

WHISPERING ROCK

by JOHN LEBAR



SECOND INSTALLMENT

SYNOPSIS: Ruth Warren, living in the East, comes into possession of three-quarter 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 weakened lungs. Arriving at the nearest town, she learns that the ranch, "Dead Lantern", is 85 miles across the desert. Charley Thane, old rancher and rural mail carrier, agrees to take them to "Dead Lantern" gate.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"Listen!" commanded the girl suddenly. Her face was white, tense with sudden dread, and her lip quivered. "Oh, Kenneth!" she cried hysterically. "There's not a sound—not a sound—it's too much, I tell you! It's deathly—nothing moves, not a living thing! It's too big!" Old Charley put down his sandwich and stepping on the starter, kicked open the muffler. Ancient Lena broke into an unsteady roar. To give color to his action the old man got out of the car, threw back the hood, and stood staring skeptically within.

In the back seat the husband and wife were locked in each other's arms. Little David watched them with solemn eyes, not quite sure of his proper course. "It'll be all right dear," the man's voice came to her in a strained whisper above the grateful noise of the car. "We'll just have to stick it out—you'll get used to it—all—" Again the thing in his chest began to flutter madly.

To Old Charley's mild surprise the young woman sat beside him for the rest of the afternoon. Her manner had changed. Silently, she looked about her. There was no pleasurable interest in her face as her eyes studied each detail of her surroundings—it was as though she felt it incumbent upon her to understand this strange country. After half an hour she began to ask questions.

"Will we see any cowboys today?"

"We passed one an hour back." "That man on the horse? He didn't look like a cowboy. Oh, but don't they wear those—those fur rug things on their legs and high-heeled boots and big hats and revolvers—forty-fives?"

"Hair chaps are all right on a fashion plate cowboy, or in a cold country. That man was wearin' the useful kind—plain cowhide. He was probably wearin' ridin' boots—high heels. But nobody packs a gun nowadays 'ceptin' hi-jackers and peace officers. Oh, it's kinda usual to carry a gun in your car for coyotes and such, but I ain't seen a cowpuncher with a holster on for fifteen or twenty years."

"Why, according to you, this wild country must be as safe as a town with a good police force."

"Lots safer. We got rattlesnakes and a few other things, but in town you've got high school kids scootin' around in stripped Fords."

For the first time in many hours the girl laughed. She relaxed in the seat, and pulling her tight-fitting hat from her head, let the dry wind do as it pleased with her short amber hair. "We've been awfully rude," she smiled, "we should have introduced ourselves—my husband's name is Kenneth Warren; I'm Ruth."

The old man nodded. I figured maybe you might be. I think my son, Will, wrote you about—Mr. Grey."

"Oh!" The girl's face went sober. "I see, of course. Mr. Will Thane's letter came from Los Angeles and I didn't think of there being a connection when I learned your name this morning. Did—did you know my brother?"

"Yes, pretty well. He and Will used to ride the country together quite a bit whenever Will came out. Will was here when the news was brought about your brother Harry."

"Please tell me what you know about Harry's death," asked the girl quietly.

Old Charley shook his head. "There ain't much I can tell you. I expect Will wrote about all anybody knows. Your brother went down into Mexico last fall. After the fall cattle sellin', it was. He and his partner, Jep Snaveley, had been figurin' or lookin' over some stock down that way—so Harry went. Snaveley heard from him a time or two and learned Harry was goin' further into the interior. After that Snaveley didn't hear from him. For a couple of months he didn't think nothin' about it because mail's mighty uncertain in some parts of Mexico. Then he commenced gettin' worried—he even come over to my place and asked me what should be done. Well, just about then a Mexican came into Palo Verde and told about findin' Harry. Close to two hundred miles below the line, it

was. The Mexican knew the body was American and he brought some letters—one of them was from you. He described the clothes and so from the story the Mexican brought back and the letters and other personal things everybody knew it was Harry. Snaveley was notified and he seen the Mexican and told all he knew about it, which is about what I told you.

"Was there anything to show what caused Harry's death?"

"Nothin' exact. The Mexican said it looked like he'd been thrown from his horse and dragged—but it's hard to tell."

"Was Harry buried?"

"Yes, the Mexican did that and he marked the grave. He told them at the next rancho he come to about where to find the grave and all."

The girl's eyes filled. "That was kind," she murmured.

"I expect Will told you it wouldn't hardly be possible to have the body brought over the line?"

"Yes. And I'd rather have things the way they are—I'm the only one who cares, anyway," she finished bitterly.

Old Charley changed the subject. "Are you folks plannin' on stayin' a spell?"

"Yes—I suppose so." She answered slowly, with a nervous glance at the gaunt range of mountains they would soon be entering.

"Aren't we nearly there?"

"It's quite a piece yet—we've only come about forty-five miles. We cross this range and then we're in the San Jorge Valley. The valley's a long one—runs way down into Mexico. The Dead Lantern's about forty miles down the valley and up against the mountains on the west side. My place is along there too—lies between the south Dead Lantern fence and the Mexican line—kinda over an elbow in the mountain range."

"Why in the world is the ranch called the Dead Lantern?"

"Well, you see, the brand is the outline of a lantern an' folks got to callin' it the Dead Lantern—I reckon because there wasn't no light in it. A man makes a brand and puts it on his cattle, and then folks get to callin' it whatever it looks like to them. By and by some name sticks, and from then on everybody calls the ranch that." The old man paused. "I expect this'll be your first trip out this way?" he asked.

"I may as well tell you," said Ruth, "my husband hasn't been doing well in business for some time—his health, you understand. Harry knew how things were and—well, he's always been my big brother. My husband and I were very young when we married and he kept his eye on us. He felt that we had no one to fall back on but him—my father and step-mother weren't—" she paused. "When Harry came West and bought his part of the cattle ranch, he willed it to me. He wasn't married, you see, and he wanted us to have something to fall back on if anything happened to him. Now that he's gone, we've come out here to the ranch. We also think the climate will benefit Mr. Warren."

Old Charley was silent for a moment. "Well, well," he said at last, "so you're part owner of the Dead Lantern." The car covered a hundred yards of road. "Don't suppose you've met Jep Snaveley yet?"

"No. I hardly know anything about him. Harry used to mention him in his letters. Are you a friend of his?"

The old man pursed his lips. "I'm a neighbor. In fact a real close neighbor to the Dead Lantern. It's only about six miles over the mountains from the Dead Lantern house to my house."

"Ah—what sort of a man is Mr. Snaveley?"

"He's about fifty—a good deal slimmer than me—the old man smiled—"He's an old cattleman; but he ain't been in this country more'n twelve years or so. Originally from Texas, so Harry said. But he knows cattle and ranchin'."

"I'm glad to hear that," laughed the girl; "it will be rather necessary to have some one around who knows what to do on a ranch."

"Well, yes—I expect it will."

Nearly two hours after they had passed through the range of low mountains and had turned southward, a wire fence came down from the mountains on the western side of the valley.

"That's the Dead Lantern fence," said Old Charley noncommittally. "There's twenty thousand acres of the Dead Lantern, feed enough to run two thousand head, the land's all fenced, and there's heaps of browse up in the hills."

How big is twenty thousand acres?"

"Sizable. The skyline of those mountains is the western boundary; to the south where that ridge runs out into the valley is the southern line. My place is 'round on the

other side of that ridge—'bout 20 miles by road. But there's a trail over the ridge from the Dead Lantern home ranch to my place, that makes it about six miles.

"And all that land from here to the mountain tops belong to the Dead Lantern?"

"Yes. And there's a heap more of it you can't see tucked away in the canyons. If you followed the line fence on horseback it would take you about four days to ride 'round the ranch."

"No wonder it can hold two thousand cows! What do cattle sell for a piece—I mean how much a head?"

"Forty to fifty dollars lately."

She made a quick calculation. "My heavens! Could we get a hundred thousand dollars for the cattle?"

Old Charley smiled. "It's not quite as simple as all that," Old Charley remarked gravely as he turned from the road and stopped by the Dead Lantern mail box. Just beyond the mail box was the gate; a newish sign, crudely lettered in black paint, was nailed on the middle bar. ANYBODY COMING ON THIS RANCH IS LIABLE TO GET SHOT!

When the old man heard the girl gasp he knew that she had seen the sign, and with averted eyes he began to rummage in the government mail sack.

The girl watched her husband's face as he read; her eyes met blankly, then turned to the old man.

"What in the world does that mean?" asked Warren.

"Nobody thinks it means anything," answered Old Charley reassuringly. "Just Jep Snaveley's way—he's a little ac-centric." He pointed to a faint cloud of dust far up the two wheel paths which led from beyond the gate toward the distant mountains. "I'll be going along now—I reckon it would be best for you folks to meet your new pardner alone, anyways." He looked into Warren's eyes. "And if something should come up sudden-like that you'd want to get to town in a hurry just ride over the mountain to my place. This old car ain't much, but she still rolls."

While they were piling the baggage by the mail box, both the girl and her husband glanced frequently at the sign.

They watched Old Charley until the car disappeared over a hill a few hundred yards south of the gate, then turned their attention to the approaching wagon on the ranch road.

When the wagon stopped at the gate, an Indian boy of ten slid cautiously to the ground and, with his wide eyes fixed on the three by the mail box, sidled to the gate and opened it. This done, he speedily rejoined the family in the wagon. Kenneth Warren went forward. "Can you tell me," he addressed the two-hundred-pound Indian on the wagon seat, "where is Mr. Snaveley? Are you his man?"

The Indian looked at his two-hundred and fifty pound squaw, glanced back among his numerous progeny, and then turned his black eyes on Warren. "No sabe." The horses started forward.

"Mamma, letter for the man!" David, the letter from the box outstretched, started toward the retreating wagon.

"No, David, not to that man. Mama will tell you when the man comes to whom you are to give the letter." An instant later she whirled

about to her husband the letter in her hand. "Kenneth! This letter—it's the one I wrote over two weeks ago to Snaveley—he doesn't know we're comin'!"

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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