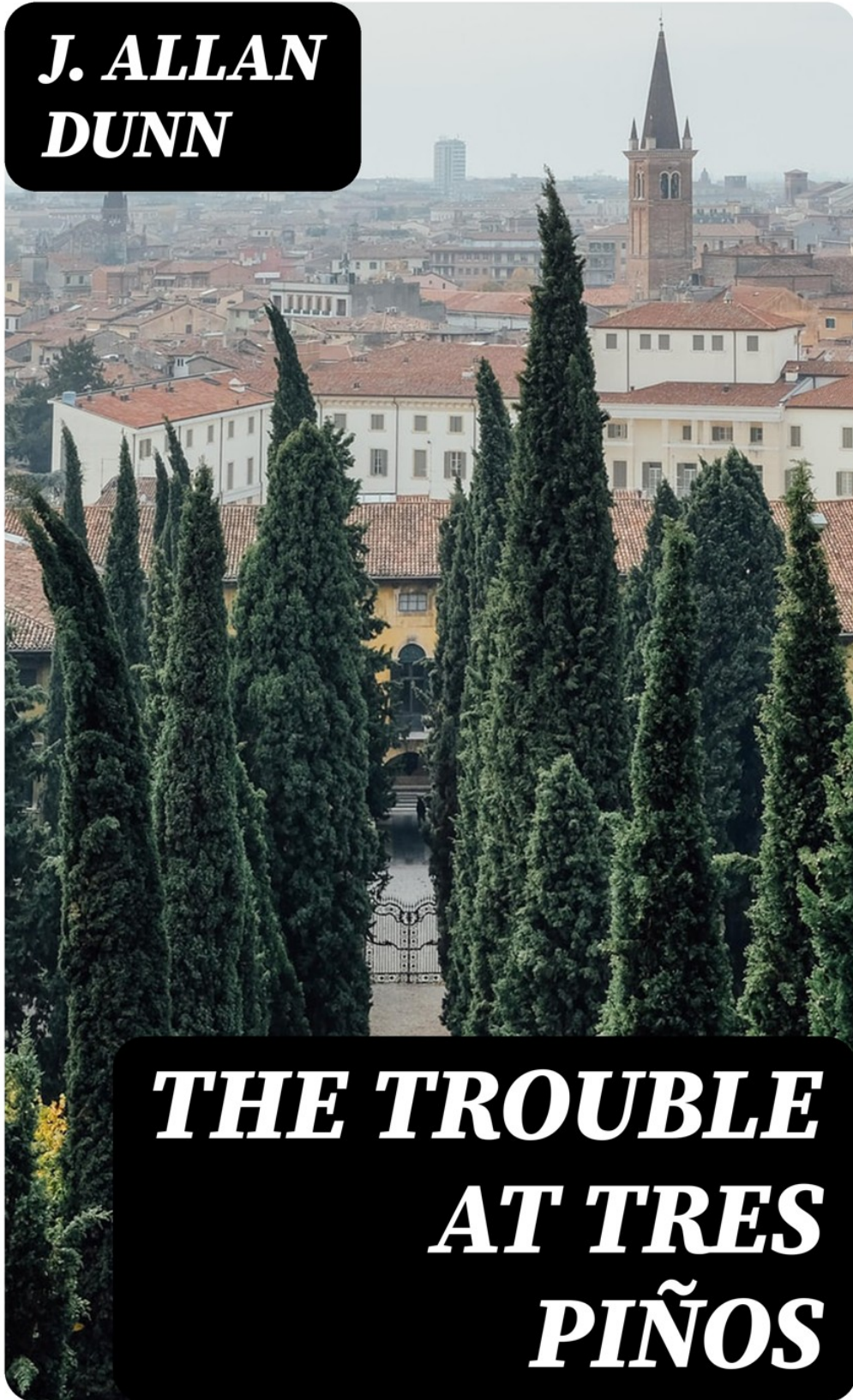


***J. ALLAN  
DUNN***

An aerial photograph of a city, likely in Italy, showing a long, straight path lined with tall, thin cypress trees. The path leads to a large, light-colored building with a prominent tower. The city is densely packed with buildings, and a tall, thin tower is visible in the background.

***THE TROUBLE  
AT TRES  
PIÑOS***

***J. ALLAN  
DUNN***



***THE TROUBLE  
AT TRES  
PIÑOS***

**J. Allan Dunn**

# **The Trouble at Tres Piños**

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THESE WAS REALLY TROUBLE AT TRES PIÑOS AND SLIM MARVIN RODE RIGHT INTO IT. BUT SLIM WAS NOT THE SORT TO MIND TROUBLE IN A GOOD CAUSE. AND HE GOT IT—NIGHT RAIDERS, CATTLE RUSTLERS, BAD MEN, AND ALL THEIR ACCOMPANYING VILLAINIES

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**S**LIM MARVIN rode blithely toward Caroca, the county seat, in search of a job. The last one had been spoiled for him by the advent of a new owner who cared little for cattle and less for the West, being intent only upon getting back the money he had advanced on a mortgage, the interest of which had been only intermittently paid by a man who was a good cattleman, but a better spender.

There had been words between Slim and the mortgagor, who had seemed to entertain the curious idea that because he had not reaped the financial profit he anticipated, his ranch hands should be willing to accept a loss in the wages due them.

The memory of what he had told the new owner helped to keep Slim in a good humor. His phrasing had been brief and crisp and eminently to the point. It had got under the thick hide of the man who had paid him in full and dispensed with his services after Slim had told him that he would rather sift cinders in hell than work for a *hombre* whose nature would contaminate a coyote—or words to that effect.

So, with his best horse and saddle under him, his second string left with a friend at a neighboring ranch, a nice paycheck in his pocket; Slim had no cares. He was a good

cowman—none better—and he had small fears of not landing a job—as soon as his money gave out. Meantime he meant to sleep some, eat sweetened pies and cake, gamble, treat any friends he might make or find at Caroca, and generally relax after long weeks of work.

He had tried out his own county without finding an opening that suited him, and now he was adventuring into comparatively new fields. Only once before had he been to Caroca and he associated that visit with a measure of ill luck that he hoped ardently to redeem on this occasion. He had got into a poker game with certain individuals who made a profession of that pastime and had convinced Slim, for the time being, that he was merely an amateur. He remembered the features of those individuals, and he burned to once more sit with them at a table where the chips clicked and the limit was not mentioned.

Slim's name had grown up with him, bestowed upon him the first day he appeared, a stripling of seventeen, astride a half-broken broomtail mustang, at the fall roundup. That was ten years back, and Slim had developed in many ways. Slim was scarcely the *sobriquet* for him now, but he was lean and his waistline was still ten inches less than that of his chest. As he sat in the saddle his shoulders seemed ultra broad, and when the wind flattened the cloth of his shirt against his shoulders it disclosed flat masses of muscle that could work like ropes in well-oiled sheaves.

Good to look at, was Marvin. No girl had ever called him handsome, but he suggested the sun and the wind, virility and friendliness, with eyes that could chill and a jaw that could jut upon occasion into a welded firmness and

insistency that caused his fellow riders to speak of Slim as one who did to take along. Girls usually looked at him twice at least. Slim's singing intentions were better than his execution. His voice was better in speech than song, but the day was fine and the wind blew free, the mesas and the sharper peaks of the Esquelitos Mountains stood out sharply defined beyond the plain down which he rode on his way to Caroca. A song bird was warbling as sweetly as any mocking bird in his own home state below the Dixie Line; his bay mount, with the three white stockings and the blaze down its roman nose, was going strong on springy pasterns; the mesquite waved lacyly and Slim was constrained to express himself in sentiment—something he steadfastly abjured in everyday affairs. This was vicarious. Slim was no poet.

Her name it was Cherokee Mary,  
She was sweet as a Cherokee rose;  
Though her manners were often contrary  
She was light as an elf on her toes.  
She could dance like a zephyr-blown thistle  
She could smile like the witch that she was;  
And when she got mad she could bristle  
And cuss like a good one, because

Although she was cute as a fairy  
The cutest gal ever I saw,  
Yet noboddy wedded with Mary  
For—she was a Cherokee squaw!

"And I'm no squawman, Pete," he confided to the bay.  
"What's mo', I ain't pinin' to hitch up to any woman, brown, red or white. Me, I think too much of mah libutty, hawss. If

I was married now I'd have had to take what that son of a gun offered me back to the ranch, 'stead of tellin' him to his face where he-all headed in. An' you an' me wouldn't be lopin' along this fine mawnin' with one hundred an' eighty bucks in our pockets, hawss, lookin' forward to apple pie that ain't made out of dried apples. Fo' you git one, you sweet-toothed *caballo*, sure's we hit Caroca. Reckon this is Owl Canyon, an' we're half way there."

Owl Canyon thrust itself out of the plain in unusual fashion, two walls of rock honeycombed with caves, so that the weathered fronts resembled sponges, the dirt sloping back from their crests to common level again and an irregular passage between the walls. Midway, a spring of water gushed, slightly warm, slightly sulphurous, but refreshing at that stage of a ride made dusty with alkali, and sufficient to cause a little oasis of grass and low trees.

Usually there were cattle there, and sometimes tracks showed where deer came down from the distant hills to drink the waters that instinct told them was good for them. But it was close to noon and all four-footed things, save those pressed into the service of man, were enjoying what shade and coolness they might find.

Slim, on his seventh stanza, which told of the horrors of an Indian mother-in-law, checked song and horse simultaneously as he rode out of a bay in the cliff, following the scanty strip of shade; and saw the tableau staged on the turf near the spring. Two ponies grazed in the background. Their riders had apparently dismounted for a drink. One was a man, not as tall as Slim, but much heavier, clad in a shirt with an aggravated pattern of plaid generally



affected by the film variety of cowboy rather than by the genuine variety. He was wearing worn leather chaparejos on bowed legs, leather gauntlets, and, over all, a cartridge belt that holstered an ivory-handled gun. His Stetson hat lay on the grass. Slim took a dislike to him at first sight of the swarthy face, almost as dark as a Mexican's, and the sneeringly triumphant features, to say nothing of his action, which aroused in Slim a consuming desire to make a third in the tableau—which he did.

The man had seized by the wrist a girl, slender in riding togs of khaki breeches, brown boots, linen shirt of russet brown with a tie of bright scarlet. There seemed to have been some sort of a previous scuffle, for her dark hair was disarranged and long strands of it hung to her waist. She was sunbrowned, but color flamed high in her cheeks and Slim caught the flash of spirit in her eyes as he off-saddled and leaped to the rescue.

She was half the man's size and weight, but she defended herself with a desperation that held off his advantage. Once she scored with a rake of her fingernails across his leathern cheek that brought the quick blood and a curse as she all but broke clear, while he strove to get an arm about her.

The oath was but half delivered when Slim cracked the attacker neatly over the elbow with the barrel of his Colt, and slid the gun back into holster while the other, letting go the girl, swerved to face the newcomer. He was rubbing his tingling, temporarily useless arm, and swearing in earnest.

"Shut up," snapped Slim. "Pronto, mister, or I'll put a hole through yo' windpipe!"

The man, conscious of his lame arm, sizing up Slim's calm countenance that was only a mask for flaming eyes that shone like steel, checked his tongue, looking at the cowboy with venomous eyes that rolled in yellowish whites, slightly bloodshot.

Slim had barely glanced at the girl. He was not interfering as a personal matter—save as the man had sworn at him directly—but as one of ordinary range chivalry. It would have been the same if the girl had been an old crone—even the mother of "Cherokee Mary."

For a man to handle a woman brutally was not permissible. That was the code of the West and the other had broken it. Slim intended to administer punishment. But first he swept off his sombrero to the lady, ignoring the scowling and now silent assailant, knowing that the other's gun arm was out of commission for the time being, sure also that there was small doubt about the man's will to speed bullet—or knife—to Slim's vitals.

"Looked like to me that you all might be annoyed some by this coyote," he said in his soft drawl that took nothing away from his suggestion of efficiency, rather enhanced it, against his lithe and sinewy figure and the lights of battle already burning in his eyes. Yet he was a little abashed at the beauty of the girl; it smote him suddenly, like a light flashed in a dark room. Her eyes were a purplish gray, large of pupil and long of curling lashes; her nose, short and straight, showed above lips that were most clearly designed—even to Slim, that youthful, but sincere misogynist—for the tantalizing of all men and the ultimate reward of one. This, though at the moment they were set in

a half sneer that did not relax as Slim spoke to her, while her eyes were anything but friendly.

"I suppose you meant well," she said, "but it was not at all necessary for you to interfere. I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

Like all men who are women-shy, Slim was particularly susceptible to their use of feminine weapons. He had no idea of their instinctive exaggerations. He was taken aback, feeling like a fool and fancying he looked like one, conscious of a jaw that sagged in sheer amazement.

Had he stumbled on a quarrel that was going to be eventually ended by a reconciliation the more satisfactory for the temper and violence that led up to it? He had heard of such things—usually between married folks. He knew of one or two examples personally, combinations of bullies and viragos that had helped him acquire his bachelor's degree. Did she like the roughness of this man? Was she by any chance, his wife? He saw no wedding ring on the brown, but shapely hand, and—It was incredible that a girl who looked like her could endure such familiarity! There must be some special reason for her utterance.

The ardor that, on her behalf, had fanned the flame of his chivalry, wavered and blew strong again. But he left her out of the affair from that moment.

"I'm right sorry I disturbed you all," he said gravely, and the note of sarcasm was hard to distinguish, though the girl looked at him as if she suspected its presence. Then her glance changed. Warning leaped into it. Slim's back was to the man. She might have spoken, but he whirled at the first hint of caution.