

# ZEN of the Y. D.

A Novel of the Foothills

By ROBERT STEAD

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"I HAD TO KILL HIM"

SYNOPSIS—Transley's hay-cutting outfit, after stacking 2,000 tons, is on its way to the big Y. D. ranch headquarters. Transley is a master of men and circumstances. Linder, foreman, is substantial, but not self-assertive. George Drazk, one of the men, is an irresponsible chap who proposes to every woman he meets. Transley and Linder dine with Y. D. and his wife and daughter Zen. Transley resolves to marry Zen.

CHAPTER I—Continued.

"Perhaps you will excuse us now," said the rancher's wife.

"You will wish to talk over business, Y. D. will show you upstairs, and we will expect you to be with us for breakfast."

With a bow she left the room, followed by her daughter. Linder had a sense of being unsatisfied; it was as though a ravishing meal had been placed before a hungry man, and only its aroma had reached his senses when it had been taken away. Well, it provoked the appetite—

The rancher refilled the glasses, but Transley left his untouched, and Linder did the same. There were business matters to discuss, and it was no fair contest to discuss business in the course of a drinking bout with an old stager like Y. D.

"I got to have another thousand tons," the rancher was saying. "Can't take chances on any less, and I want you boys to put it up for me."

"Suits me," said Transley, "if you'll show me where to get the hay."

"You know the South Y. D.?"

"Never been on it."

"Well, it's a branch of the Y. D. which runs southeast from the Forks. Guess it got its name from me, because I built my first cabin at the Forks. That was about the time you was on a milk diet, Transley, and you old-timers had all outdoors to play with. You see, the Y. D. is a cantank'rous stream, like its godfather. At the Forks you'd nat'rally suppose is where two branches joined, and jogged on henceforth in double harness. Well, that ain't it at all. This creek has modern ideas, and at the Forks it divides itself into two, and she hikes for the Gulf o' Mexico an' him for Hudson's bay. As I was sayin', I built my first cabin at the Forks—a sort o' peek-a-hoo cabin it was, where the wolves usta come an' look in at nights. Well, I usta look out through the same holes. I had the advantage o' usin' language, an' I reckon we was about equal scared. There was no wife or kid in those days."

The rancher paused, took a long draw on his pipe, and his eyes glowed with the light of old recollections.

"Well, as I was sayin'," he continued presently, "folks got to callin' the stream the Y. D., after me. That's what you get for bein' first on the ground—a monument for ever an' ever. This bein' the main stream got the name proper, an' the other branch bein' smallest an' runnin' kind o' south nat'rally got called the South Y. D. I run stock in both valleys when I was at the Forks, but not much since I came down here. Well, there's maybe a thousand tons o' hay over in the



"Perhaps You Will Excuse Us Now," Said the Rancher's Wife.

South Y. D., an' you boys better trail over there tomorrow an' pitch into it—that is, if you're satisfied with the price I'm payin' you."

"The price is all right," said Transley, "and we'll hit the trail at sun-up. There'll be no trouble—no conflict of interests, I mean?"

"Whose interests?" demanded the rancher, beligerently. "Ain't I the father of the Y. D.? Ain't the whole valley named for me? When it comes to interests—"

"Of course," Transley agreed, "but I just wanted to know how things stood in case we ran up against something."

"Quite proper," said Y. D., "quite proper. An' now the matter's under discussion, I'll jus' show you my hand. There's a fellow named Landson down the valley of the South Y. D. that's

been flirtn' with that hay meadow for years, but he ain't got no claim to it. I was first on the ground an' I cut it whenever I feel like it an' I'm goin' to go on cuttin' it. If anybody comes out raisin' trouble, you just shoos 'em off, an' go on cuttin' that hay, spite o' h—I an' high water. Y. D.'ll stand behind you."

"Thanks," said Transley. "That's what I wanted to know."

CHAPTER II

Transley and Linder were so early about next morning after their conversation with Y. D. that there was no opportunity of another meeting with the rancher's wife or daughter. They were slipping quietly out of the house to take breakfast with the men when Y. D. intercepted them.

"Breakfast is waitin', boys," he said, and led them back into the room where they had had supper the previous evening. Y. D. ate with them, but the meal was served by the Chinese boy.

In the yard all was jingling excitement. The men of the Y. D. were fraternally assisting Transley's gang in hitching up and getting away, and there was much bustling activity to an accompaniment of friendly profanity. It was not yet six o'clock, but the sun was well up over the eastern ridges that fringed the valley, and to the west the snow-capped summits of the mountains shone like polished ivory. The exhilaration in the air was almost intoxicating.

Linder quickly converted the apparent chaos of horses, wagons and implements into order; Transley had a last word with Y. D., and the rancher, shouting "Good luck, boys! Make it a thousand tons or more," waved them away.

Linder glanced back at the house. The bright sunshine had not awakened it; it lay dreaming in its grove of cool, green trees.

The trail lay, not up the valley, but across the wedge of foothills which divided the South Y. D. from the parent stream. The ascent was therefore much more rapid than the trails which followed the general course of the stream. Huge hills, shouldering together, left at times only wagon-track road between; at other places they skirted dangerous cutbanks worn by spring freshets, and again trekked for long distances over gently curving uplands. In an hour the horses were showing the strain of it, and Linder halted them for a momentary rest.

It was at that moment that Drazk rode up, his face a study in obvious annoyance.

"Danged if I ain't left that Pete-horse's blanket down at the Y. D.," he exclaimed.

"Oh, well, you can easily ride back for it and catch up on us this afternoon," said Linder, who was not in the least dejected.

"Thanks, Lin," said Drazk. "I'll beat it down an' catch up on you this afternoon, sure," and he was off down the trail as fast as "that Pete-horse" could carry him.

At the Y. D. George conducted the search for his horse blanket in the strangest places. It took him mainly about the yard of the house, and even to the kitchen door, where he interviewed the Chinese boy.

"You catchee horse blanket around here?" he inquired, with appropriate gesticulations.

"You losee hoss blanket?"

"Yep."

"What kind hoss blanket?"

"Jus' a brown blanket for that Pete-horse."

"Whose hoss?"

"Mine," proudly.

"Where you catchee?"

"Raised him."

"Good hoss?"

"You betcha."

"Huh!"

Pause.

"You no catchee horse blanket, hey?"

"No!" said the Chinaman, whose manner instantly changed. In this brief conversation he had classified Drazk, and classified him correctly. "You catchee him, though—some h—I, too—you stickee round here. Beat it," and Drazk found the kitchen door closed in his face.

Drazk wandered slowly around the side of the house, and was not above a surreptitious glance through the windows. They revealed nothing. He followed a path out by a little gate. His ruse had proven a blind trail, and there was nothing to do but go down to the stables, take the horse blanket from the peg where he had hung it, and set out again for the South Y. D.

As he turned a corner of the fence the sight of a young woman burst upon him. She was hatless and facing the sun. Drazk, for all his admiration of the sex, had little eye for detail. "A sort of chestnut, about sixteen hands high, and with the look of a thoroughbred," he afterwards described her to Linder.

She turned at the sound of his footsteps, and Drazk instantly summoned a smirk which set his homely face beaming with good humor.

"Pardon me, ma'am," he said, with an elaborate bow. "I am Mr. Drazk—Mr. George Drazk—Mr. Transley's assistant. No doubt he spoke of me."

She was inside the inclosure formed by the fence, and he outside. She

turned on him eyes which set Drazk's pulses strangely a-tingle, and subjected him to a deliberate but not unfriendly inspection.

"No, I don't believe he did," she said at length.

Drazk cautiously approached, as though wondering how near he could come without frightening her away. He reached the fence and leaned his elbows on it. She showed no disposition to move. He cautiously raised one foot and rested it on the lower rail.

"It's a fine morning, ma'am," he ventured.

"Rather," she replied. "Why aren't you with Mr. Transley's gang?"

The question gave George an opening. "Well, you see," he said, "it's all on account of that Pete-horse. That's him down there. I rode away this morning and plumb forgot his blanket. So when Mr. Transley seen it he says, 'Drazk, take the day off an' go back for your blanket,' he says. 'There's no hurry,' he says. 'Linder an' me 'll manage,' he says."

"Oh!"

"So here I am." He glanced at her again. She was showing no disposition to run away. She was about two yards from him, along the fence. Drazk wondered how long it would take him to bridge that distance. Even as he looked she leaned her elbows on the fence and rested one of her feet on the lower rail. Drazk fancied he saw the muscles about her mouth pulling her face into little, laughing curves, but she was gazing soberly into the distance.

"He's some horse, that Pete-horse," he said, taking up the subject which lay most ready to his tongue. "He's sure some horse."

"I have no doubt."

"Yep," Drazk continued. "Him an' me has seen some times. Whew! Things I couldn't tell you about, at all."

"Well, aren't you going to?"

Drazk glanced at her curiously. This girl showed signs of leading him out of his depth. But it was a very delightful sensation to feel one's self being led out of his depth by such a girl. Her face was motionless; her eyes fixed dreamily upon the brown prairies that swept up the flanks of the foothills to the south. Far and away on their curving crests the dark snake-line of Transley's outfit could be seen apparently motionless on the rim of the horizon.

Drazk changed his foot on the rail and the motion brought him six inches nearer her.

"Well, for instance," he said, spurring his imagination into action, "there was the fellow I run down an' shot in the Cypress Hills."

"Shot!" she exclaimed, and the note of admiration in her voice stirred him to further flights.

"Yep," he continued, proudly. "She an' I buried him there, right by the road where he fell. Only me an' that Pete-horse knows the spot."

George sighed sentimentally. "It's awful sad, havin' to kill a man," he went on, "an' it makes you feel strange an' creepy, specially at nights. That is, the first one affects you that way, but you soon get used to it. You see, he insulted—"

"The first one? Have you killed more than one?"

"Oh yes, lots of them. A man like me, what knocks around all over with all sorts of people, has to do it."

"Then there's the police. After you kill a few men nat'rally the police begins to worry you. I always hate to kill a policeman."

"It must be an interesting life."

"It is, but it's a hard one," he said, after a pause during which he had changed feet again and taken up another six inches of the distance which separated them. He was almost afraid to continue the conversation. He was finding progress so much easier than he had expected. It was evident that he had made a tremendous hit with Y. D.'s daughter. What a story to tell Linder! What would Transley say? He was shaking with excitement.

"It's an awful hard life," he went on, "an' there comes a time, miss, when a man wants to quit it. There comes a time when every decent man wants to settle down. I been thinkin' about that a lot lately. . . . What do you think about it?" Drazk had gone white. He felt that he actually had proposed to her.

"Might be a good idea," she replied, demurely.

He changed feet again. He had gone too far to stop. He must strike the iron when it was hot. Of course he had no desire to stop, but it was all so wonderful. He could speak to her now in a whisper.

"How about you, miss? How about you an' me jus' settlin' down?"

She did not answer for a moment. Then, in a low voice:

"It wouldn't be fair to accept you like this, Mr. Drazk. You don't know anything about me."

"An' I don't want to—I mean, I don't care what about you."

"But it wouldn't be fair until you know," she continued. "There are things I'd have to tell you, and I don't like to."

She was looking downward now, and he fancied he could see the color rising about her cheeks and her frame trembling. He turned toward her and extended his arms. "Tell me—tell your own George," he cooed.

"No," she said, with sudden rigidity. "I can't confess."

"Come on," he pleaded. "Tell me. I've been a bad man, too."

She seemed to be weighing the matter. "If I tell you, you will never, never mention it to anyone?"

"Never. I swear it to you," dramatically raising his hand.

"Well," she said, looking down bashfully and making little marks with her finger-nail in the pole on which they were leaning. "I never told anyone before, and nobody in the world knows it except he and me, and he doesn't know it now either, because I killed him. . . . I had to do it."

"Of course you did, dear," he murmured. "It was wonderful to receive a woman's confidence like this."

"Yes, I had to kill him," she repeated. "You see, he—he proposed to me without being introduced!"

It was some seconds before Drazk felt the blow. It came to him gradually, like returning consciousness to a man who has been stunned. Then anger swept him.

"You're playin' with me," he cried. "You're makin' a fool of me!"

"Oh, George dear, how could I?" she protested. "Now perhaps you better run along to that Pete-horse. He looks lonely."

"All right," he said, striding away angrily. As he walked his rage deepened, and he turned and shook his fist at her, shouting, "All right, but I'll get you yet, see? You think you're smart, and Transley thinks he's smart, but George Drazk is smarter than both of you, and he'll get you yet."

She waved her hand complacently, but her composure had already maddened him. He jerked his horse up



"But It Wouldn't Be Fair Until You Know," She Continued.

roughly, threw himself into the saddle, and set out at a hard gallop along the trail to the South Y. D.

It was mid-afternoon when he overtook Transley's outfit, now winding down the southern slope of the tongue of foothills which divided the two valleys of the Y. D. Pete, wet over the flanks, pulled up of his own accord beside Linder's wagon.

"Lo, George," said Linder. "What's your hurry?" Then, glancing at his saddle, "Where's your blanket?"

Drazk's jaw dropped, but he had a quick wit, although an unbalanced one.

"Well, Lin, I clean forgot all about it," he admitted, with a laugh, "but when a fellow spends the morning chatting with old Y. D.'s daughter I guess he's allowed to forget a few things."

"Oh!"

"Reckon you don't believe it, eh, Lin? Reckon you don't believe I stood an' talked for so long I just had to pull myself away?"

"You reckon right."

George was thinking fast. Here was an opportunity to present the incident in a light which had not before occurred to him.

"Guess you wouldn't believe she told me her secret—told me somethin' she had never told anybody else, an' made me swear not to mention. Guess you don't believe that, neither?"

"You guess right again." Linder was quite unperturbed. He knew something of Drazk's gift for romancing.

Drazk leaned over in the saddle until he could reach Linder's ear with a loud whisper. "And she called me 'dear'—'George dear,' she said, when I came away."

"The h—I she did!" said Linder, at last prodded into interest. He considered the "George dear" idea a daring flight, even for Drazk. "Better not let old Y. D. hear you spinning anything like that, George, or he'll be likely to spoil your youthful beauty."

"Oh, Y. D.'s all right," said George, knowingly. "Y. D.'s all right. Well, I guess I'll let Pete feed a bit here, and then we'll go back for his blanket. You'll have to excuse me a bit these days, Lin; you know how it is when a fellow's in love."

"Huh!" said Linder.

Suppose Transley starts in to cut hay and is warned off by Landson, who is already at work. What do you imagine will happen?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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