



TENTH INSTALMENT
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.

"I say yes," exploded Tisdale. "I got money in my poke an' the boys down in Jericho Valley have authorized me to act for the whole crowd. Let's go and see the young lady right away."

That night, behind locked door and shuttered windows, three men met in heated argument in George Arthur's office. Arthur himself was again nervously pacing back and forth, while Sarg Brockwell and Jigger Starbuck occupied chairs.

"I tell you," snapped Arthur, "we've got to act quick, without a minute of delay. If we don't, we lose everything. Those herds are nearly to the north end of Jericho Valley right now. Tisdale, the Big Bend representative, raved like a wild man when I told him it would cost him and the others a dollar a head to cross the range, but they'll pay in the end. They'll have to, and they know it."

"But now Loyale is going to loan Miss Hall money enough to pay me. We've got to stop that move somehow, and there is only one way to do it. I've told you how. We'd be better off if we had the Circle L too, but we simply gotta get the Dot H Dot to get any money outa this deal."

"It's a pretty stiff deal you're handin' me an' my gang, Arthur," growled Brockwell, his big teeth showing in a snarl of anger. "Robbin' a bank is apt to start somethin' we can't stop. Folks in this neck of the woods are beginning to get kinda on edge."

"Why shouldn't they?" broke in Starbuck. "Yuh've messed things up from the first, Sarg. Yuh won't leave that Vasco stage alone. You're so danged greedy yuh can't see the end of yore own nose, if a dollar is in the way."

"I'm about ready to chuck the whole thing an' pull my freight. Time was when I was a square-shooter. Yuh jaspers dangled a lot of promises an' false bait in front of me, an' I turned coyote. I'm sick of the whole deal."

"This is no time to quarrel among ourselves or quit," snapped Arthur. "We can still win out—"

big Brockwell, that bank has got to be robbed, and Loyale and Blue have got to be rubbed out. Furthermore, we've got to act tonight."

Silence fell. Every one of these three realized that they were gambling madly beyond all reason. Yet so deeply were they in the fire already, they could not stop. A wild, reckless light flamed in Starbuck's eyes.

"Gimme enough men for a posse, an' I'll go out to the Circle L. an' arrest both Loyale an' Blue. If they resist an' I hope they will we'll rock 'em off. If they don't well, I can allus swear they made a getaway attempt along the trail to town an' rock 'em off anyway. Gimme five men an' I'll make my play. Like Arthur says, it's whole hawg or none."

Brockwell licked his thick lips. "Keno! I'll split my crew. Jigger yuh can take half; I'll take the rest. While yore outa town, I'll spear that bank. It'll be a good alibi for yuh anyhow."

"But we don't take all the risk, Arthur, at daybreak tomorrow mornin' you're due at the Dot H Dot. Clamp that foreclosure on an' make it stick. I don't care how much time of notice yuh've give that Hall woman. Take it back. Slap that foreclosure on without another day of grace. Savvy?"

"Oh, I'll do it," promised Arthur. "We've got to pyramid now—push our luck for all we've got. That's decided. Let's drink on it."

From the lower drawer of his desk, the renegade lawyer produced a whiskey bottle and three glasses. And with him drank a renegade sheriff and a renegade cattleman. Without further words, Starbuck and Brockwell went out into the night.

Arthur remained and drank and drank until he was dead-drunk. At least, the other two were fighting men, who, in the final showdown, were game to sniff smoke. But he was the rat, drinking to stifle his innate cowardice, to try and whip his shanking nerves to face the big showdown.

Out at the Dot H Dot, Mona Hall was radiant. Sam Tisdale had just laid a pile of bills on the table before her. "There's five thousand dollars, Miss Hall," he said. "There'll probably be a thousand or fifteen hundred more due yuh. We'll make a good count as the herds go through the pass at the north end of Jericho. Yuh can rest happy that we'll shoot square with you."

"Oh, I know you will, Mr. Tisdale," she cried. "You don't know what this means! You can't guess—"

Tisdale grinned. "Mebbe I can better than yuh think, miss," he broke in. "Give all the credit to Loyale here. He figured it out for the both of us."

As the three men were leaving, Mona caught Slim by the arm. Her eyes were starry. "You're the best, dearest friend ever, Slim," she told him.

Slim smiled and chuckled her under the chin. "Me, I'm beginnin' to get tired of that word 'friend.' It's okay for some cases, but in others it's pretty darned empty soundin'. When things are squared away on this range again, we'll argue that out. Adios! It's plumb good to see yuh smilin' again an' with roses in yore cheeks, Mona."

Outside, Slim paused for a moment beside the Dot H Dot bunkhouse and called Abe Fornachon. "Abe," he said, "Mona's got quite a lump of money there in the house—enough to squelch that mortgage. Kinda keep yore eye on things, will yuh? An' if Arthur shows up tomorrow to try an' foreclose, yuh be present an' see that he takes the money an' receipts the note an' turns it over to Mona."

"I'll wring his damned neck if he don't," promised Abe. At the Circle L, a heavy argument was in progress. Steve Owens and Charley Quinn were sprawled flat on the ground behind a substantial pile of spare corral rails, their cheeks pressed to the stocks of a pair of Winchester's, the muzzles of which bore steadily upon a dark clump of riders.

"Yuh jaspers stay put!" yelled Steve. "Yuh start anythin' an' we'll shore finish it."

"But I've got warrants, I tell yuh," came back Jigger Starbuck's voice. "This is the law. Put down them guns an' get some sense."

"Yore kind of law has got a busted back around this ranch, Starbuck," retorted Steve. "Best thing yuh can do is pull yore freight. Won't be no warrants served around here."

There came a mutter of argument from the posse, then Leo Brockwell's venomous tones sounded. "Aw, hell! This blab makes me sick. Let's rush 'em. We can't stand here all night arguin'. Let's spread out an' circle that pile of rails an' show them jaspers they're draggin' a short rope."

During the renewed argument over this plan, Steve and Charley got busy immediately. Not unlike a pair of awkward land crabs, they spraddled backwards, located the corral fence with their feet and slid under it. Then, rising to a crouch, they stole along it.

"Yuh git behind the feed shed, Charley," whispered Steve. "I'll hole up around the bunk shack. If they start murderin' that pile of rails, give it to 'em."

The bulk of the posse split and circled. "Last chance," came Starbuck's voice. "Come outa there or we start shootin'."

There was no answer. Starbuck cursed in sudden fury and rolled a gun, the others of the posse following suit. The night shook with the rumbling reports and was splashed with goutts of crimson flame from searching gun muzzles.

Without any more hesitation, Steve and Charley went to work. They laced the night with lead, their rifles sounding flatly. The posse was torn with confusion. "Spread out!" yelled Starbuck. "Git around the whole damned place, an' grab cover."

The posse needed no second command. Like startled quail they all scattered, seizing upon anything to get away from that surprising crossfire. One individual of the crowd, who had had his horse shot from under him, had the bad judgment to duck behind a corner of the big ranch house. Here he halted beneath an open window, peering back into the darkness.

Oscar, the big Swede cook, startled by this outburst of sudden gunfire, stuck his head out of the window. The posseman did not see him, but Oscar saw the crouching figure. By the snarling curses echoing upward, he knew it was neither Steve or Charley. Therefore Oscar leaned well out, one huge fist clubbed. It fell like a post maul, and the posseman subsided in a silent heap.

Oscar chuckled and heaved his big bulk out of the window. He found the fellow's guns and hefted them. "I guess this bane good time to start fightin'," rumbled Oscar to himself. So with a queer Swedish war cry, he waded in.

Slim and his two companions were about a quarter of a mile from home when that first burst of gunfire echoed. Instantly Slim spurred his mount to a scudding run. "Our fight, Tisdale," he flung over his shoulder. "No call for yuh to take chances. Yuh can drop out." "Like hell I will!" snapped Tisdale, spurring up even with Slim and Dakota Blue. "Yuh shot square with me, I'm returnin' the favor."

Just as they reached the ranch they heard Oscar's war cry and saw, by the gun flames that answered it, the approximate position of the attackers. Slim left his saddle while his horse was still in movement, and ran, crouching, down one corner of the central corral.

Tisdale followed Slim, but Dakota cut around the other way. By the steady spangling of the Winchester's, Slim got Steve and Charley located. So he turned his own guns loose on the hostile positions.

Almost opposite him from the other side of the corral came answering lead. Slim, a wild ferocity

upon him, stalked straight towards that place, shooting steadily. His hat left his head and swirled to one side, torn and dragged. Invisible fingers plucked at one flaring wing of his chaps. He heard Tisdale curse in sudden pain, but he kept on, shooting low and center.

The hostile guns went quiet and a choking curse echoed. A man tottered out of the blackness towards him. "Reach high," snapped Slim, "Reach high, quick!"

"Loyale!" gasped the other. "Yuh had all the luck. Yuh got me—yuh got me, yuh damned jailbird!"

The voice broke off and the figure slumped forward silently. Slim knew by the voice, that he had killed Leo Brockwell.

As Dakota Blue cut in from the opposite side, he found himself barging right through the scattered and disorganized forces of Starbuck's dishonored law. Starbuck, wildly furious at the way things were going against him, was trying by word and action to rally his men. By the renegade sheriff's cursing and shooting, Dakota was able to locate him, and with grim purposefulness he made his way towards him.

Momentarily, no one questioned Dakota's presence. He was right among the remaining numbers of the posse, and in the dark they had no way to distinguish him from any other of their crowd. Dakota wisely held his fire, working always towards his objective. He knew that he was taking a long chance of intercepting a slug from the gun of some ranch defender, but he was willing to take the gamble, providing he could get at Starbuck.

Long since, the last atom of doubt had been wiped from Dakota's mind regarding just how and where Jigger Starbuck stood in relation to the decent interests of the country. Too much damning evidence had been uncovered in the past week or two for him to be mistaken.

The remnants of the posse were

beginning to break and give back despite Starbuck's infuriated orders and cursing wrath. They had come with him in the first place believing that there would be little resistance to their plans. But here deadly lead was lashing them from several angles at once. They were being outfought by men

they could hardly locate, men who held the advantage of concealment and protection.

Continued Next Issue
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