

Leashed Guns of Circle L

by Perry Westbrook

FIFTH 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.

The Brockwells and their gang are plotting to gain possession of Circle L ranch and the property of Mona Hall, a neighbor and life-long friend of Slim Loyale. Slim discovers that Sheriff Starbuck has joined the plot against him. With the help of Dakota Blue and his cowboys, Slim Loyale defies the landgrabbers to do their worst.

He only knew that he had this hated fellow where he wanted him, and that a keen, savage yid 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 forearm 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.

Strength During MIDDLE LIFE

Strength is extra-important for women going through the change of life. Then the body needs the very best nourishment to fortify it against the changes that are taking place. In such cases, Cardui has proved helpful to many women. It increases the appetite and aids digestion, favoring more complete transformation of food into living tissue, resulting in improved nutrition and building up and strengthening of the whole system.



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"An' if yo' cotton and cawn could talk, they'd say jes' exactly the same thing to you—'NATCHEL Sody, please suh!'"

Uncle Natchel

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NATURAL AS THE GROUND IT COMES FROM

There was a queer pain in Abe's eyes as he watched Mona. "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'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 and 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, "yore 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 of this ranch an' stay off. I told yuh somethin'; 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 straight at the 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. "Yore 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. He gives me the shivers, always did. But I've got to get money from somewhere, 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 talking with him about—I guess it's all off now."

Mona's 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 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 pauperish any time, the same as he has me."

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

Mona nodded. Slim was silent, thinking. "Yeah," he mtered finally, "it could be done. Flash Courtney, eh?" He looked at Mona. "How come yuh ain't been able to fight him 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 that 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 no 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 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 dickering 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—the lawyer, George Arthur."

"George Arthur!" exploded Slim. "Why he was the lyn' polecat who sold out on 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 words were bitter.

"I don't think you understand, Slim," he 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 you'd have done the same."

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

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 fore-closin' 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 happy 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 to-night. 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. "Divil a bit do yuh worry about the why an' wherefore, lad," he answered. "I'm swappin' hats an' broncs with yuh now."

Without waiting for the amazed 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."

Slim, bewildered, slid to the ground, but he did not relax the grip on the reins of his gray gelding. "What's the meanin' of all this hocuspocus, Roy?" he insisted. "Open up or 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 start home myself. But 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 Week)

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