim roughly. "If yuh've got to sell off yore stock to keep up with his demands, he must be houndin' yuh."

Mona lifted her hands protestingly. "Please, Slim," she begged. "Please don't use that tone to me. I've been so gorgeously happy since I've known you were coming back. I felt at last I had a shoulder to lean on that was trustworthy."

"Did you ever stop to figure what the interest on five thousand dollars at seven per cent amounted to? Add that to my other expenses and you'll understand why I want to sell some of my stock."

The note of tearful misery in

And I'll make out some way or other. I feel pretty confident of that."

Mona's more spirited tone did not fool Slim a bit. He saw through it and understood the valiant courage of this slip of a Western girl. Without kith or kin she was waging a lone-handed, losing battle against big odds, and she was courageously facing the ultimate. Slim's eyes softened as he watched her. Little Spartan, that's what she was.

"We won't talk about that any more," he drawled. "One thing is plumb certain, though; yuh ain't ever gonna lose yore ranch. Whether yuh like it or not, Mona, I shore won't stand for some slick jasper like George Arthur forclosin' on yuh. That's final. Now cheer up; let's be happy for a change." He gave her a comforting pat on the arm.

Strangely enough, they did fall into channels of easy range gossip. There was much that had happened while Slim had been away. Folks had died; others had married; babies had been ushered into the world—just homely gossip that did a lot for them both in easing them and cheering them up. When Slim squeezed Mona's hand and left, some two hours later, he was humming happily to himself. It was good to be back again.

As Slim Loyale headed homeward through the velvet night, he had already made up his mind as to how he would ward off the cloud that was hanging over Mona Hall's head. The first thing on the following morning, he promised himself, he would ride into Pinnacle and hunt up George Arthur.

Then he would buy up the mortgage on the Dot H Dot if it cost him a thousand dollars more than the amount of the note. He'd say nothing to Mona about it. When she finally did learn what had happened, there would be nothing she could do. Slim grinned to himself. He knew Mona would be as mad as hops, but she'd get over it.

A couple of miles drifted back under the steadily thrumming hoofs of his bronco. He was still engrossed with thoughts and plans concerning Mona, when, out of nowhere it seemed, a mounted figure rose before him in the trail. Slim jerked erect, wary and suspicious. Unconsciously he reached to his thigh, only to realize that he had left his guns at home.

"Pull down, Slim," came a husky undertone. "Shore an' there's dirty work abroad tonight. Not another step unless yuh'll be after wantin' a coward slug in the ribs."

"Roy!" exclaimed Loyale. "Roy O'Brien, what in blazes are yuh ridin' around at this time of night for?"

Roy swung his mount close beside Slim's. "Devil a bit do yuh worry about the why an' wherefore, lad," he answered. "I'm swappin' hats an' brones with yuh now."

Without waiting for the amaz-

Modern Women

Painting exotically colored deep sea flora and fauna is something that interests Miss Else Bostlemann, who has assisted Dr. William Beebe in his explorations of the depths of the ocean. Miss Bostlemann uses an iron music rack to which she fastens her canvas and her paint brushes are tied to strings and lowered from a boat. When she wants a certain kind of brush she reaches up and finds

ed Slim's consent, Roy reached over and swept off Slim's cream sombrero, replacing it with his own roll-brimmed black one. Then he swung to the ground.

"Git off'n that gray hoss of yores," he ordered. "Off I say, an' scramble up on this bay o' mine. Then do yuh turn north off the trail a bit an' be after goin' home in a roundabout way."

Still bewildered, Slim slid to the ground, but he did not relax his grip on the reins of his gray gelding. "What's the meanin' of all this hocuspocus, Roy?" he insisted. "Open up or I don't move a step."

Roy swore softly. "I tell yuh there be polecats an' dirty spalpeens ridin' tonight, lad. 'Tis yuh they are after. Unless yuh listen to old Roy, yuh'll never git home alive. But we'll be after foolin' them."

"Do as I say. Go north to the town trail an' then home. I'll wait here an hour to give you plenty of time. Then I'll be drunk an' singin' loud, so it'll seem. They'll know who I be an' they won't be after botherin' me."

(Continued Next Issue)

Modern Women

A costume worn by Mrs. Grover Cleveland when she was our "First Lady" and in which she appeared when hostess at a White House Ball in 1894, was displayed recently by Mrs. John H. Amen, daughter of the late President of Mrs. Cleveland. The dress is of rose and green brocaded silk with rose velvet trimming on the bodice. Mrs. Amen, who was Marion Cleveland, appeared with several other society women in costumes of the "gay nineties" at a charity fashion show in New York.

Miss Sally Clary, sculptor, taxidermist and hunter, says she holds the world record in lion shooting, having killed two lions in two minutes with two shots. She is a well-known explorer and her trophies are numerous, including the skins of the two lions and heads, horns any many other hides she brought back from Africa. She keeps her aim from going bad by practicing in shooting galleries.

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