

GUNLOCK RANCH by FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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SYNOPSIS

Sleepy Cat, desert town of the Southwest, is celebrating the Fourth of July. Jane Van Tambel, beautiful daughter of Gus Van Tambel, hated owner of Gunlock ranch, has arrived from the East for the first time. She watches the Frontier Day celebration in company with Dr. Carpy, crusty, tender-hearted friend of the community, Henry Sawdy of the Circle Dot ranch, tricked in a fake horse race the day before by Dave McCrossen, foreman at Gunlock, plans revenge. He enters Bill Denison, a handsome young Texas wrangler, in the rodeo which McCrossen is favored to win, and lays heavy bets on him. Unknown to the crowd, Denison is a champion horseman, McCrossen and the young stranger tie in the various events. Denison drops a cigarette carelessly. Racing down the track full tilt, he picks up the cigarette. The verdict goes to Denison when McCrossen refuses to attempt the stunt. Entreated by the crowd, Denison agrees to perform another trick. Jane is asked for her bracelet, and throws it on the track. Just as Denison rides to pick it up a yell from Barney Rebstock, a McCrossen henchman, scares the pony, nearly costing the rider his life. Gun play is prevented by the intervention of Dr. Carpy. Back on Gunlock ranch after two years in Chicago, because of her father's illness, Jane gets lost riding in the hills and meets Denison, now a neighbor, who guides her home. Not knowing her identity, he speaks bitterly of Van Tambel. She tells McCrossen who brought her home and he denounces Denison as a cattle thief. Later she asks Dr. Carpy why her father is unpopular and he tells her it is because of Van Tambel's ruthless and unscrupulous character. Later McCrossen tries to woo Jane, but is sharply rebuffed. Once again she loses her way in the hills and meets Denison. On impulse she gives him her bracelet for guiding her home. Their interest in each other growing, she reveals her identity to him. Jane is distressed to learn from Carpy that her father had wronged Denison. The Texan had worked at Gunlock as foreman and been promised a share in the profits. When he quit, Van Tambel reneged. In reprisal Denison has been running cattle off Gunlock ranch. Shamed and humiliated, Jane avoids Denison, but longs to see him. Then they meet by accident.

CHAPTER V—Continued

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"For ever coming to this country at all, if you must know," she declared in angry desperation.

"But, Jane, that doesn't sound reasonable," protested her companion.

"I can't help that," she said petulantly. "I wish I'd never seen this country. And I'm going to leave it, the very first minute I get a chance. Don't see me any more. I don't want to see anybody till I can leave here."

"Just as you say, Jane. But if I can't see you any more, please remember that wherever you are, I love you."

Jane got home thinking of how wretchedly she had handled the situation with Denison.

It proved to be her foreman, McCrossen, who had been cut up in a gambling quarrel.

Jane kept Dr. Carpy for supper, and that evening she held him so long as she could. She felt down in the depths.

When he started for town, Jane walked out in the moonlight with him, talking and clinging to his hand. When he mounted, she still asked questions to keep him talking and kept his hand in hers.

"Jane," he said, "there's something hurting your mind, not your body. Do you want to tell me, girl?"

"Not tonight, doctor."

"Sometime, maybe—come to me just the same as if I were your father."

Her face fell against his hand. He felt on it the warmth of her tears. "Mustn't worry, my child. And if the load, whatever it is, gets too heavy—you know where to bring it," he added, wheeling away.

She had promised Dr. Carpy to ride every day, and while attending the wounded man he kept close tab on her, but she avoided the main

trails and kept to the hills near the ranch house. Carpy brought little news from Sleepy Cat, but he spoke of the forest fires north of town.

"I hope we shan't be bothered here," said Jane.

"No danger here unless they cross the river. You haven't much timber on the east ranch. There's none to speak of over on the range. But you've got a lot scattered around here in the hills. If it should get down into the reservation timber, there would be hell to pay."

"How is McCrossen coming on, doctor?" asked Jane.

"He'll be up in a few days now. The infection is disappearing. How are you? You're the one I'm interested in."

"Following orders like a lamb, doctor. Don't you see how brown I'm getting?"

"Yes, outside. But what about inside? That's where I want you to get brown. By the way, your friend Bill Denison was in to see me the other day. He's been up north with the fire fighters—'way up on the Crazy Woman at Jim Laramie's ranch. Look here, girl," he continued, "what are you doing tomorrow? We are going to have a moose dinner. Ever eat moose? Come in and try it."

Jane hesitated. "Oh, I don't know—"

"Come along. There'll be nobody else there, if that's what you're afraid of?"

Sleepy Cat looked deserted when Jane rode in next day. She asked McAlpin at the barn where all the men were.

"Up north, fire fighting."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"I never saw it so bad in the twenty years I've lived here and at Calabazas! They brought in a wagonload yesterday of the worst burnt men I ever seen in my life. The hospital's pretty near full. Doc Carpy was there all night."

Jane was for going home. She walked up to the hotel and talked with Puss, the housekeeper. "Don't you go," counseled Puss. "If the doctor's expecting to see you, he'll be all upset if you don't stay."

"But with all these men in the hospital? I'd rather wait till he has a free day," suggested Jane.

The housekeeper laughed. "If you wait for a free day for the doctor, you'll wait till Judgment day. And he might be busier then than he is now. There's a preacher in town this week, baptizing folks down in the river. 'Cording to what he says, there'll be a lot more Sleepy Cat fire fighters needing help Judgment day than is needin' it now. Come in here and take off your things."

When Jane sat down with the doctor in his private dining room for the moose dinner, he made light of the fire situation as well as of his labors.

"All in the day's work, Puss is an alarmist. She's always telling me I'm working too hard."

Jane repeated the anecdote of the preacher and Puss' application of it to the doctor himself on Judgment day.

Carpy laughed "That's Panama she's talking about. Puss is powerful afraid of him . . . Who is he? Why, a pretty good fellow—used to be an auctioneer and all-round gambler—got converted—preaches up and down the line from Medicine Bend to Sleepy Cat. But he volunteered for fire fighting. He's one of the men got burnt yesterday, and he's up with the rest of 'em at the hospital."

The ex-sheriff, Bill Pardaloe, rode out to Gunlock two days later and conscripted the men to fight fire coming down the Crazy Woman and threatening Sleepy Cat.

The quiet of that day and the next was like a calm before a storm. After supper Jane ordered her pony saddled and rode clear up to the summit of Gunlock Knob,

where she could see the northern country for many miles.

When she reached the top she was sorry she had attempted the climb. The spectacle was awe-inspiring, but terrifying.

Far beyond the hills and all along the northern horizon she saw patches of dull, silent red, slowly rising and falling, at moments increasing, and again subsiding.

She fell asleep early, but after midnight she woke. The sky was fairly clear, and she could hear the wind singing in the pines about the ranch house. She was roused from her thoughts by the approaching clatter of galloping hoofs. Raising herself to support her head on her elbow, she listened. The clatter came nearer, the galloping faster. In a moment she heard a man pull his horse sharply up and spring from the saddle under her window. "Miss Jane!" he called. "Wake up, please!"

She knew the voice. "I'm awake. Bull. What is it?"

"The boys are ridin' in behind me."

"All of them?"

"Everybody. They'll be here inside twenty minutes."

"What time is it, Bull?"

"From the moon, about two o'clock. The boys'll want somethin' to eat. They're ridin' right out again. I'll call Quong."

"What's the matter, Bull—what are they riding out again for?"

"The fire has crossed the river."

CHAPTER VI

BULL PAGE, the messenger of alarm, turned in with Quong and Jane to make ready a hasty supper for the hungry, weary men.

While Jane asked questions, McCrossen lighted a cigarette. "Not a bit of danger, Jane, to Gunlock—not while I can get out on the fire line, anyway. I've fought these infernal blazes all my life, and I don't figure this one's goin' to beat me. The only thing that worries me, Jane, is to think of your bein' here alone at home while we're fire-fightin'."

"Of course, I can't help some worry now, with the ranch threatened," she returned thoughtfully.

"Jane," he said impressively, "you needn't worry. I like to fight for a girl like you. While I'm able to raise an arm, Jane, I'll be out there thinkin' of you." His hands closed firmly on her shoulders.

She shrugged them and edged uneasily away. "Saddles, boys!" shouted McCrossen in his rich, hearty voice. "Look alive, there, everybody! Come over to where my horse is, Jane. I want you to say good-by to us! Give the boys a word of cheer."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Over the Divide. I want to do some backfirin' north of the pastures. Come along, girl," he insisted, taking her arm firmly.

All at once he caught her in a vise-like grip of his arms and kissed her twice before she could escape. She slapped him indignantly and pushed him violently away.

McCrossen laughed. "Slap me again, Jane; that was worth a string of slaps, girl. But why not take a little practice? You'd get to like it, same as I do!"

Toward the night of the second day, the fire crew straggled back to the ranch house, McCrossen at their head.

Next morning, the sun rose hot and in an atmosphere without a breath of wind. Faces were brighter.

But after breakfast, the mail carrier, Ignace, from the Reservation, on his way to town, brought disquieting news. A fire had broken out in the timber along the eastern boundary, and every buck had been called out to fight it.

McCrossen listened carefully. "Which way was the wind, Ignace, when you left?"

"From the east."

"Hell's bells," exclaimed McCrossen "just where we don't want it." He questioned the carrier closely. The big ranch was now threatened on the southeast, and McCrossen started with the freshest of his men for the new danger point.

In the afternoon Jane rode into town to order some supplies sent out. While she was in Rubido's store, a white man from the Reservation came in. The clerk who waited on him asked him about the fires down his way.

"Not so good," said the man. "A new one broke out this morning between the Reservation timber and Bill Denison's ranch. Bill's in getting men together now."

Jane, in another aisle and unobserved, walked quietly outdoors and down the street for McAlpin's livery barn.

"Mose," she said to the hostler on duty, "is Bill Denison in town?"

"He is. His horse, Music, is here—Bill rode in pretty fast, an' I been rubbin' Music down. Bill says—"

"Mose, I want to see Bill. Go up the street and see if you can find him. Tell him I want to see him and I'll be up at the hotel."

Half an hour later Jane, sitting with the door open in Dr. Carpy's office, off the hotel lobby, heard footsteps approaching and, turning, saw Denison. She rose quickly, extended her hand, took his without a greeting, and spoke rapidly and nervously. "I heard you were in town," she said, "and that you were in danger at the ranch—I suppose, for that matter, we all are. But they said you were taking out men, and I wanted to see you, Bill, and ask what we could do to help. You won't take that amiss, I'm sure."

"How could I take anything amiss from you?"

"In a common danger," she said, flushing in some confusion and interrupting him to hide it.

"What can we do at the ranch to help make you safe? Is there anything, Bill? Anything to help?"

Both were conscious of slight strain. Denison shuffled awkwardly. "Why, Miss Jane—"

"Since when Miss Jane?" she asked with asperity.

"I didn't know—" he began.

"Neither did I know, Bill. Now answer my question. If you're in danger, tell me what I can do."

"Have the boys keep a close eye on the two Reservation fires. If either of 'em get around Gunlock Knob, it'll be kind of bad for both ranches."

"Yes, but, Bill, how am I to know when or whether they do get around the Knob? How am I going to know whether you yourself need help?" She was beginning to realize that it was impossible to get anything but evasive generalities out of him. "Tell me this: If you need help from us, will you send me word? Right away?"

He thought for a moment. "I'll send word over to you at the ranch house, Jane."

She could not escape the significance of his tone in uttering her name. But she kept her balance and spoke steadily:

"Keep your promise, Bill; I shall be waiting for the word when it comes."

Along the hill trail as Jane rode home the air was heavy with smoke drifting slowly up from the south. It was laden with the pungent smell of brush fire and acrid with the creosote of burned slashings from cut-over lands on the Reservation.

Reaching home, she was not surprised to find everything there abnormally quiet. McCrossen, with most of the men, was up in the hills. The sole exception to the general atmospheric gloom was Quong.

When Jane dressed at daybreak and looked out, the wind had shifted and was blowing fresh from the south.

McCrossen and his men were up betimes. He reported to Jane that they had checked the fire up toward the pass. He was in good spirits.

Jane went to her breakfast feeling reassured. She was finishing her coffee when Quong stuck his head through the kitchen door into the dining room and said. "Man to see!"

Jane walked to the front door and found a man on horseback.

"What can I do for you?"

"I've just come from Bill Denison's. He says if you can spare a dozen men quick, he can, maybe, save his ranch buildings."

"Tell him I'll do everything I can to get them over right away. What's your name?"

"Scott, ma'am."

Jane ran over to the corral, where McCrossen was closing the wire gate.

"Bill Denison has sent a messenger over—"

"I saw him," interjected McCrossen curtly.

"—asking for help," Jane went on rapidly. "If we can get a dozen men over to him quick, he can save his ranch buildings—"

"A lot of gall, ain't it, Bill Denison lookin' to Gunlock for help?"

"No matter what differences there have been," insisted Jane firmly, "in the hills we're all going to stand together in a time like this. Get the men together, Dave, and get over quick and do what you can."

McCrossen, drawing from his pocket a plug of tobacco, bit off a chunk. "I don't approve of that."

"It's not a question of your approving, Dave, I want you to go. Right off; now!"

McCrossen was in no hurry. "Who's goin' to look after Gunlock if I go over to Bill Denison's?" he asked, regarding Jane sullenly.

Jane was nobody's fool on the danger of the situation.

"Dave," she exclaimed, impatiently, "you know the worst threat to us, with this wind, is from the south. If the Denison ranch burns we're in danger ourselves. Will you saddle up quick and get over there with the boys?" she demanded.

McCrossen made no move to go.

"I'll tell you right now I've had a damned sight more experience in these forest fires than you have. And I say my place's right here!" He spoke loudly and angrily.

Jane grew white. "I want you to know I'm boss of this ranch. My father has told you so—and this order is going to be obeyed or I'll know the reason why."

McCrossen faced her with as much animosity as he dared show. "Well, if you want to know one reason why your order won't be obeyed, just look at me—I'm a reason. I know where my place is when Gunlock's in danger," he thundered.

"Stop your talk!" exclaimed Jane. "Will you do as I tell you or not?"

"I will not."

"Then you're discharged as foreman of this ranch. Take your things and get off by tomorrow morning."

"Like hell I will."

Half a dozen cowboys had edged up to listen to the controversy. Jane whirled around to them. "Boys," she said, speaking in lower but very determined tones, "take no more orders from David McCrossen. He's no longer foreman here."

Reeling off her words rapidly and firmly, Jane explained the situation to her growing circle of listeners. "Now I have discharged McCrossen," she said in conclusion, "and I want all of you boys who are loyal to me to ride with me over to the fire line on the Denison ranch and see what we can do to save his buildings. Those of you who will go, line up here with me."

One of the boys, Bull Page, stepped promptly to Jane's side. Before he reached it, four more were on their way. Barney Rebstock and a cory stood still. It meant that they sided with the foreman.

"Now, Bull," she added snappily, "hunt up as many of the other boys as you can find and let's get going."

Within a few minutes, with the ponies dancing and the men shouting, a party of ten headed south for the Denison ranch.

(TO BE CONTINUED)