

B. M. BOWER



***JEAN
OF THE LAZY A***

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CHAPTER I

HOW TROUBLE CAME TO THE LAZY A

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Without going into a deep, psychological discussion of the elements in men's souls that breed events, we may say with truth that the Lazy A ranch was as other ranches in the smooth tenor of its life until one day in June, when the finger of fate wrote bold and black across the face of it the word that blotted out prosperity, content, warm family ties,—all those things that go to make life worth while.

Jean, sixteen and a range girl to the last fiber of her being, had gotten up early that morning and had washed the dishes and swept, and had shaken the rugs of the little living-room most vigorously. On her knees, with stiff brush and much soapy water, she had scrubbed the kitchen floor until the boards dried white as kitchen floors may be. She had baked a loaf of gingerbread, that came from the oven with a most delectable odor, and had wrapped it in a clean cloth to cool on the kitchen table. Her dad and Lite Avery would show cause for the baking of it when they sat down, fresh washed and ravenous, to their supper that evening. I mention Jean and her scrubbed kitchen and the gingerbread by way of proving how the Lazy A went unwarned and unsuspecting to the very brink of its disaster.

Lite Avery, long and lean and silently content with life, had ridden away with a package of sandwiches, after a full breakfast and a smile from the slim girl who cooked it, upon the business of the day; which happened to be a long ride

with one of the Bar Nothing riders, down in the breaks along the river. Jean's father, big Aleck Douglas, had saddled and ridden away alone upon business of his own. And presently, in mid-forenoon, Jean closed the kitchen door upon an immaculately clean house filled with the warm, fragrant odor of her baking, and in fresh shirt waist and her best riding-skirt and Stetson, went whistling away down the path to the stable, and saddled Pard, the brown colt that Lite had broken to the saddle for her that spring. In ten minutes or so she went galloping down the coulee and out upon the trail to town, which was fifteen miles away and held a chum of hers.

So Lazy A coulee was left at peace, with scratching hens busy with the feeding of half-feathered chicks, and a rooster that crowed from the corral fence seven times without stopping to take breath. In the big corral a sorrel mare nosed her colt and nibbled abstractedly at the pile of hay in one corner, while the colt wobbled aimlessly up and sniffed curiously and then turned to inspect the rails that felt so queer and hard when he rubbed his nose against them. The sun was warm, and cloud-shadows drifted lazily across the coulee with the breeze that blew from the west. You never would dream that this was the last day,—the last few hours even,—when the Lazy A would be the untroubled home of three persons of whose lives it formed so great a part.

At noon the hens were hovering their chickens in the shade of the mower which Lite was overhauling during his spare time, getting it ready for the hay that was growing apace out there in the broad mouth of the coulee. The rooster was wallowing luxuriously in a dusty spot in the

corral. The young colt lay stretched out on the fat of its side in the sun, sound asleep. The sorrel mare lay beside it, asleep also, with her head thrown up against her shoulder. Somewhere in a shed a calf was bawling in bored lonesomeness away from its mother feeding down the pasture. And over all the coulee and the buildings nestled against the bluff at its upper end was spread that atmosphere of homey comfort and sheltered calm which surrounds always a home that is happy.

Lite Avery, riding toward home just when the shadows were beginning to grow long behind him, wondered if Jean would be back by the time he reached the ranch. He hoped so, with a vague distaste at finding the place empty of her cheerful presence. He looked at his watch; it was nearly four o'clock. She ought to be home by half-past four or five, anyway. He glanced sidelong at Jim and quietly slackened his pace a little. Jim was telling one of those long, rambling tales of the little happenings of a narrow life, and Lite was supposed to be listening instead of thinking about when Jean would return home. Jim believed he was listening, and drove home the point of his story.

"Yes, sir, them's his very words. Art Osgood heard him. He'll do it, too, take it from me, Crofty is shore riled up this time."

"Always is," Lite observed, without paying much attention. "I'll turn off here, Jim, and cut across. Got some work I want to get done yet to-night. So long."

He swung away from his companion, whose trail to the Bar Nothing led him straight west, passing the Lazy A coulee well out from its mouth, toward the river. Lite could save a

half mile by bearing off to the north and entering the coulee at the eastern side and riding up through the pasture. He wanted to see how the grass was coming on, anyway. The last rain should have given it a fresh start.

He was in no great hurry, after all; he had merely been bored with Jim's company and wanted to go on alone. And then he could get the fire started for Jean. Lite's life was running very smoothly indeed; so smoothly that his thoughts occupied themselves largely with little things, save when they concerned themselves with Jean, who had been away to school for a year and had graduated from "high," as she called it, just a couple of weeks ago, and had come home to keep house for dad and Lite. The novelty of her presence on the ranch was still fresh enough to fill his thoughts with her slim attractiveness. Town hadn't spoiled her, he thought glowingly. She was the same good little pal, —only she was growing up pretty fast, now. She was a young lady already.

So, thinking of her with the brightening of spirits which is the first symptom of the world-old emotion called love, Lite rounded the eastern arm of the bluff and came within sight of the coulee spread before him, shaped like the half of a huge platter with a high rim of bluff on three sides.

His first involuntary glance was towards the house, and there was unacknowledged expectancy in his eyes. But he did not see Jean, nor any sign that she had returned. Instead, he saw her father just mounting in haste at the corral. He saw him swing his quirt down along the side of his horse and go tearing down the trail, leaving the wire gate

flat upon the ground behind him,—which was against all precedent.

Lite quickened his own pace. He did not know why big Aleck Douglas should be hitting that pace out of the coulee, but since Aleck's pace was habitually unhurried, the inference was plain enough that there was some urgent need for haste. Lite let down the rails of the barred gate from the meadow into the pasture, mounted, and went galloping across the uneven sod. His first anxious thought was for the girl. Had something happened to her?

At the stable he looked and saw that Jean's saddle did not hang on its accustomed peg inside the door, and he breathed freer. She could not have returned, then. He turned his own horse inside without taking off the saddle, and looked around him puzzled. Nothing seemed wrong about the place. The sorrel mare stood placidly switching at the flies and suckling her gangling colt in the shady corner of the corral, and the chickens were pecking desultorily about their feeding-ground in expectation of the wheat that Jean or Lite would fling to them later on. Not a thing seemed unusual.

Yet Lite stood just outside the stable, and the sensation that something was wrong grew keener. He was not a nervous person,—you would have laughed at the idea of nerves in connection with Lite Avery. He felt that something was wrong, just the same. It was not altogether the hurried departure of Aleck Douglas, either, that made him feel so. He looked at the house setting back there close to the bluff just where it began to curve rudely out from the narrowest part of the coulee. It was still and quiet, with closed

windows and doors to tell there was no one at home. And yet, to Lite its very silence seemed sinister.

Wolves were many, down in the breaks along the river that spring; and the coyotes were an ever-present evil among the calves, so that Lite never rode abroad without his six-shooter. He reached back and loosened it in the holster before he started up the sandy path to the house; and if you knew the Lazy A ranch as well as Lite knew it, from six years of calling it home, you would wonder at that action of his, which was instinctive and wholly unconscious.

So he went up through the sunshine of late afternoon that sent his shadow a full rod before him, and he stepped upon the narrow platform before the kitchen door, and stood there a minute listening. He heard the mantel clock in the living-room ticking with the resonance given by a room empty of all other sound. Because his ears were keen, he heard also the little alarm clock in the kitchen tick-tick-tick on the shelf behind the stove where Jean kept it daytimes.

Peaceful enough, for all the silence; yet Lite reached back and laid his fingers upon the smooth butt of his six-shooter and opened the door with his left hand, which was more or less awkward. He pushed the door open and stepped inside. Then for a full minute he did not move.

On the floor that Jean had scrubbed till it was so white, a man lay dead, stretched upon his back. His eyes stared vacantly straight up at the ceiling, where a single cobweb which Jean had not noticed swayed in the air-current Lite set in motion with the opening of the door. On the floor, where it had dropped from his hand perhaps when he fell, a small square piece of gingerbread lay, crumbled around the

edges. Tragic halo around his head, a pool of blood was turning brown and clotted. Lite shivered a little while he stared down at him.

In a minute he lifted his eyes from the figure and looked around the small room. The stove shone black in the sunlight which the open door let in. On the table, covered with white oilcloth, the loaf of gingerbread lay uncovered, and beside it lay a knife used to cut off the piece which the man on the floor had not eaten before he died. Nothing else was disturbed. Nothing else seemed in the least to bear any evidence of what had taken place.

Lite's thoughts turned in spite of him to the man who had ridden from the coulee as though fiends had pursued. The conclusion was obvious, yet Lite loyally rejected it in the face of reason. Reason told him that there went the slayer. For this dead man was what was left of Johnny Croft, the Crofty of whom Jim had gossiped not more than half an hour before. And the gossip had been of threats which Johnny Croft had made against the two Douglas brothers,—big Aleck, of the Lazy A, and Carl, of the Bar Nothing ranch adjoining.

Suicide it could scarcely be, for Crofty was the type of man who would cling to life; besides, his gun was in its holster, and a man would hardly have the strength or the desire to put away his gun after he has shot himself under one eye. Death had undoubtedly been immediate. Lite thought of these things while he stood there just inside the door. Then he turned slowly and went outside, and stood hesitating upon the porch. He did not quite know what he ought to do about it, and so he did not mean to be in too

great a hurry to do anything; that was Lite's habit, and he had always found that it served him well.

If the rider had been fleeing from his crime, as was likely, Lite had no mind to raise at once the hue and cry. An hour or two could make no difference to the dead man,—and you must remember that Lite had for six years called this place his home, and big Aleck Douglas his friend as well as the man who paid him wages for the work he did. He was half tempted to ride away and say nothing for a while. He could let it appear that he had not been at the house at all and so had not discovered the crime when he did. That would give Aleck Douglas more time to get away. But there was Jean, due at any moment now. He could not go away and let Jean discover that gruesome thing on the kitchen floor. He could not take it up and hide it away somewhere; he could not do anything, it seemed to him, but just wait.

He went slowly down the path to the stable, his chin on his chest, his mind grappling with the tragedy and with the problem of how best he might lighten the blow that had fallen upon the ranch. It was unreal,—it was unthinkable,—that Aleck Douglas, the man who met but friendly glances, ride where he might, had done this thing. And yet there was nothing else to believe. Johnny Croft had worked here on the ranch for a couple of months, off and on. He had not been steadily employed, and he had been paid by the day instead of by the month as was the custom. He had worked also for Carl Douglas at the Bar Nothing; back and forth, for one or the other as work pressed. He was too erratic to be depended upon except from day to day; too prone to saddle his horse and ride to town and forget to return for a day or

two days or a week, as the mood seized him or his money held out.

Lite knew that there had been some dispute when he had left; he had claimed payment for more days than he had worked. Aleck was a just man who paid honestly what he owed; he was also known to be "close-fisted." He would pay what he owed and not a nickel more,—hence the dispute. Johnny had gone away seeming satisfied that his own figures were wrong, but later on he had quarreled with Carl over wages and other things. Carl had a bad temper that sometimes got beyond his control, and he had ordered Johnny off the ranch. This was part of the long, full-detailed story Jim had been telling. Johnny had left, and he had talked about the Douglas brothers to any one who would listen. He had said they were crooked, both of them, and would cheat a working-man out of his pay. He had come back, evidently, to renew the argument with Aleck. With the easy ways of ranch people, he had gone inside when he found no one at home,—hungry, probably, and not at all backward about helping himself to whatever appealed to his appetite. That was Johnny's way,—a way that went unquestioned, since he had lived there long enough to feel at home. Lite remembered with an odd feeling of pity how Johnny had praised the first gingerbread which Jean had baked, the day after her arrival; and how he had eaten three pieces and had made Jean's cheeks burn with confusion at his bold flattery.

He had come back, and he had helped himself to the gingerbread. And then he had been shot down. He was lying in there now, just as he had fallen, and his blood was

staining deep the fresh-scrubbed floor. And Jean would be coming home soon. Lite thought it would be better if he rode out to meet her, and told her what had happened, so that she need not come upon it unprepared. There was nothing else that he could bring himself to do, and his mood demanded action of some sort; one could not sit down at peace with a fresh tragedy like that hanging over the place.

He had reached the stable when a horse walked out from behind the hay corral and stopped, eyeing him curiously. It was Johnny's horse. Even as improvident a cowpuncher as Johnny Croft had been likes to own a "private" horse,—one that is his own and can be ridden when and where the owner chooses. Lite turned and went over to it, caught it by the dragging bridle-reins, and led it into an empty stall. He did not know whether he ought to unsaddle it or leave it as it was; but on second thought, he loosened the cinch in kindness to the animal, and took off its bridle, so that it could eat without being hampered by the bit. Lite was too thorough a horseman not to be thoughtful of an animal's comfort.

He led his own horse out, and then he stopped abruptly. For Pard stood in front of the kitchen door, and Jean was untying a package or two from the saddle. He opened his mouth to call to her; he started forward; but he was too late to prevent what happened. Before his throat had made a sound, Jean turned with the packages in the hollow of her arm and stepped upon the platform with that springy haste of movement which belongs to health and youth and happiness; and before he had taken more than the first step away from his horse, she had opened the kitchen door.

Lite ran, then. He did not call to her. What was the use? She had seen. She had dropped her packages, and turned and ran to meet him, and caught him by the arm in a panic of horror. Lite patted her hand awkwardly, not knowing what he ought to say.

"What made you go in there?" came of its own accord from his lips. "That's no place for a girl."

"It's Johnny Croft!" she gasped just above her breath. "How—did it happen, Lite?"

"I don't know," said Lite slowly, looking down and still patting her hand. "Your father and I have both been gone all day. I just got back a few minutes ago and found out about it." His tone, his manner and his words impressed upon Jean the point he wanted her to get,—that her father had not yet returned, and so knew nothing of the crime.

He led her back to where Pard stood, and told her to get on. Without asking him why, Jean obeyed him, with a shudder when her wide eyes strayed fascinated to the open door and to what lay just within. Lite went up and pulled the door shut, and then, walking beside her with an arm over Pard's neck, he led the way down to the stable, and mounted Ranger.

"You can't stay here," he explained, when she looked at him inquiringly. "Do you want to go over and stay at Carl's, or would you rather go back to town?" He rode down toward the gate, and Jean kept beside him.

"I'm going to stay with dad," she told him shakily. "If he stays, I'll—I'll stay."

"You'll not stay," he contradicted her bluntly. "You can't. It wouldn't be right." And he added self-reproachfully: "I never

thought of your cutting across the bench and riding down the trail back of the house. I meant to head you off—"

"It's shorter," said Jean briefly. "I—if I can't stay, I'd rather go to town, Lite. I don't like to stay over at Uncle Carl's."

Therefore, when they reached the mouth of the coulee, Lite turned into the trail that led to town. All down the coulee the trail had been dug deep with the hoofprints of a galloping horse; and now, on the town trail, they were as plain as a primer to one schooled in the open. But Jean was too upset to notice them, and for that Lite was thankful. They did not talk much, beyond the commonplace speculations which tragedy always brings to the lips of the bystanders. Comments that were perfectly obvious they made, it is true. Jean said it was perfectly awful, and Lite agreed with her. Jean wondered how it could have happened, and Lite said he didn't know. Neither of them said anything about the effect it would have upon their future; I don't suppose that Jean, at least, could remotely guess at the effect. It is certain that Lite preferred not to do so.

They were no more than half way to town when they met a group of galloping horsemen, their coming heralded for a mile by the dust they kicked out of the trail.

In the midst rode Jean's father. Alongside him rode the coroner, and behind him rode the sheriff. The rest of the company was made up of men who had heard the news and were coming to look upon the tragedy. Lite drew a long breath of relief. Aleck Douglas, then, had not been running away.

CHAPTER II

CONCERNING LITE AND A FEW FOOTPRINTS

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"Lucky you was with me all day, up to four o'clock, Lite," Jim said. "That lets you out slick and clean, seeing the doctor claims he'd been dead six hours when he seen him last night. Crofty—why, Crofty was laying in there dead when I was talking about him to you! Kinda gives a man the creeps to think of it. Who do you reckon done it, Lite?"

"How'n hell do I know?" Lite retorted irritably. "I didn't see it done."

Jim studied awhile, an ear cocked for the signal that the coroner was ready to begin the inquest. "Say," he leaned over and whispered in Lite's ear, "where was Aleck at, all day yesterday?"

"Riding over in the bend, looking for black-leg signs," said Lite promptly. "Packed a lunch, same as I did."

The answer seemed to satisfy Jim and to eliminate from his mind any slight suspicion he may have held, but Lite had a sudden impulse to improve upon his statement.

"I saw Aleck ride into the ranch as I was coming home," he said. As he spoke, his face lightened as with a weight lifted from his mind.

Later, when the coroner questioned him about his movements and the movements of Aleck, Lite repeated the lie as casually as possible. It might have carried more

weight with the jury if Aleck Douglas himself had not testified, just before then, that he had returned about three o'clock to the ranch and pottered around the corral with the mare and colt, and unsaddled his horse before going into the house at all. It was only when he had discovered Johnny Croft's horse at the haystack, he said, that he began to wonder where the rider could be. He had gone to the house—and found him on the kitchen floor.

Lite had not heard this statement, for the simple reason that, being a closely interested person, he had been invited to remain outside while Aleck Douglas testified. He wondered why the jury,—men whom he knew and had known for years, most of them,—looked at one another so queerly when he declared that he had seen Aleck ride home. The coroner also had given him a queer look, but he had not made any comment. Aleck, too, had turned his head and stared at Lite in a way which Lite preferred to think he had not understood.

Beyond that one statement which had produced such a curious effect, Lite did not have anything to say that shed the faintest light upon the matter. He told where he had been, and that he had discovered the body just before Jean arrived, and that he had immediately started with her to town. The coroner did not cross-question him. Counting from four o'clock, which Jim had already named as the time of their separation, Lite would have had just about time to do the things he testified to doing. The only thing he claimed to have done and could not possibly have done, was to see Aleck Douglas riding into the coulee. Aleck himself had branded that a lie before Lite had ever uttered it.

The result was just what was to be expected. Aleck Douglas was placed under arrest, and as a prisoner he rode back to town alongside the sheriff,—an old friend of his, by the way,—to where Jean waited impatiently for news.

It was Lite who told her. "It'll come out all right," he said, in his calm way that might hide a good deal of emotion beneath it. "It's just to have something to work from,—don't mean anything in particular. It's a funny way the law has got," he explained, "of arresting the last man that saw a fellow alive, or the first one that sees him dead."

Jean studied this explanation dolefully. "They ought to find out the last one that saw him alive," she said resentfully, "and arrest him, then,—and leave dad out of it. There's no sense in the law, if that's the way it works."

"Well, I didn't make the law," Lite observed, in a tone that made Jean look up curiously into his face.

"Why don't they find out who saw him last?" she repeated. "Somebody did. Somebody must have gone there with him. Lite, do you know that Art Osgood came into town with his horse all in a lather of sweat, and took the afternoon train yesterday? I saw him. I met him square in the middle of the street, and he didn't even look at me. He was in a frightful hurry, and he looked all upset. If I was the law, I'd leave dad alone and get after Art Osgood. He acted to me," she added viciously, "exactly as if he were running away!"

"He wasn't, though. Jim told me Art was going to leave yesterday; that was in the forenoon. He's going to Alaska,—been planning it all spring. And Carl said he was with Art till Art left to catch the train. Somebody else from town here

had seen him take the train, and asked about him. No, it wasn't Art."

"Well, who was it, then?"

Never before had Lite failed to tell Jean just what she wanted to know. He failed now, and he went away as though he was glad to put distance between them. He did not know what to think. He did not want to think. Certainly he did not want to talk, to Jean especially. For lies never came easily to the tongue of Lite Avery. It was all very well to tell Jean that he didn't know who it was; he did tell her so, and made his escape before she could read in his face the fear that he did know. It was not so easy to guard his fear from the keen eyes of his fellows, with whom he must mingle and discuss the murder, or else pay the penalty of having them suspect that he knew a great deal more about it than he admitted.

Several men tried to stop him and talk about it, but he put them off. He was due at the ranch, he said, to look after the stock. He didn't know a thing about it, anyway.

Lazy A coulee, when he rode into it, seemed to wear already an air of depression, foretaste of what was to come. The trail was filled with hoofprints, and cut deep with the wagon that had borne the dead man to town and to an unwept burial. At the gate he met Carl Douglas, riding with his head sunk deep on his chest. Lite would have avoided that meeting if he could have done so unobtrusively, but as it was, he pulled up and waited while Carl opened the wire gate and dragged it to one side. From the look of his face, Carl also would have avoided the meeting, if he could have done so. He glanced up as Lite passed through.

"Hell of a verdict," Lite made brief comment when he met Carl's eyes.

Carl stopped, leaning against his horse with one hand thrown up to the saddle-horn. He was a small man, not at all like Aleck in size or in features. He looked haggard now and white.

"What do you make of it?" he asked Lite. "Do you believe —?"

"Of course I don't! Great question for a brother to ask," Lite retorted sharply. "It's not in Aleck to do a thing like that."

"What made you say you saw him ride home? You didn't, did you?"

"You heard what I said; take it or leave it." Lite scowled down at Carl. "What was there queer about it? Why—"

"If you'd been inside ten minutes before then," Carl told him bluntly, "you'd have heard Aleck say he came home a full hour or more before you say you saw him ride in. That's what's queer. What made you do that? It won't help Aleck none."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Lite slouched miserably in the saddle, and eyed the other without really seeing him at all. "They can't prove anything on Aleck," he added with faint hope.

"I don't see myself how they can." Carl brightened perceptibly. "His being alone all day is bad; he can't furnish the alibi you can furnish. But they can't prove anything. They'll turn him loose, the grand jury will; they'll have to. They can't indict him on the evidence. They haven't got any evidence,—not any more than just the fact that he rode in

with the news. No need to worry; he'll be turned loose in a few days." He picked up the gate, dragged it after him as he went through, and fumbled the wire loop into place over the post. "I wish," he said when he had mounted with the gate between them, "you hadn't been so particular to say you saw him ride home about the same time you did. That looks bad, Lite."

"Bad for who?" Lite turned in the saddle aggressively.

"Looks bad all around. I don't see what made you do that;—not when you knew Jim and Aleck had both testified before you did."

Lite rode slowly down the road to the stable, and cursed the impulse that had made him blunder so. He had no compunctions for the lie, if only it had done any good. It had done harm; he could see now that it had. But he could not believe that it would make any material difference in Aleck's case. As the story had been repeated to Lite by half a dozen men, who had heard him tell it, Aleck's own testimony had been responsible for the verdict.

Men had told Lite plainly that Aleck was a fool not to plead self-defense, even in face of the fact that Johnny Croft had not drawn any weapon. Jim had declared that Aleck could have sworn that Johnny reached for his gun. Others admitted voluntarily that while it would be a pretty weak defense, it would beat the story Aleck had told.

Lite turned the mare and colt into a shed for the night. He milked the two cows without giving any thought to what he was doing, and carried the milk to the kitchen door before he realized that it would be wasted, sitting in pans when the house would be empty. Still, it occurred to him

that he might as well go on with the routine of the place until they knew to a certainty what the grand jury would do. So he went in and put away the milk.

After that, Lite let other work wait while he cleaned the kitchen and tried to wash out that brown stain on the floor. His face was moody, his eyes dull with trouble. Like a treadmill, his mind went over and over the meager knowledge he had of the tragedy. He could not bring himself to believe Aleck Douglas guilty of the murder; yet he could not believe anything else.

Johnny Croft, it had been proven at the inquest, rode out from town alone, bent on mischief, if vague, half-drunken threats meant anything. He had told more than one that he was going to the Lazy A, but it was certain that no one had followed him from town. His threats had been for the most part directed against Carl, it is true; but if he had meant to quarrel with Carl, he would have gone to the Bar Nothing instead of the Lazy A. Probably he had meant to see both Carl and Aleck, and had come here first, since it was the nearest to town.

As to enemies, no one had particularly liked Johnny. He was not a likeable sort; he was too "mouthy" according to his associates. He had quarreled with a good many for slight cause, but since he was so notoriously blatant and argumentative, no one had taken him seriously enough to nurse any grudge that would be likely to breed assassination. It was inconceivable to Lite that any man had trailed Johnny Croft to the Lazy A and shot him down in the kitchen while he was calmly helping himself to Jean's gingerbread. Still, he must take that for granted or else