

GUNLOCK RANCH

CHAPTER VII—Continued

"Ob, Bill!" said Jane. "Don't think of me—do just as if I were not here. She threw her own arms around his neck, and their lips met again in passionate appeal.

"Then come, Jane. We must dash through this pine before that fire you hear roaring catches up to us."

"Is that awful roar from a fire, Bill?"

"It is. It's our worst danger. Let's go, Jane."

To cross the wide belt of pine their course lay obliquely downhill. If anything were needed to spur them on, the thunder of the fire sweeping down the forest behind served as a dread warning that they had only minutes left to escape disaster.

Halfway down the ridge, Denison paused to rest Jane in his arms. She was panting like an antelope.

"Brave girl!" he murmured. "Not a sob—not a tear—"

"But we must hurry, Bill," she panted.

"Get a little breath for the next run."

"Can we make it, Bill, dear?"

"We've got to make it," he muttered.

"I'll save you, Jane, if it's the last thing I do in life."

"Don't save me unless you save yourself—remember that!"

"Come! We must make the spring—the spring!"

The timber was thinning, the ground growing rougher. The frontiersman and cowman who had gone through every adventure that befalls a man in a life of danger and escape made little of finding safe footing from rock to rock. But his charge had a harder time trying to keep her feet and to keep the pace. Denison offered to carry her. She would not hear of it.

He himself saw, before Jane realized it, that the end of her strength was at hand. Striving vainly to keep up, she stumbled and with a little moan fell forward on the ground. Denison picked her up in his arms. She could not speak; only panted. Her heart, pressed against his breast, pounded like a hammer.

"Put me down, Bill! Put me down!" she sobbed when she could breathe and form the words. "You must save yourself! Is the spring far, now?"

"Not far. Clasp your arms tight around my neck," was all he said, leaping along.

"You can't save us both; save yourself. You are dearer to me than my life, Bill."

"So are you to me. Hang on," he panted. "I'll never put you down!"

After another run he paused. "Bill, I can run a little now. Let me try it. Please, dear! Let me try!"

He shook his head and struggled on. The fire was only minutes behind him. Its roar deafening.

A cry roused Jane in his arms. "The spring!"

She cried to him in happy answer. There was not an instant to spare.

He slid down the steep side of the hollow that enclosed the spring. Jane, still in his arms, he rolled into the pool and lay panting beside her. The shock of the icy water revived her. He soused her head into the water. The pool was wide enough to submerge Jane, but not himself. He rolled in the shallower edge, wet himself all over and, holding her head just clear of the surface as she spluttered and coughed, gave her orders: "Keep your face down. Don't, don't open your eyes. You're safe if you do exactly as I say."

Savage flames burst above their heads. The burning air showered searing fragments of bark and branch on them as they lay huddled, comforting each other with words. "Breathe carefully, Jane," he cried in her ear. "This air will wear your lungs. Fill your nose and mouth with water, spit and splutter it out. My God, it is upon us!"

The heart of the fire was on them. They could no longer hear or think. Flame belled and danced. Tongues of fire licked at their hiding heads. Denison mechanically dipped water into Jane's hair. Consciousness was nearly gone. Only the effort to live and the fierce instinct to protect the one he loved animated him.

With their trial of endurance almost at an end, a sudden explosion burst in the air above them. Denison, forgetting his caution, opened his eyes in the fear that a tree was falling. His eyeballs were scorched in a fraction of a second. He dashed his face back into the water; but mischief had been done.

At last the terrific outburst abated. With the hope of life reanimated, the two rose in the pool in their steaming clothing. Darkness fell from the sky above, but the forest was lighted with smoking and burning tree torches, the aftermath of its destruction.

The two who had passed through and escaped a hideous catastrophe stood clasped in each other's arms thanking God and delirious in a new-found, intimate happiness.

"Water!" exclaimed Denison. "I'm perishing. In spite of my cold bath. Aren't you thirsty?"

"Yes, but not suffering. I didn't have to carry you, you know."

Moving a few feet up to the basin of the spring itself, they pushed aside debris from the water's surface, drank from their cupped hands, and dashed water over their faces.

"Jane," said Denison when he rose again, "it was almost worth it for the way it's brought you and me together."

by Frank H. Spearman

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"It was," she whispered. "I've given you my trust."

"For all time, Jane?"

"For all time, Bill. Nothing shall ever part us, now."

CHAPTER VIII

Picking their way haltingly and cautiously down through smoking pines, dodging burning limbs that snapped and crackled menacingly overhead or crashed to the ground about them, the refugees emerged from the forest and could see that Denison's ranch buildings had escaped the flames.

The instant they reached the ranch house, Denison ran to the well, filled the water bucket, and carried it to Jane. Sitting on the ground, bare-headed, they slaked their thirst out of the dipper together.

Denison turned to the corral. Jane, who had gone into the house, had got the fire going and was slicing bacon when she heard the clatter of hoofs outside, and angry voices.

"Where's my daughter, you damned scoundrel?" were the first words she made out. The sound of the voice that uttered them sent her running, the knife still in her hand, to the door. Amazed to dumbness, she saw her father and McCrossen in the saddle, facing Denison, who stood at the gate of his corral.

"Van Tassel," Denison spoke carefully, "you're too old a man for me to quarrel with. Just remember you're on my property and keep a civil tongue in your head. I've taken more of your abuse in years gone by than I ought to take. Now put your question civilly."

"I don't want no truck with you, Denison," shouted Van Tassel, raging. "Where's my girl?"

McCrossen had reined about and was starting for the house. "Swing back here, McCrossen," Denison sang

to him. "I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw you yesterday, father," she said coldly. "Did the doctor give you permission to come home?"

After a shuffling of papers came the first shot at Jane: "What did you fire McCrossen for?"

"Because he refused to obey orders," she retorted instantly.

"Whose orders?"

"My orders."

"Who owns this ranch?"

"You do. And," she added, keen-eyed, "you made me manager."

"I'll take that job off your shoulders, McCrossen is foreman here now. And I am boss. Now what about this skunk, Denison?"

"What about Mr. Denison, father?"

"He's a crook. And as long as you live, keep away from him."

"What has he ever done to you that's wrong, father?"

"He and his brother's been trying for five years to beat me out of Gunlock Spring and all that ranch land back of it."

"That's part of what he's done to me. He's stole my cattle besides. McCrossen is the only man that stayed by me through thick and thin. McCrossen's the right man for you. You can get married tomorrow if you want to."

"I haven't the slightest idea of getting married tomorrow, father. And if Mr. McCrossen were the only man left, I certainly should never marry. There's not a straight hair in his head. He's been robbing you for years."

"Sounds like that skunk Denison's been filling your ears for you."

"Bill Denison's barely ever mentioned McCrossen's name to me."

"Well, keep away from Denison for good, don't forget that."

Jane flinched inwardly but spoke low and clearly: "I can't promise that, father."

"Why not?"

"I don't think it's right."

"Ain't I your father?"

"Yes."

"Ain't a parent a-goin' to be obeyed?"

"If he is reasonable. I'm not a child, father."

He grew furious. "I don't give a damn what you are, you're not a-goin' to take up with any enemy of mine, 'n' you might just as well know it now—and I'll see that you don't."

Van Tassel, quitting the house, rode with McCrossen, over the hills burned the day before, to determine what further measures should be taken to insure safety for the ranch buildings. The two men halted at the foot of Gunlock Knob.

"A lot of good timber gone in that blaze, Van," muttered McCrossen.

Van Tassel was silent for a moment. "The ranch ain't worth as much as it was yesterday, that's sure," he said at last. Then after another pause: "I wouldn't mind the timber if the damned fire had held on till it cleaned out Denison."

Both were looking down on the neighbor's ranch.

"I wish I was rid of that fellow," Van Tassel's words fairly grated out of his harsh throat. Why couldn't that blamed fire have cleaned out his buildings yesterday?"

"It was a close scratch. If the wind had shifted—"

"(TO BE CONTINUED)"



"A Lot of Good Timber Gone in That Blaze, Van," Muttered McCrossen.

out sharply. "Stop right where you are. My cabin's not open to public inspection!"

"I don't give a damn for your cabin. There's Jane," the foreman shouted, "standing in the doorway."

Jane ran across the yard to the angry men. "Father!" she cried. "What in the world are you doing here? What brought you from the hospital?"

Her father's deep-set, piggy eyes flashed his fury on her. "You brought me here," he snapped savagely. "You wench! Living with this man, are you?"

"Father!" Outraged womanhood never spoke the word more stingingly.

"Is it possible you insult me so vilely before you have heard a single word?" she said. "What have I to do with your grudges and quarrels?"

Rigid and erect, storming within and striking with white-hot words at her parent's base intimation, Jane silenced the men about her by her outraged dignity.

"What shameful words have you heard—and from whom?"—she barely indicated her father's companion by a lightning flash of her eye—"that put such vile thoughts into your head?" She waited for no answer. "I rode to the peak of Gunlock Knob to see how the fire was heading—it has threatened Gunlock Ranch for two days. When I tried to ride down this afternoon, the fire cut me off. I should have been burned to death where I stood on the peak, if Bill Denison hadn't ridden up through another fire to save me. And now after fighting our way for hours through smoke and flame, he brings me down by the only possible way, to hear me foully insulted by my own father. This is too much!"

Van Tassel had not dreamed that a mere insult—his usual weapon toward everybody—would arouse anyone, much less his daughter, to such a pitch. Her buttoned blouse, torn rudely open at the neck by a forest branch, and her tie awry, revealed the girlish ivory of her throat and neck, while her hot words silenced the domineering brute before whose insolence few men could stand at ease.

"Look here, Jane!" bellowed her father in retreat. "You come out here for your health, didn't you?"

"I didn't come out here to be grossly insulted," she retorted.

"Where's your pony?"

"Heavens knows where it is, or where Bill Denison's is. I hope they're not burned up."

"Well, come along home. McCrossen will lend you his horse."

"He needn't. I will walk home just as soon as I have cooked some bacon for Bill Denison."

"Come along now."

"Did you hear me? I'll come home"—each word was defiantly emphasized—"when I have made coffee and cooked bacon for Bill Denison. When you get home, be kind enough to ask Bull Page to saddle a horse for me and bring it over." With this, Jane walked swiftly back to the cabin. Van Tassel, in a muttering rage, followed by McCrossen, started home.

A slender supper was at length got together. Then Jane made Denison lie back in a chair and submit to cold compresses on his eyes.

Waiting for Bull Page proved no hardship, but when the hands of Denison's little alarm clock pointed to midnight it dawned on Jane that her request had been ignored and that her father or McCrossen had meant she should walk home or compromise herself by staying all night at Denison's.

She boiled a bit inside when she realized the situation, but prepared to walk. To this Denison would not listen. He got up two ponies—he had but one extra saddle—and, despite her objections and protests, insisted on riding home with her.

It needed no announcer in the morning to tell Jane that her father had come home. She lay, exhausted and with every bone in her body aching, beyond her usual rising time. But there was an unusual scurrying about outside her room. Quong, old and winked, was the only man of the household not in the least perturbed by the surprise return of Van Tassel.

Jane came to the table as her father was leaving it. "I want to see you after breakfast," was the gruff greeting he vouchsafed Jane.

She found Van Tassel seated at his desk in his bedroom, looking over bills. Jane went up to him.

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