

Leaded Guns

EIGHTH 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.

Starbuck came over and entered. "Well?" he demanded. "What did Loyale an' Blue want?"

The lawyer fumbled nervously for a black stogy, snapped the tip off and lit it. "Loyale tried to get me to sell the Dot H Dot mortgage to him. I'm afraid they are beginning to get wise, Starbuck."

"I know damned well they are," grunted the sheriff. "They shored me over a barrel just now. I got a hunch I'm gonna be the final goat in this deal. It won't be healthy for a lot of folks I can name, if things shape that way too strong."

Arthur looked puzzled. "I don't exactly understand."

"I mean that Brockwell is gettin' too raw," exploded Starbuck, the anger he had been subduing breaking forth in full fury. "Him an' his crowd are clumsy as a bunch of oxen. Start from the beginning an' count up the slips he's made."

"Yuh an' me put Slim Loyale in Jarillo, knowin' Bart Loyale would be daid before Slim got out. Then the question of a parole for Slim came up. Brockwell promised us that he had influence enough to block that parole. He fell down an' Slim got out."

"In the meantime he was gonna see that Dakota Blue was put outa the way. The best he could do about that was to miss a good shot at Blue one day along Nigger Ridge. Since then Blue's been too wary to be got. Sarg ain't been able to pull down the Dot H Dot herds fast enough to keep the Hall girl from payin' her interest on that note yuh hold."

"Why, I hear that he was even dickerin' to buy up some of her stuff. Course he'd have robbed her, give her only half what the stock was worth, but had the deal gone through, she'd have had more money to stall yuh off. Brockwell is so damned greedy he's blind."

"Anyway, last night he had a chance to get Slim Loyale on the trail between the Circle L and the Dot H Dot. Loyale got through clean with the help of Roy O'Brien. Before the night was over, O'Brien plugged Rango Deale."

"Deale an' Cinder Alton were pals. So what does that crazy Alton do but try to wipe out Loyale again just now up in the Wild Horse. Loyale didn't even have a gun on him. Alton got upset an' his guns were taken off him. An' Loyale an' Blue are all through turnin' the other cheek."

"Loyale's puttin' on his guns. He told me straight that, parole or no parole, he's gonna start throwin' lead. He also said that if I tried to take him into custody he'd salivate me. An' Dakota Blue an' the whole Circle L outfit is backin' Loyale to a finish. Damn Brockwell an' his crowd for a bunch of knot-haired fools, anyhow!"

Starbuck had talked so fast and with so much pent-up anger, that he was breathless when he finished. George Arthur had begun pacing about his office again, his thin lips pursed, his forehead wrinkled with agitated thought.

"Things have been badly messed," he agreed jerkily. "But of course if the worst comes to the worst, we can stage a raid on the Circle L some night and clean up the whole nest."

Starbuck laughed scornfully. "Yuh gone crazy too?" he demanded. "Yuh sound like it, talkin' that way. Listen here, Arthur. Only a idiot underestimates his opponent. Slim Loyale is a scrappin' fool; he comes from that kinda stock."

"Backin' him are three of the most dangerous men that ever swung a laig over a saddle. I'm referring to Dakota Blue, Stoney Sheard an' Roy O'Brien. Wind them three up an' get 'em started and they're better than a dozen ordinary men. Steve Owens an' Charley Quinn are young cubs, but not afraid of anything under the sun."

"An' me, I'd rather trade wallops with a grizzly bear than mix it hand to hand with that big Swede cook, Oscar. So just knock the idee outa your head that the Circle L spread can be rushed an' wiped out in a pitched fight."

"But we've got to do something," snapped the lawyer. "The opening of the Kicapoo River range is due the middle of next month. The migration of the Big Bend herds will start immediately. In fact, I know that some of them are on the move already, intending to be the first on the new ground. We've got to get control of the Circle L and the Dot H Dot, or all our plans and work

will go for nothing. We've just got to do it, I tell you!"

Starbuck laughed harshly. "Yuh an' Brockwell go ahead an' get 'em then," he said mockingly. "Me, I'm about through. I sat into this plan in the first place, willin' to do my part, 'cause I figured I was sidin' in with men who had some savvy an' brains. I found I was mistaken."

"I'll still play the game with yuh, as far as I can swing it. But I'm sittin' back an' sayin' nothin'. The finish is up to yuh an' Brockwell, damn him. He ain't played fair at all. He won't even leave the Vasco stage alone. An' folks are beginnin' to look at me sorta outa the corners of their eyes, because I ain't roundin' up the jaspers who are pullin' them hold-ups."

"We fixed one of them hold-ups once on a innocent man, Slim Loyale. But that game ain't gonna get over a second time. Nope, I'm keepin' my coat tails in the clear from now on. Yuh can tell Brockwell that, an' to hell with both of yuh!"

Saying which, Jigger Starbuck stalked out of the door and crossed to the solitude of his own office. That same morning, Mona Hall had just finished her breakfast when Abe Fornachan clanked into her room. "Mornin', Miss Mona," he drawled, his deep eyes flitting over her wistfully. "I hear there was trouble along the trail last night."

Mona started up, her face white, her hands going to her throat. "Slim!" she gasped. "Slim isn't—"

"Slim's all right," broke in Abe gently. "Brockwell's crowd was layin' for him, but between him an' Roy O'Brien they foxed 'em. There was one casualty. Rango Deale got rocked off by Roy. Shore, there's bad trouble brewin'."

Mona nodded, her eyes tragic. "I've sensed it piling up on this range, Abe, for a long time. Ever since they sent Slim to prison I've felt that sinister cloud hanging above us all. I'm afraid, Abe—afraid."

Still later that morning, almost noon, in fact, a buckboard rattled up to the Dot H Dot. George Arthur, dressed in a voluminous linen duster and a narrow-brimmed Stetson got out of it. There was a sharp, nervous impatience in his eyes, his thin lips were set.

Mona met him on the porch, murmuring a perfunctory greeting. Arthur wasted no time in getting to the purpose of his visit. "Miss Hall," he rasped, "are you prepared to settle the note I hold against your ranch?"

Mona's heart sank. She shook her head. "No, I'm not, Mr. Arthur—at least, not immediately. But with a little more time—"

Arthur halted her with uplifted hand. "Impossible," he snapped. "I regret this, of course, but conditions are such that I can extend you no further time. I shall have to foreclose immediately."

"B-but you said—" Mona was fencing rather fantically, but Arthur cut her short again, with almost brutal directness.

"What I may have said in the past has absolutely no bearing on the present, Miss Hall. Again I am sorry, but business exigencies force this step upon me. I am giving you ten days' notice. On the twentieth of this month I will take possession. Good day."

He was gone before Mona could collect her wits, leaving her feeling more desolately beaten than ever before in her life. It wasn't that the blow was entirely unexpected. Mona had known that the ax would fall sometime, just as she had intimated to Slim Loyale. But she was human enough to have hung on to one last thread of hope that something might turn up to avert the foreclosure.

She turned wearily back to the house, her eyes dimming with tears, her throat convulsed with sobs. Two hours later she hunted up Abe Fornachan. "Abe," she choked, "we're all done. The old Dot H Dot Ranch is about to change proprietors, Arthur is foreclosing on the twentieth."

"You'll have to tell the boys; I haven't the heart. Of course, if they want to gamble on Arthur retaining them after he takes over the place, they can. But I can't afford to keep them another day. I've just got about enough to pay them all off, including you. Oh, Abe, it hurts me so!"

She began to sob again, little choked sobs that set lines of grim, white suffering about Abe Fornachan's lips. He laid a big hand on her bowed shoulder. "Don't yuh worry none about us, Miss Mona," he told her gently. "We'll make out."

"Me, I've seen this coming and I ain't a mite surprised. For that matter, neither will the boys be. O' course it ain't exactly my business, but why don't yuh make a deal with Slim Loyale? He's got plenty of ready cash. I know Slim would be tickled to death to help yuh out."

had so much trouble himself, I can't add mine to the load. Besides, there are other reasons that make it—well, I just can't; that's all."

"I see," nodded Fornachan even though he didn't. "Well, keep a stiff upper lip. Ten day's time is ten day's time. Mebbe somethin' will turn up."

"No, Abe; nothing will. That's the trouble. I've been waiting too long now for some good break to come along. They just don't; that's all. If I had stepped out with ruthless hands and forced my own breaks, things would be different now."

"Mebbe," nodded Fornachan. "Mebbe yo're right. Well, I'll tell the boys. An' some day I'm gonna cook up a reason to punch that lawyer jasper to a tall, thin peak."

Mona went back to the house. As soon as she disappeared, Abe saddled a bronco and rode off, apparently in search of the Dot H Dot punchers, to give them the bad news. But as soon as he was out of sight of the ranch buildings, he headed straight for the Circle L.

He rode rapidly, and about halfway between the two places overtook another rider, a tall, keen-eyed man of middle age, dressed in dusty, worn range habiliments. The stranger's hair was bleached to a straw yellow, as was the long drooping mustache that bracketed his thin, strong mouth.

At sound of Abe's approach, the stranger turned in his saddle and stopped. "When Abe came up he nodded, 'Amigo,' he drawled, his voice deep and slow, 'mebbe yuh can tell me where I can locate a feller named Arthur—George Arthur.'"

Abe looked the stranger over keenly before answering. "Yeah, I can. Yuh'll find him at his office in town."

"Town called Pinnacle?"

"Yeah. Over thataway, a good two hours' ride."

"Shore, I'm off the trail. But I understood he owned a ranch hereabouts—the Dot H Dot Ranch."

Abe stiffened. "There must be a mistake somewhere. Arthur don't own the Dot H Dot, yet. How long since was it yuh got that word?"

"Nigh onto a month. Yuh see my name's Tisdale. I own a purty good-sized spread down in the Big Bend country, but I'm pullin' out with a lot of other Big Bend ranchers. Too much sheep down there. We're haidin' up into this new Kicapoo country that's to be opened."

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