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SADDLE and RIDE

By ERNEST HAYCOX

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CHAPTER I

From the high edge of Mogul to the floor of Powder Desert was a sheer drop of fourteen hundred and sixty feet; and even on the quietest day a stream of warm air from the desert boiled up the face of the rim, so that if a man stood at the breakoff and tossed his hat outward it invariably sailed back to him. Clay Morgan had shown this to his daughter Janet long ago. It was a part of their ritual on the trip to town, and as soon as they reached the rim this afternoon, she reminded him of it again; whereupon he sailed his hat across the rim, caught it on the rebound, and witnessed her delighted smile. Afterwards they turned downgrade on a road steeply and narrowly cut against the face of the mountain.

As they descended she began to recite lines of "Hiawatha," in preparation for a school play. Riding slightly back of her, Clay Morgan watched her small arms gesture and her naturally sober face lighten and grow faintly dramatic. To him it was a matter of never-ending astonishment that one nine-year-old girl's head could hold so much.

The silence and the slow way she had of judging people came from him. The vivid imagination and the growing beauty came from her mother. It was something Clay Morgan had watched for, through the years—and yet, much as he had expected it, it still was strange to see in this girl the image of a woman nine years dead, to know that the tempestuous Lila who had been his wife now reached out of the grave to remind him of the one brief and violent and miserable and beautiful year of their marriage. In the beginning she had said she loved him; she had died hating him.

Powder Desert began at the bottom of the grade. Sand and sagebrush hummocks, built by the east wind, lay before them; around these lumpy barriers, high as a man's shoulders, meandered the deep twin ruts of the road. This September day's sun was half-down in the west and heat lay heavy on the flat; and in the near distance, on the benchland at the head of the desert, the houses of War Pass made an irregular outline. Toward this cattle town they traveled, Janet dreaming her nine-year-old dreams in sober stillness, Clay Morgan holding his clear intimations of trouble ahead.

Turning at the corner of Gentry's corral, Clay Morgan faced the length of Main Street, with its double row of angular wooden buildings and its deep golden dust. Under the courthouse locusts at the corner of Main and Stage, a large group of men idly waited; and he knew then that the trial of the rustler, Ollie Jacks, was still unfinished.

He dismounted by the stable and permitted both horses to nose into the water trough before tying them to the rack. Janet said: "I am going to Ann McGarrah's, Daddy."

She always had a quick smile for him when she mentioned Ann McGarrah's name, as though there might be some secret involved. "I think," she added, "we will eat supper there"—and watched him a moment with her observant eyes.

"You seem pretty sure of that."

Morgan remained near the stable's hitching-rack to roll up a quick smoke. But he was never a man to let his eyes be idle; thus now, while his fingers tapered off the cigarette his glance ran down the street, past the courthouse and post office and the Long Grade saloon, past the Mountain House hotel and beyond that to the little cluster of brick and dobe buildings of Old Town. Two cross-streets dropped from a higher level of the hillside. Up there sat the high, square, iron-ornamented houses owned by the wealthier merchants and the big cattlemen who liked to winter their families in town. This was four o'clock and already the street was in shadow, though the far desert burned up its brown-gray glitter.

Jesse Rusey, the town's marshal, cruised the walk—short, broad body swinging a little. He had the shoulders of a wrestler; above the sweep of his mustaches was a glance as cool as flint. This man had a kind of rocky solidness, a kind of formidable courtesy. He said, "How are you, Clay?" and passed by.

Charley Hillhouse and Hack Breathitt broke from the courthouse group and walked toward him, their boots puffing up the street's dust; but for a moment he remained slackly by the hitching-rack, his mind picking away at the mystery of Jesse Rusey. This town marshal had been in War Pass for twenty years, yet nobody knew him, or knew what he thought, or knew where his sympathies actually lay.

Hillhouse and Breathitt came cheerfully forward and for a moment these three fast friends stood by the hitching-rack and swapped gossip, pleased to be together again. All of them had grown up in the country, they had gone to school together and had worked and hunted and had their fun together, and in trouble had stood inseparably side by side. Clay Morgan said: "Nothing new on Ollie Jacks yet?"

Hillhouse shrugged his shoulders: "They been arguing about it since noon. I don't see nothin' to argue about. We caught Ollie dead in his tracks, bendin' over a Three Pines calf with his iron. But there's a couple townsmen on the jury. They're the ones hanging this thing up."

Hack Breathitt grinned: "Ben Herendeen's sore enough to shoot the jury." He gave Charley Hillhouse a slanting, skeptic glance.

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"If they don't throw Ollie Jacks in the cooler, there ain't no use for juries."

"Your boss is gettin' pretty large for his pants, Charley. But then he always was that way."

Ben Herendeen owned Three Pines, and Charley Hillhouse was Herendeen's foreman, loyal to the core. Hillhouse said in a mild voice:

"If they don't throw Ollie Jacks in the cooler there ain't no use for any juries in this country.

"After all, Hack, it was Ben's beef."

They moved toward the Long Grade saloon, three abreast. Directly opposite, under the locust trees, Clay noticed the crowd grouped around Ben Herendeen—Gurd Grant and Lige White, both big cattlemen, and Sheriff Ed Nickum, and a few smaller ranchers like Hamp Brigham and Vance Ketchell. Herendeen's riders, with a few townsmen, made up the rest of the crowd.

Hack Breathitt got a bottle, two glasses, and a bunch of cigars. They went to a corner table and sat down. Hack Breathitt passed the cigars to Morgan, poured a drink for Hillhouse and for himself and settled deep in the chair. For that little interval he was as relaxed as he could ever be, still smiling a little, still with the sparkle of secret amusement in his eyes. He said, "To law and order," and downed the drink.

"You," said Hillhouse tolerantly, "are an ornery son-of-a-gun."

"The country ain't the same," murmured Hack. "There's one hell of a beautiful ruckus comin'. The sheep and the goats. That's it. The sheep and the goats. Accordin' to Ben Herendeen I'm one of the goats. Ben's about ready to work on the goats."

Charley Hillhouse, who was a quiet workhorse of a man, slowly nodded.

Breathitt started to speak but was stopped by quick-rising talk on the street. A man struck the swinging doors of the saloon with both fists and rushed in. He said, in a half shout, "They let Ollie Jacks free," and ran out. The conversation in the saloon rose at once to a noisy pitch.

Hack Breathitt grinned. "I'd like to see Ben Herendeen's face right now."

Charley Hillhouse answered irritably. "If it was your beef, Hack, you wouldn't make a joke of it."

Hack Breathitt had his moments of wisdom; he had his far thoughts. "There's two kinds of people in this world, Charley. Those that have got beef—and those that have got none. People that stick and people that drift. The Lord made you and me different. It ain't my fault and it ain't your fault. But I like my way—and no man can make me change."

"Ben's got nothing against you," said Charley Hillhouse.

Hack Breathitt showed Hillhouse a smart, dark expression. "When folks get heated up, Charley, there ain't no halfway. It's one thing or the other. The sheep or the goats." He poured himself a second drink. "You know what I'm thinkin', boys? I'm thinkin' that this is probably the last time us three will sit at the same table."

"Don't talk like that," said Charley Hillhouse.

But both of them were watching Clay Morgan, who sat silent all the while, buried in his own thinking. He had always been the silent one, the last one to speak. He said, very quiet with his words, "I want you to know this, Hack. If you ever get in trouble, come to me. I'll stand behind you."

Charley Hillhouse shook his head, bothered by Morgan's words. "I knew you'd say that, Clay, but I wish you hadn't. Makes it tough on me. Long as I work for Three Pines, I'll let nothing get between me and the ranch. Nothing at all." He met Hack Breathitt's glance and quietly added: "Don't come to me, Hack."

That was all. These three rose and crossed the room, pushing through the doors. Ben Herendeen remained under the locust trees, with Lige White and Gurd Grant and a group of Three Pines riders. Sheriff Nickum was also there, coat hung loosely to his gaunt frame. Jesse Rusey, farther down the street, watched this crowd; and on him Clay Morgan put his glance for a moment. Charley Hillhouse went across the dust to join Herendeen. Janet turned out of McGarrah's store, advancing toward Morgan. Her little shoulders showed straight in the sunless light, her small feet made a quick tapping on the sidewalk boards. She said:

"We are having supper with Ann McGarrah, Daddy." Her soft smile held its secret again, her eyes showed it. "Didn't I tell you?"

Hack Breathitt removed his hat with a flourish. "How, honey?"

"How, Hack."

Hack said: "Come along with a gentleman."

Janet put her hand in Hack Breathitt's fist and walked away with him.

Morgan laid his shoulders against the wall of the saloon and freshened his cigar with a match. The group remained beneath the locust trees, Herendeen and Lige White now talking together while the rest remained silent. A good many people had come to the street, scattered under the board awnings. All of them, he noticed, were watching the courthouse. Tension crawled up the street, strong enough to touch Morgan's nerves. Jesse Rusey never moved from his position as he, too, watched the courthouse door. A stage stood by the Mountain House hotel, ready to go. At the stable, Parr Gentry sat on a capsized barrel, lumped over and apparently disinterested, but Morgan saw the way the man's eyes traveled around. Hack Breathitt and Janet were crossing the dust to Tanner's drugstore and at this moment Ollie Jacks, freed by the jury's verdict, stepped from the courthouse, looked to either end of the street, and halted.

He was a wiry man with the drawn, blank face of a gambler; he was a man who had been caught stealing beef and now, by the act of the jury, was free to ride out. His horse was in Gentry's stable, fifty feet from where he stood, yet this was as far as he got, this rooted position before the courthouse with Jesse Rusey on one side of him and Herendeen's group watching him from the other, and with all the town looking on. At that moment he knew what Clay Morgan and every soul in town knew: he knew he was a dead man.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Gems of Thought

BE NOBLE, and the nobleness that lies in other men, sleeping but never dead, will rise in majesty to meet thine own.—James Russell Lowell.

Make two grins grow where there was only a grouch before. —Elbert Hubbard.

"When people once are in the wrong,
Each line they add is much too long;
Who fastest walks, but walks astray,
Is only furthest from his way."
—PRIOR.

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