

CHAPTER XIII

By the time she had reached a side door and flung it open the sounds of activity were already coming from the bunk house. There was a man there on a horse—it looked like Brimstone—and other men were tumbling out of the door half dressed and gathering around him. She herself was running now with leaden weights dragging at her feet.

It was Brimstone, glistening with the sweat of hard riding, but the man just dismounting from him was Francisco Ramirez.

Curley came running. He talked rapidly, giving her the blunt truth. "It's Lee. Francisco was goin' home late and he saw Brimstone in front of the cabin all saddled, but no sign of Lee. Francisco went up and found the cabin empty and blood on the saddle."

"Do you suspect anyone, Curly?"

"We're lookin' first for Lawler and Slanty Gano. They both held grudges against Lee, and [illegible] hunt up their ali- [illegible] hur-

Turkey Gulch were men. They were Circle V men and they rode with a purpose, scanning trail and hillside.

Crouched low in his covert between the rolling dust cloud and the riding men, with a deed in his pocket bearing the smeared imprint of a bloody thumb, Slanty knew that he was a fugitive.

At the ranch house relations between the inmates were noticeably strained, but Virginia saw little of the others. They would all have departed gladly, but to leave just now might create an unpleasant impression or even definitely arouse suspicion in this place where feeling was running so high. The Archers fussed around anxiously, Bradish was bluntly rude to his now useless agent, and Stanley was nervously on edge. There were several matters that were worrying him badly, and one of them was a thousand dollar bill. If they should catch Gano and find that bill on him, Staney Bradish was going to have a bad time trying to explain it.

The second day dragged out to ghastly length, but there was [illegible] trace of Lee and no sign of [illegible] Gano or Lawler. Men be- [illegible] shake their heads. There [illegible] enty of places around [illegible] re a man's body might [illegible] for a score of years. [illegible] rginia and one other [illegible] believe that Lee was [illegible] other came at dusk [illegible] d her arm slyly with [illegible] wn hand.

[illegible] te you any more. My [illegible] eak for you, and for [illegible] p you fin' heem."

[illegible] Josefa." Virginia [illegible] small hand closely.

• • •

[illegible] lack tunnel o the [illegible] gaunt shadow of a [illegible] ears ago Don Luis' [illegible] g had turned his [illegible] d Matt's into a [illegible] esecting tunnels, [illegible] se Lee stagger- [illegible] now fainting, [illegible] his feet again, [illegible] ing a sense of [illegible] which one [illegible] ump of lead [illegible] oating fea- [illegible] ng for a [illegible]

[illegible] ol about. [illegible] Presently he lost [illegible]

time. He did not know that it was the noon of the second day which found him back at the place where Slanty had left him.

Even as he worked, men were passing through Turkey Gulch, less than a hundred yards away. One of the deputies looked up at the yawning black hole.

"No chance of anybody hiding in the old Bonanza, is there?"

Curly shook his head. "I was up there yesterday with the sheriff. Ye can't get but a little ways in. Both tunnels is blocked by cave-ins.

They rode on. Back in the rubble-choked tunnel the digging hands had stopped. Lee was sinking down, down, into that deadening coma of weakness and exhaustion.

• • •

Long hours of hiding had not improved Slyanty Gano's temper and Lawler also was visibly soured. He was stretched out



Below them a human fly clung

indolently, half sitting, half sprawling, just inside of a narrow crevice some forty feet above the floor of a secluded little box canyon. It was a perfect hideout.

From where he lay on a pile of boughs, Slanty sent a jerring taunt at his fellow fugitive.

"Ye talk big, but I notice ye keep on skulkin'. The Circle V boys has found out that ye set

wind hadn't freshed up," retorted Lawler sullenly. "And I notice there's two of us skulkin'. It's you them boys are after. You've done for Lee Hollister. Didn't I hear what they said, passin' not twenty feet away from us—"

"Maybe ye'll remember that yore name was mentioned as well as mine." Slanty arose deliberately and faced his partner with a hard stare. "Where was ye Wednesday night, Lawler? Got an alibi?"

Slanty's voice was menacing, his head was thrust forward and his eyes bored into the stupidly staring ones of his slower witted companion.

"Better get your own alibi," snarled Lawler, but his voice was uncertain. Sticking doggedly to his one idea of ingratiating himself with Milton Bradish by piling up discouraging losses on the present owner of the Circle V, he had spent the night cutting out a bunch of Virginia's cattle and wantonly slaughtering them in a remote coulee. There had been a splash of blood on his shirt when he had returned in the early morning, to flee at the sight of those riding men. He wore his coat buttoned now to cover the stain.

resently Slanty went to where Lawler lay and put a hand on his shoulder as if to shake him

awake. The sleeping man did not stir. From a hiding place inside his shirt Slanty took out a folded paper and slipped it cautiously into Lawler's inner pocket. Then he arose lightly and went to the crevice that served them as a doorway.

Morning sunshine brightened the secretive little canyon. Down there two horses were picketed, well hidden from any casual [illegible] but only one of them was [illegible] flame. Wednesday night, and the foot was getting bad.

But Slanty knew what Lawler did not. There were two other horses not far away in a hidden corral. Slanty had more than once found it expedient to change mounts quickly.

When Lawler awoke, hours later, the sun was slantly westward and Slanty apparently was asleep. Lawler came softly to his feet and edged toward the narrow exit. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he let him down.

Leading the fresh horse Lawler picked his sealthy way out of the box canyon, hugging the rock wall.

He recalled feeling something stiff in an inside pocket of his coat as he had swung himself over the edge of the cave floor.

The paper that he drew out was puzzling. It was a neatly folded, legal looking document, with printing on the back and a single word standing out boldly. DEED. Other words caught his eye—"Matthew Blair"—"Lee Hollister."

Beneath the word Hollister was the blurred imprint of a bloody thumb.

aPnic swept over Lawer. Fire and slaughtered cattle, and in his possession the blood-smeared property of a murdered man. What little head Lawler had, he lost Cursing Slanty Gano and his horse, he mounted hastily and bolted for deeper shelter.

As he rode he caught sight of a dozen men pounding along behind him He crouched low over his horse's neck, cursing. All he could do now was to ride. Then the grade dropped suddenly. There was a lurch and a stumble. The horse went down and lay there. Lawler was flung free and staggered to his feet. He ran like a panic-stricken animal.

A few moments later the foremost of his pursuers flung themselves off their horses and looked down. Many feet below them a human fly clung to a rock wall. One man drew a gun.

"Hold on! He won't get away. He'e done for!" They watched him fall, turning, swooping, head down.

They stepped back and looked at one another. One of the young deputies spoke.

"It looks as if that settled it, boys. An innocent man don't take a chance like that. Where's that white thing he dropped?"

Someone found it in a clump of scrub They crowded together looking at a blood-stained deed, and exchanged hard glances.

"No doubt about it now," said the young deputy slowly. The search is over."

• • •

Each day Virginia had stopped for a little while at Lee's empty cabin, opening the door with the persisting, unreasonable hope that he might have found his way back there.

For that very season the blank finality of Curly's news about Lawler seemed cruller and harder to comprehend.

He saw that she wanted only to be alone, and he left her. She could hear him riding down to the mouth of Turkey Gulch, and then it was quiet again. She hurried toward her horse.

As she mounted, her little first aid kit bumped uselessly against her side. She had packed it so carefully,—bandages, iodine, restoratives, matches for a fire, a tin of broth, fresh every day. In one pocket was a flashlight for dark places, in another a policeman's whistle to call help to Lee. Futile little toys! She gave Black Lightning his head, ridding blindly.

The ragged scar of the Bonanza came into view, and Virginia remembered Joey, searching patiently and futilely for evidence in the loneliness of the old tunnel.

She snapped on the flash as soon as she had gone a little way in.

The pencil of white light flickered over rock walls and rubble-strewn floor, but there was no sign of Joey.

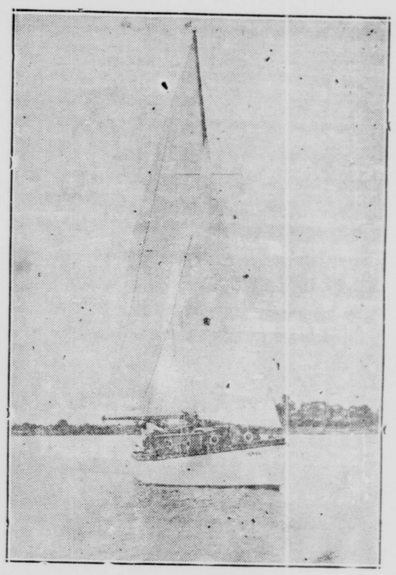
Just ahead there was a darkly looming bulk which must mark the spot where the big cave-in blocked all further ingress to the mine. The white beam danced along the face of the slide. Earth, stones, rubble. It switched down up, jerked suddenly and came back, searching wildly. Protuding stiffly from the piled earth and stone, gaunt and torn, blood-crusted and earth stained, motionless, was a human hand.

Yesterday that hand had not been there!

(To be continued)

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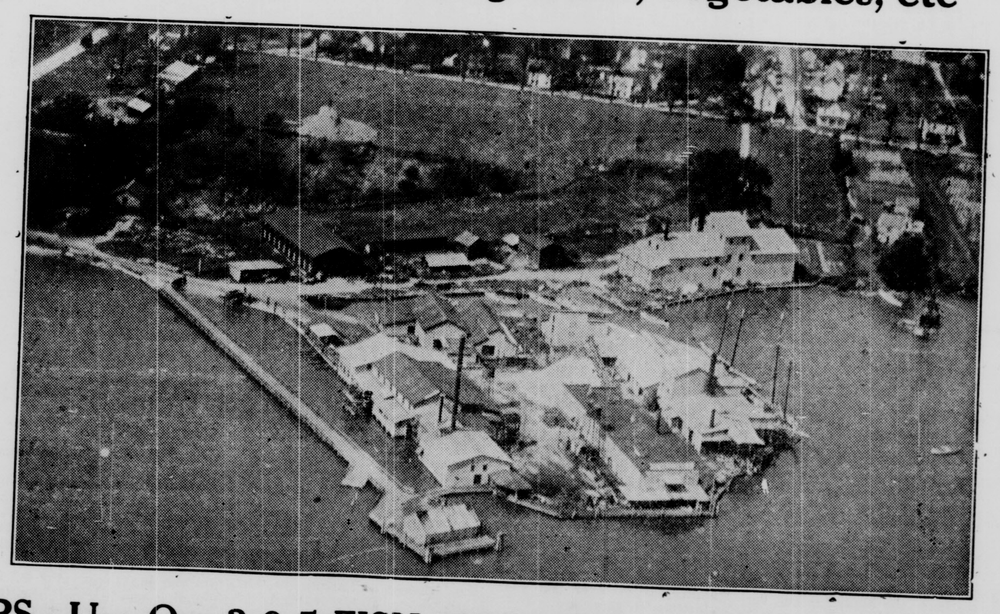
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