

# Leathered Guns of Jarillo

by Perry Westbrook

## FIRST INSTALMENT

The massive, steel-barred gates of the Jarillo Penitentiary swung back, disclosing a cavernous, shadowy, hopeless arch beyond. From those gates walked a man, a slender, wiry man of slightly more than medium height.

His shoulders were not of extraordinary width, but they were erect, flat, and packed with smoothly coordinating muscles. His chest was arched and deep, his waist lean.

His face, from the nose upward was of a young man, not over thirty years in age at most. That nose was straight, thin and sensitive of nostril. The eyes were of steely gray, clear with the tonic of perfect health. But there was something hard about them—a glimmer, far in the depths, like a living, never fading flame.

Nests of tiny wrinkles spread from the corners of them, telling of long years of facing strong sunlight, hot winds, and illimitable distances. The short, crisp hair beneath his floppy and battered old sombrero was dark brown, slightly curly and with a dusting of gray at the temples.

It was the mouth and jaw which made a cold, stern mask of what was otherwise a reasonably amiable countenance. The jaw was lean and strong, the mouth wide and hinting whimsicality, were it not for the sensitive lips set in a hard line of repression. Besides the worn sombrero, his garb was made up of faded shirt and jeans, and a pair of battered, high-heeled boots which showed signs of long disuse.

This, on that sunny, early spring morning, was Edward (Slim) Loyale, ex-convict, Number 214, with eighteen months served of a three-year sentence, and with eighteen months of parole ahead of him, before he would once more be an entirely free man.

A closer observer than the stolid guard who had opened the gates would have noticed that Slim Loyale was trembling as he left the prison behind him. This quiver, which traversed the entire length of his body, held something of a strange, exalting ecstasy about it.

A captive bird, freed of its cage might have acted the same. A wild stallion, surrounded by the high walls of a man-made corral, might have lifted its head to gaze long at the dim, mist-shrouded rim of some great mesa country, its nostrils dilated and quivering, just as Slim Loyale's nostrils dilated and quivered now.

Slim's pace quickened. He took no notice of the sun-bleached, squalid little town of Jarillo a quarter of a mile to his left. Nor did he once look back at the sprawling bulk of the prison, which crouched like some unmoving, heartless, drab beast in the immensity of the plain. Slim's face was to the north, and his eyes never wavered from a point out there where a dim, violet line of saw-edged mountains hung against the horizon, nebulous and beckoning.

Inside of an hour the prison and the town of Jarillo had fallen far behind him. He was entering now a slightly rolling country of chemical and manzanita. With strange abandon

Slim forced his way through the brush. As he walked he caught handfuls of pungent chemical, holding it to his face and sniffing with little, quick sighs of joy.

His lean cheeks, slightly pale from long months away from the sun, glowed with the quickened beat of his stirring blood. In a little meadow, thick-grown with tar-weed and still a little damp from the night dew, he kicked about with his feet, inhaling deep of the keen, wild odor which arose.

Then as a long-eared jack-rabbit hopped sedately away and a tiny, pert brush wren twittered at him, he laughed, low and deep, and for a moment the hard mask fell away from him. He was a boy again, just a boy going home—going home.

The sun arched to the zenith, passed it and swung low into the west. Still Slim Loyale plodded onward, a little wearily now, for many miles lay behind him and he had been long hours without food or water. But the glow in his eyes was still strong, and his thin face still eager.

For over two miles he had been breasting a long, gradual slope, matted with brush clumps and broken here and there by rough spines of rock. Abruptly he reached the crest.

Before him the ridge fell away in dusty slides to a wide-spreading basin, spotted with groups of shimmering, silver-barked sycamores. A line of scrub willow twisted from east to west through the basin, coming from one narrow gorge to plunge from sight into a like one.

Slim paused, his eyes flitting keenly over the country below. Off there to his left, in an elbow of the creek, a faint haze of bluish smoke was rising. Slim went down a handy slide in great, falling strides and hurried on along the edge of the willows. A moment later he stepped into a little clearing, carpeted with green and rimmed with a wall of willow.

In that clearing a fire glowed, and over it crouched a tall, gaunt leathery-faced old-timer, with keen blue eyes and faded hair and mustache. At one edge of the clearing three horses crouched lazily at the succulent grass. Near the fire was a heap of dunnage.

"Hello, Dakota," said Slim quietly, though his voice trembled slightly. "Faithful as ever, I see."

The man by the fire straightened quickly and turned. "Slim," he ejaculated. "Kid!" Then with three quick strides he was over to Slim and was wringing his hand, his free arm going about the young fellow's shoulders.

For a long minute neither of them spoke again. A strange mistiness dimmed Slim Loyale's eyes, and even Dakota Blue was winking fast. Slim cleared his throat. "Grub ready?" he asked gruffly. "I'm damn near starved. It—it's a long walk back from hell."

Glad of the chance to hide his emotion, Dakota Blue turned to the fire and jabbed at the glowing coals with a stick. "Be ready in a jiffy, Slim. The coffee is about to turn over an' there's a painful of trout waitin' to go on."

Slim nodded and went over to the creek. Flat on its moist, sweet rim he lay, his face buried in the sparkling, chill depths. When he had drunk his fill he stripped off his shirt and had a good wash. Then he went back to the fire where a black frying-pan was sizzling, and Dakota was setting out tin plates and cups on a piece of tarpaulin.

"Got yore letter two weeks ago," said Dakota casually. "I rode in here to the basin yesterday morning. I'd have come down—there for yuh, only I knew yuh'd want to be alone for a few hours an' get the feel of the earth under yuh once more. Well, light in, Slim; there's plenty of it."

They ate in silence. When the meal was over, Dakota tossed Slim a sack of tobacco and a book of papers. Keep it," he said. "I brought plenty."

Slim rolled and lit his cigarette and leaned back against the heap of dunnage. "Now tell me," he commanded, "everythin'."

Dakota rolled a smoke himself before answering, and squatted on his heels before the fire. "Things ain't changed much," he drawled finally. "Sarg Brockwell is still Sarg Brockwell. Jigger Starbuck is still sheriffin' an' Spud Dillon is still doin' business at the same ole stand."

"I suppose crime disappeared about the same time I did?" murmured Slim, his low voice bitter. "No," said Dakota softly. "It ain't disappeared, Slim. In the past month the Vasco stage has been held up twice, an' the Dot H Dot has lost about a hundred haid more cattle. Some folks in Pinnacle have been wondering a heap if they didn't make a bad mistake, when they sent yuh up."

Slim Loyale laughed curtly. "They shoulda done their wonderin' a year an' a half ago. How's things at the ole Circle L, Dakota?"

"'Bout as usual. Since yore daddy died, the spread is kinda empty-like. But yore cows—they are yore now, yuh know—well, they keep right on havin' calves. Yore pretty well fixed with this world's goods, Slim."

"Yeah, but a pauper with rep-

utation. Did — did Dad figger that I was guilty, Dakota?" Dakota Blue snorted. "Hell, no! Why, not a week before he died that sanctimonious law-shark, George Arthur, came to see him an' made some crack about it bein' too bad that yuh shoulda fell foul of the law."

"Man—I though ole Bart Loyale was gonna crawl right outa bed, sick as he was, an' scalp that lawyer right there. 'Damn yore law!' yelled Bart. 'That boy is innocent an' yuh know it, Arthur, yuh crooked, lyin' polecat! Get outa here, fore yore packed out on a board.' Don't worry, Slim; yore daddy stood behind yuh to his last breath."

A long silence fell. Slim's chin was on his chest. Presently he stirred. "Yuh seen Mona Hall lately?"

Dakota nodded. "Saw her day before yesterday. She asked about yuh, Slim. I told her yuh were gettin' out today."

"What—what did she say?" "Nothin'—with her lips. But she kinda twisted them slim, little brown hands of hers an' looked away out past me—like she was lookin' at a sunrise an' findin' it good."

Silence fell again, unbroken except for the steady munching of the horses. A sap pocket in a piece of glowing wood snapped sharply, scattering a little cloud of ashes from the fire. The crimson of the sunset sky faded and dusk thickened. A hoot owl boomed hollowly from a neighboring sycamore. Thin and far away a coyote yammered at the first stars.

Slim Loyale got to his feet and dragged a blanket roll from the dunnage heap. He set about spreading them in the very center of the little meadow.

"It'll be a heavy dew, tonight, Slim," counseled Dakota Blue. "Yuh better spread 'em back under the willows where mine are."

Slim laughed softly. "I wanta taste that dew once more, Dakota. I wanta feel it on my face, an' I wanta look at the stars a heap. I ain't seen much of 'em for—a long time."

Shortly before midnight, Slim Loyale and Dakota Blue rode into the cow town of Pinnacle. The single street was dusty and wide, and flanked with warped, splintery board sidewalks. The buildings were nearly all of frame construction, their high false fronts throwing blocks of shadow.

The street ran north and south, and at the north end stood a livery stable and corral with a watering trough in front. Across from the livery stable was Sheriff Jigger Starbuck's office and behind the office stood the jail. The latter was a small square chubby, which differed in construction from the majority of the buildings inasmuch as it was made of stout fir logs, brought down from the slopes of the jagged Mineral Mountains to the north.

At the hitching-rail before the sheriff's office, Slim and Dakota dismounted. "Yuh go ahead with yore business, Slim," said Dakota. "When yore done, come on over to Spud Dillon's place. I'll be waitin' for yuh there."

Slim nodded, twisted the reins of his mount around the rail, then walked up to the door of the office and knocked. He entered at the summons of a deep resonant voice.

Sheriff Starbuck sat behind a battered, paper-littered desk. He was a tall man of middle age, thin and leathery-brown. His clean-shaven face was hard from the habitual grim set of his jutting jaw. His eyes were a light blue, cold and searching. He showed no evidence of surprise at sight of Slim. Instead, he rose to his feet and thrust forth his hand.

"Hello Slim," he said. "Glad to see yuh back?"

Slim shook hands. "Glad to be back, Jigger. Yuh knew I was comin'?"

Continued Next Issue

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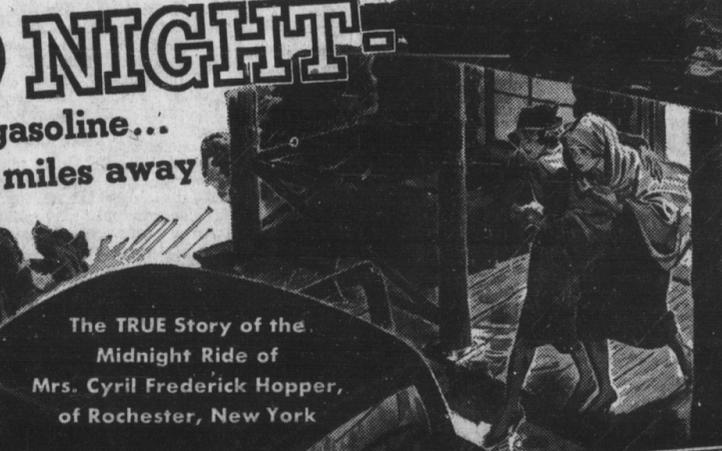
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