

Leather-Guns of Circle L

by Perry Westbrook

SECOND INSTALLMENT
SYNOPSIS: Slim Loyale is 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.

Starbuck nodded, and poked a legal looking envelope lying on the desk. "Got word yesterday. What yuh aimin' to do Slim?"

"Go out to the Circle L an' get to work."

"Glad to hear that. Was afraid yuh'd come back with the idee of startin' trouble. An' that'd be bad—with yuh on parole."

Slim's lips tightened. "I ain't aimin' to turn the other cheek, Jigger," he said softly. "Remember, I'm human. Certain folks in this neck of the woods gave me a dirty deal. I ain't exactly gonna kiss 'em when I run into 'em, but I know what that parole means."

"At the first sign of trouble I go back to—hell. Well, I aim to do the best I can. But if some folks start trompin' on my toes, I'll see that they get off. Yuh can't blame me for that?"

"I ain't blamin' yuh for nothin', Slim. But my personal feelin's ain't matterin' one little bit in this. It's the law you're beholden to. So yuh wanta watch yore step."

Slim laughed a little harshly. "Yuh still got ice water for blood, ain't you? You're a funny guy, Jigger. Sometimes I think you're white, an' sometimes I ain't so shore."

Starbuck shrugged without offense. "I took my oath to uphold an' enforce the law. It ain't me to question how it works. I aim to do my duty."

"Yuh would," retorted Slim tersely, "even if it broke yore own heart an' ruined yore best friend. Well, I didn't come in here to get into a argument. I was told to report here to yuh every two weeks, and I'll do it—for the next eighteen months."

"After that, I'm my own boss again. An' after eighteen months certain folks in these parts are gonna find that a woolly wolf has come back to live with 'em. Nobody can steal a year an' a half of my life, blast my reputation, an' get away it. Now I'll thank yuh for my guns, Jigger. I suppose yuh still got 'em?"

"I've got 'em," nodded Starbuck. "But I'd rather yuh wouldn't wear 'em, Slim. They'll be a temptation—a bad temptation, as long as they're hangin' on yore hip. If yuh go to throwin' 'em,

it's hard tellin' just how yuh'll end up."

"That's my pie," said Slim grimly. "I want 'em."

Starbuck shrugged again, crossed to a little clothes closet and lifted down a pair of cartridge belts, carrying two heavy, holstered Colts. He handed them to Slim, who buckled them about his waist, as he stepped to the door. "Much obliged, Jigger," he said over his shoulder. "See yuh two weeks from now."

Loyale left the sheriff's office and started to cross the street. A buckboard was whirling up from the south end of the street, drawn by a fast stepping pair of bang-tail mustangs. A girl was driving it alone, but on either side jogged two mounted men. Slim recognized the trio immediately. The girl was Mona Hall. The two men were Sarg Brockwell and his son, Leo.

Slim stiffened and he went a little white about the lips. For a moment his impulse was to pull his hat low over his eyes, lower his head, and hurry across the street. But a surge of burning defiance forestalled this truant weakness. So he watched them quietly, rolling and lighting a cigarette with a steady hand.

They were almost opposite him before the girl saw him. For a moment she stared. Then with one lithe twist of her slender shoulders, she set the bang-tails up short, locked the brake, looped the reins about it and jumped to the ground. She ran to him, light-footed as a fawn, a pliant little figure in khaki blouse and divided skirt.

Her hair, where it escaped in truant tendrils from beneath her dusty Stetson, was crisply brown. Her eyes were blue and heavy lashed, her nose short and straight, her lips generous and soft. And the blood flushed rich in cheeks and throat of a smooth, velvety tan.

"Slim!" she exclaimed. "Slim Loyale—oh, but it's good to see you!"

Slim, a little shaky, took both her outstretched, gauntleted hands in his. "Yuh really mean that, Mona?" he muttered huskily.

"Mean it?" she cried. "Indeed, I do mean it! If you need further convincing—there."

Before Slim could think, she had stepped close to him, risen on her tiptoes and kissed him. "Satisfied?" Her smile was a little tremulous.

For a moment Slim could not answer. "It's worth goin' through hell—to come back to heaven," he muttered finally. "Mona you're a little thoroughbred, same as always. But yuh'll be ruinin' yore reputation, kissin' a ex-convict."

Mona stamped one little, booted foot. "Bosh! Don't mention that word to me again. You are just an innocent man who has gotten a mighty shady deal. And if I can't kiss my old pal hello, I want to know why."

"I—I'm glad yuh feel that way about the innocent part, Mona. Some folks don't agree with you."

"Other folks be hangin'!" she retorted spiritedly. "I know you, Slim Loyale, better than anybody else. I ought to; we grew up together. Now let's talk of other things. You'll be going out to the Circle L, I suppose."

Slim nodded. "Soon as I can rustle up Dakota Blue. He's over in the Wild Horse Saloon."

"Then I want you to come over home and see me this evening, Slim. There's a lot to talk about. You'll come, won't you?"

"Try an' keep me away," grinned Slim. "I reckon I ain't forgot the trail."

She gave his hands a squeeze. "That's better," she said softly. "I was afraid you would be changed in some terrible manner. I want to see my old pal, Slim Loyale, not some hard-boiled stranger. Now I'll be getting along. Don't forget—seven o'clock."

Again her slim, strong little fingers tightened. Then she went back to the buckboard, climbed in and kicked off the brake. She waved to him as the broncos broke into a run.

Slim watched her until she had halted the rig in front of Ase Langley's big general store and disappeared from sight through its shadowy doorways. Then he sighed deeply and relit his cigarette which had gotten cold during her greeting.

Suddenly he remembered the men who had been riding with Mona. When he looked for them, he saw that they had dismounted in front of the Wild Horse Saloon and were just entering it. Slim's lips tightened and his eyes grew bleak. But he crossed the street and entered the place himself.

There were just five men in the Wild Horse when Slim entered. Dakota Blue was there, talking across the bar with Spud Dillon, the short, fat, red-faced, jolly proprietor. Then there was old Joe Rooney, a broken-down old mule-skinner who did the swamping for Dillon. Joe was sanding down the cues behind the pool table.

Sarg Brockwell and his son had swung up to the bar near the door and Spud Dillon was just moving down toward them when Slim entered. But at sight of Slim, Dillon seemed to forget all about the Brockwells. His fat, red face broke into a wide, delighted grin and one pudgy hand shot across the bar.

"Slim," he cried out delightedly. "Slim Loyale, yuh danged young whelp, how are yuh, boy? Put her there! Gosh, I'm glad to see yuh."

Slim knew Spud Dillon well, and he knew that Spud meant every word of his greeting. So he wrung Dillon's hand heartily and smiled. "An' I'm shore glad to see yuh, Spud, yuh fat ole duffer. I do believe yuh've been losin' weight."

Spud guffawed. "Oh, shore I am. I've only taken on twenty more pounds since I saw yuh last, Slim. Have a drink. I'm buyin'."

As Dillon turned for bottle and glasses, a silver dollar was rung on the bar. Then a cold, sneering voice sounded. "When yuh get through makin' over yore jailbird friend, Dillon, we'd like some service."

Slim caught his breath in a little hiss and whirled. His face was white, and his lips a tight, straight line. He made a queer rasping sound in his throat and he stepped away from the bar, crouching.

"Brockwell," he grated thickly, "yuh—"

"Shut up, Slim!" It was Dakota Blue who spoke. His hand locked on Slim's shoulder and he pulled the young fellow back, stepping between him and the Brockwells. "Remember yore parole, kid," he muttered. "I'll handle this."

Dakota walked toward the Brockwells. Sarg Brockwell was the big man, dark of hair and swarthy of skin. His face was broad with high cheek bones and little, glinting black eyes. His lips were thick and in repose wore a continual, confident grin, disclosing two rows of teeth, startling in their size and whiteness. As Spud Dillon had said one time, "I never look at them teeth of Sarg Brock-

well's but what I think of a graveyard."

Leo Brockwell was smaller than his father, with the same swarthy coloring and black eyes. But Leo's mouth was thin, sarcastic and sneering, twisting up at one corner. He was built on the lithe feline lines of a panther, and he moved with the same slinking walk.

His hands on his hips, Dakota Blue stopped a yard from the Brockwells. "Which one of yuh made that crack?" he demanded coldly.

"Yes, by Jiminy," yelled Spud Dillon, his round face scarlet with anger. "lemme tell yuh somethin' Sarg Brockwell! I don't like yuh or yore no-good son or nothin' about yuh, savvy? I choose my own friends an' to hell with yuh! Yuh've had your last drink over this bar. Yore money ain't worth a damn here, from now on. Chaw on that!"

Neither of the Brockwells paid any attention to Dillon. They were watching Dakota Blue. "Well I'm waitin'," drawled Dakota. "Which one of yuh made that crack?"

Leo's lips twisted. "I did," he snarled. "What's it to yuh?"

"This!" Dakota's fist moved with startling speed. It landed with a spat on young Brockwell's mouth and he went over backward, clawing at his gun. At Dakota's movement, Sarg Brockwell had jumped back, his right hand flashing to his hip. Thrown a little off balance by his blow, Dakota lagged on his draw, and it looked as if Sarg Brockwell had him dead to rights.

Here Joe Rooney stepped into the game. At the first hint of hostilities, Joe had slipped away from the pool table, a cue gripped in his hands, his faded old eyes glinting purposefully. And now, as Sarg Brockwell threw down on

Dakota, Joe jammed the cue between Sarg Brockwell's ankles and gave it a violent twist.

Brockwell, his feet cut from under him, cursed raucously as he fell forward, and his gun rammed flame and smoke into the floor. Dakota's return shot, loosed as Brockwell was falling cut through the shoulder of Brockwell's shirt, just nicking the heavy muscles.

Before Brockwell could straighten himself, Dakota stepped forward and kicked the gun from his hand.

Leo Brockwell, dazed and bleeding, was mumbling curses and fumbling at his gun. As he raised it, Joe Rooney slammed him across the wrist with his cue. The gun thumped to the floor, where Dakota Blue snapped it up.

Dakota stepped back. "A'right, Joe," he drawled. "Let em up. I got their stingers. An' much obliged, Joe. That was quick, heady work."

Sarg Brockwell lunched to his feet and dragged Leo up beside him. A little smear of blood showed on Sarg's shoulder. And before anyone could speak further, Jigger Starbuck came lunging through the swinging doors, a drawn gun in his hand.

"What's going on in here?" he snapped. "Loyale, are yuh in trouble already?"

"Hardly," answered Dakota, smiling thinly. "Not quite so fast, Starbuck. Damned if yuh don't act like you're just waitin' a chance to try an' hang somethin' on Slim."

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