

A close-up, artistic photograph of a woman wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. Her long, wavy, light brown hair is blowing in the wind, partially obscuring her face. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with rolling hills under a pale sky. The entire image is framed by a thin, dark border with decorative corner elements.

# JUDITH OF BLUE LAKE RANCH

*Jackson Gregory*

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# **Judith of Blue Lake Ranch**

**Western Novel**

e-artnow, 2022

Contact: [info@e-artnow.org](mailto:info@e-artnow.org)

EAN 4066338123428



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# I

## BUD LEE WANTS TO KNOW

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Bud Lee, horse foreman of the Blue Lake Ranch, sat upon the gate of the home corral, builded a cigarette with slow brown fingers, and stared across the broken fields of the upper valley to the rosy glow above the pine-timbered ridge where the sun was coming up. His customary gravity was unusually pronounced.

"If a man's got the hunch an egg is bad," he mused, "is that a real good and sufficient reason why he should go poking his finger inside the shell? I want to know!"

Tommy Burkitt, the youngest wage-earner of the outfit and a profound admirer of all that taciturnity, good-humor, and quick capability which went into the make-up of Bud Lee, approached from the ranch-house on the knoll. "Hi, Bud!" he called. "Trevors wants you. On the jump."

Lee watched Tommy coming on with that wide, rocking gait of a man used to much riding and little walking. The deep gravity in the foreman's eyes was touched with a little twinkle by way of greeting.

Burkitt stopped at the gate, looking up at Lee. "On the jump, Trevors said," he repeated.

"The hell he did," said Lee pleasantly. "How old are you this morning, Tommy?"

Burkitt blushed. "Aw, quit it, Bud," he grinned. Involuntarily the boy's big square hand rose to the tender

growth upon lip and chin which, like the flush in the eastern sky, was but a vague promise of a greater glory to be.

"A hair for each year," continued the quiet-voiced man. "Ten on one side, nine on the other."

"Ain't you going to do what Trevors says?" demanded Tommy.

For a moment Lee sat still, his cigarette unlighted, his broad black hat far back upon his close-cropped hair, his eyes serenely contemplative upon the pink of the sky above the pines. Then he slipped from his place and, though each single movement gave an impression of great leisureliness, it was but a flash of time until he stood beside Burkitt.

"Stick around a wee bit, laddie," he said gently, a lean brown hand resting lightly on the boy's square shoulder. "A man can't see what is on the cards until they're tipped, but it's always a fair gamble that between dawn and dusk I'll gather up my string of colts and crowd on. If I do, you'll want to come along?"

He smiled at young Burkitt's eagerness and turned away toward the ranch-house and Bayne Trevors, thus putting an early end to an enthusiastic acquiescence. Tommy watched the tall man moving swiftly away through the brightening dawn.

"They ain't no more men ever foaled like him," meditated Tommy, in an approval so profound as to be little less than out-and-out devotion.

And, indeed, one might ride up and down the world for many a day and not find a man who was Bud Lee's superior in "the things that count." As tall as most, with sufficient shoulders, a slender body, narrow-hipped, he carried himself

as perhaps his forebears walked in a day when open forests or sheltered caverns housed them, with a lithe gracefulness born of the perfect play of superb physical development. His muscles, even in the slightest movement, flowed liquidly; he had slipped from his place on the corral gate less like a man than like some great, splendid cat. The skin of hands, face, throat, was very dark, whether by inheritance or because of long exposure to sun and wind, it would have been difficult to say. The eyes were dark, very keen, and yet reminiscently grave. From under their black brows they had the habit of appearing to be reluctantly withdrawn from some great distance to come to rest, steady and calm, upon the man with whom he chanced to be speaking. Such are the serene, dispassionate eyes of one who for many months of the year goes companionless, save for what communion he may find in the silent passes of the mountains, in the wide sweep of the meadow-lands or in the soul of his horse.

The gaunt, sure-footed form was lost to Tommy's eyes; Lee had passed beyond the clump of wild lilacs whose glistening, heart-shaped leaves screened the open court about which the ranch-house was built. A strangely elaborate ranch-house, this one, set here so far apart from the world of rich residences. There was a score of rooms in the great, one-story, rambling edifice of rudely squared timbers set in field-stone and cement, rooms now closed and locked; there were flower-gardens still cultivated daily by José, the half-breed; a pretty court with a fountain and many roses, out upon which a dozen doorways looked; wide verandas with glimpses beyond of fireplaces and long expanses of polished floor. For, until recently, this had been

not only the headquarters of Blue Lake Ranch, but the home as well of the chief of its several owners. Luke Sanford, whose own efforts alone had made him at forty-five a man to be reckoned with, had followed his fancy here extensively and expensively, allowing himself this one luxury of his many lean, hard years. Then, six months ago, just as his ambitions were stepping to fresh heights, just as his hands were filling with newer, greater endeavor, there had come the mishap in the mountains and Sanford's tragic death.

Lee passed silently through the courtyard, by the fountain which in the brightening air was like a chain of silver run through invisible hands, down the veranda bathed in the perfume of full-blown roses, and so came to the door at the far end. The door stood open; within was the office of Bayne Trevors, general manager. Lee entered, his hat still far back upon his head. The sound of his boots upon the bare floor caused Trevors to look up quickly.

"Hello, Lee," he said quietly. "Wait a minute, will you?"

Quite a different type from Lee, Bayne Trevors was heavy and square and hard. His eyes were the glinting gray eyes of a man who is forceful, dynamic, the sort of man who is a better captain than lieutenant, whose hands are strong to grasp life by the throat and demand that she stand and deliver. Only because of his wide and successful experience, of his initiative, of his way of quick, decisive action mated to a marked executive ability, had Luke Sanford chosen Bayne Trevors as his right-hand man in so colossal a venture as the Blue Lake Ranch. Only because of the same pushing, vigorous personality was he this morning general manager,

with the unlimited authority of a dictator over a petty principality.

In a moment Trevors lifted his frowning eyes from the table, turning in his chair to confront Lee, who stood lounging in leisurely manner against the door-jamb.

"That young idiot wants money again," he growled, his voice as sharp and quick as his eyes. "As if I didn't have enough to contend with already!"

"Meaning young Hampton, I take it?" said Lee quietly.

Trevors nodded savagely.

"Telegram. Caught it over the line the last thing last night. We'll have to sell some horses this time, Lee."

Lee's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "I didn't plan to do any selling for six months yet," he said, not in expostulation but merely in explanation. "They're not ready."

"How many three-year-olds have you got in your string in Big Meadow?" asked Trevors crisply.

"Counting those eleven Red Duke colts?"

"Counting everything. How many?"

"Seventy-three."

The general manager's pencil wrote upon the pad in front of him "73," then swiftly multiplied it by 50. Lee saw the result, 3,650 set down with the dollar sign in front of it. He said nothing.

"What would you say to fifty dollars a head for them?" asked Trevors, whirling again in his swivel chair. "Three thousand six fifty for the bunch?"

"I'd say the same," answered Lee deliberately, "that I'd say to a man that offered me two bits for Daylight or Ladybird. I just naturally wouldn't say anything at all."



"Who are Daylight and Ladybird?" demanded Trevors.

"They're two of *my* little horses," said Lee gently, "that no man's got the money to buy."

Trevors smiled cynically. "What are the seventy-three colts worth then?"

"Right now, when I'm just ready to break 'em in," said Bud Lee thoughtfully, "the worst of that string is worth fifty dollars. I'd say twenty of the herd ought to bring fifty dollars a head; twenty more ought to bring sixty; ten are worth seventy-five; ten are worth an even hundred; seven of the Red Duke stock are good for a hundred and a quarter; the other four Red Dukes and the three Robert the Devils are worth a hundred and fifty a head. The whole bunch, an easy fifty-seven hundred little iron men. Which," he continued dryly, "is considerable more than the thirty-six hundred you're talking about. And, give me six months, and I'll boost that fifty-seven hundred. Lord, man, that chestnut out of Black Babe by Hazard, is a real horse! Fifty dollars——"

He stared hard at Trevors a moment. And then, partially voicing the thought with which he had grappled upon the corral gate, he added meditatively: "There's something almighty peculiar about an outfit that will listen to a man offer fifty bucks on a string like that."

His eyes, cool and steady, met Trevors's in a long look which was little short of a challenge.

"Just how far does that go, Lee?" asked the manager curtly.

"As far as you like," replied the horse foreman coolly. "Are you going to sell those three-year-olds for thirty-six hundred?"

"Yes," answered Trevors bluntly, "I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"Ask for my time, I guess," and although his voice was gentle and even pleasant, his eyes were hard. "I'll take my own little string and move on.

"Curse it!" cried Trevors heatedly. "What difference does it make to you? What business is it of yours how I sell? You draw down your monthly pay, don't you? I raised you a notch last month without your asking for it, didn't I?"

"That's so," agreed the foreman equably. "It's a cinch none of the boys have any kick coming at the wages."

For a moment Trevors sat frowning up at Lee's inscrutable face. Then he laughed shortly. "Look here, Bud," he said good-humoredly, an obvious seriousness of purpose under the light tone. "I want to talk with you before you do anything rash. Sit down." But Lee remained standing, merely saying, "Shoot."

"I wonder," explained Trevors, "if the boys understand just the size of the job I've got in my hands? You know that the ranch is a million-dollar outfit; you know that you can ride fifteen miles without getting off the home-range; you know that we are doing a dozen different kinds of farming and stock-raising. But you don't know just how short the money is! There's that young idiot now, Hampton. He holds a third interest and I've got to consider what he says, even if he is a weak-minded, inbred pup that can't do anything but spend an inheritance like the born fool he is. His share is mortgaged; I've tried to pay the mortgage off. I've got to keep the interest up. Interest alone amounts, to three thousand dollars a year. Think of that! Then there's Luke

Sanford dead and his one-third interest left to another young fool, a girl!"

Trevors's fist came smashing down upon his table. "A girl!" he repeated savagely. "Worse than young Hampton, by Heaven! Every two weeks she's writing for a report, eternally butting in, making suggestions, hampering me until I'm sick of the job."

"That would be Luke's girl, Judith?"

"Yes. Two of the three owners' kids, writing me at every turn. And the third owner, Timothy Gray, the only sensible one of the lot, has just up and sold out his share, and I suppose I'll be hearing next that some superannuated female in an old lady's home has inherited a fortune and bought him out. Why, do you think I'd hold on to my job here for ten minutes if it wasn't that my reputation is in making a go of the thing? And now you, the best man I've got, throw me down!"

"I don't see," said Lee slowly, after a brief pause, "just what good it does to sell a string of real horses like they were sheep. Half of that herd is real horse-flesh, I tell you."

"Hampton wants money. And besides, a horse is a horse."

"Is it?" A hard smile touched Lee's lips. "That's just where a man makes a mistake. Some horses are cows, some are clean spirit. You can stake your boots on that, Trevors."

"Well," snapped Trevors, "suppose you are right. I've got to raise three thousand dollars in a hurry. Where will I get it?"

"Who is offering fifty dollars a head for those horses?" asked Lee abruptly. "It might be the Big Western Lumber Company?"

"Yes."

"Uh-huh. Well, you can kill the rats in your own barn, Trevors. I'll go look for a job somewhere else."

Bayne Trevors, his lips tightly compressed, his eyes steady, a faint, angry flush in his cheeks, checked what words were flowing to his tongue and looked keenly at his foreman. Lee met his regard with cool unconcern. Then, just as Trevors was about to speak, there came an interruption.

## II

### JUDITH TAKES A HAND

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The quiet of the morning was broken by the quick thud of a horse's shod hoofs on the hard ground of the courtyard. Bud Lee in the doorway turned to see a strange horse drawn up so that upon its four bunched hoofs it slid to a standstill; saw a slender figure, which in the early light he mistook for a boy, slip out of the saddle. And then, suddenly, a girl, the spurs of her little riding-boots making jingling music on the veranda, her riding-quirt swinging from her wrist, had stepped by him and was looking with bright, snapping eyes from him to Trevors.

"I am Judith Sanford," she announced briefly, and there was a note in her young voice which went ringing, bell-like, through the still air. "Is one of you men Bayne Trevors?"

A quick, shadowy smile came and went upon the lips of Bud Lee. It struck him that she might have said in just that way: "I am the Queen of England and I am running my own kingdom!" He looked at her with eyes filled with open interest and curiosity, making swift appraisal of the flush in the sun-browned cheeks, the confusion of dark, curling hair disturbed by her furious riding, the vivid, red-blooded beauty of her. Mouth and eyes and the very carriage of the dark head upon her superb white throat announced boldly and triumphantly that here was no wax-petalled lily of a lady but rather a maid whose blood, like the blood of the



father before her, was turbulent and hot and must boil like a wild mountain-stream at opposition. Her eyes, a little darker than Trevors's, were the eyes of fighting stock.

Trevors, irritated already, turned hard eyes up at her from under corrugated brows. He did not move in his chair. Nor did Lee stir except that now he removed his hat.

"I am Trevors," said the general manager curtly. "And, whether you are Judith Sanford or the Queen of Siam, I am busy right now."

"He got the queen idea, too!" was the quick thought back of Bud Lee's fading smile.

"You talk soft with me, Trevors!" cried the girl passionately, "if you want to hold your job five minutes! I'll tolerate none of your high and mighty airs!"

Trevors laughed at her, a sneer in his laugh. "I talk the way I talk," he answered roughly. "If people don't like the sound of it they don't have to listen! Lee, you round up those seventy-three horses and crowd them over the ridge to the lumber-camp. Or, if you want to quit, quit now and I'll send a sane man."

The hot color mounted higher in the girl's face, a new anger leaped up in her eyes.

"Take no orders this morning that I don't give," she said, for a moment turning her eyes upon Lee. And to Trevors: "Busy or not busy, you take time right now to answer my questions. I've got your reports and all they tell me is that you are going in the hole as fast as you can. You are spending thousands of dollars needlessly. What business have you got selling off my young steers at a sacrifice?"

What in the name of folly did you build those three miles of fence for?"

"Go get those horses, Lee," said Trevors, ignoring her.

Again she spoke to Lee, saying crisply: "What horses is he talking about?"

With his deep gravity at its deepest, Bud Lee answered: "All L-S stock. The eleven Red Duke three-year-olds; the two Robert the Devil colts; Brown Babe's filly, Comet——"

"All mine, every running hoof of 'em," she said, cutting in. "What does Trevors want you to do with them? Give them away for ten dollars a head or cut their throats?"

"Look here——" cried Trevors angrily, on his feet now.

"You shut up!" commanded the girl sharply. "Lee, you answer me."

"He's selling them fifty dollars a head," he said with a secret joy in his heart as he glanced at Trevors's flushed face.

"Fifty dollars!" Judith gasped. "Fifty dollars for a Red Duke colt like Comet!"

She stared at Lee as though she could not believe it. He merely stared back at her, wondering just how much she knew about horse-flesh.

Then, suddenly, she whirled again upon Trevors.

"I came out to see if you were a crook or just a fool," she told him, her words like a slap in his face. "No man could be so big a fool as that! You—you crook!"

The muscles under Bayne Trevors's jaws corded. "You've said about enough," he shot back at her. "And even if you do own a third of this outfit, I'll have you understand that I am the manager here and that I do what I like."

From her bosom she snatched a big envelope, tossing it to the table. "Look at that," she ordered him. "You big thief! I've mortgaged my holding for fifty thousand dollars and I've bought in Timothy Gray's share. I swing two votes out of three now, Bayne Trevors. And the first thing I do is run you out, you great big grafting fathead! You *would* chuck Luke Sanford's outfit to the dogs, would you? Get off the ranch. You're fired!"

"You can't do a thing like this!" snapped Trevors, after one swift glance at the papers he had whisked out of their covering.

"I can't, can't I?" she jeered at him. "Don't you fool yourself for one little minute! Pack your little trunk and hammer the trail."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Why, I don't know even who you are! You say that you are Judith Sanford." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "How do I know what game you are up to? Wayward maidens," and in his rage he sneered at her evilly, "have been known before to lie like other people!"

"You can't bluff me for two seconds, Bayne Trevors," she blazed at him. "You know who I am, all right. Send for Sunny Harper," she ended sharply.

"Discharged three months ago," Trevors told her with a show of teeth.

"Johnny Hodge, then," she commanded. "Or Tod Bruce or Bing Kelley. They all know me."

"Fired long ago, all of them," laughed Trevors, "to make room for competent men."

"To make room for more crooks!" she cried, her own brown hands balled into fists scarcely less hard than

Trevors's had been. Then for the third time she turned upon Lee. "You are one of his new thieves, I suppose?"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Bud Lee gravely.

"Well, answer me. Are you?"

"No, ma'am," he told her, with no hint of a twinkle in his calm eyes. "Leastwise, not his exactly. You see, I do all my killing and highway robbing on my own hook. It's just a way I have."

"Well," Judith sniffed, "I don't know. It will be a jolt to me if there's a square man left on the ranch! Go down to the bunk-house and tell the cook I'm here and I'm hungry as a wild-cat. Tell him and any of the boys that are down there that I've come to stay and that Trevors is fired. They take orders from me and no one else. And hurry, if you know how. Goodness knows, you look as though it would take you half an hour to turn around!"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Bud Lee. "But you see I had just told Trevors here he could count me out. I'm not working for the Blue Lake any more. As I go down to the corral, shall I send up one of the boys to take your orders?"

There was a little smile under the last words, just as there was a little smile in Bud Lee's heart at the thought of the boys taking orders from a little slip of a girl. Inside he was chuckling, vastly delighted with the comedy of the morning.

"She's a sure-enough little wonder-bird, all right," he mused. "But, say, what does she want to butt in on a man's-size job for, I want to know?"

"Lee," called Trevors, "you take orders from me or no one on this ranch. You can go now. And just keep your mouth

shut."

Bud Lee stood there in the doorway, his hat spinning upon a brown forefinger, his thoughts his own. He was turning to go out and down to his horse when he saw the look in Trevors's eyes, a look of consuming rage. The general manager's voice had been hoarse.

"I guess," said Lee quietly, "that I'll stick around until you two get through quarrelling. I might come in handy somehow."

"Damn you," shouted Trevors, "get out!"

"Cut out the swear-words, Trevors," said Lee with quiet sternness. "There's a lady here."

"Lady!" scoffed Trevors. He laughed contemptuously. "Where's your lady? That?" and he levelled a scornful finger at the girl. "A ranting tough of a female who brings a breath of the stables with her and scolds like a fishwife.... "

"Shut up!" said Lee, crossing the room with quick strides, his face thrust forward a little.

"You shut up!" It was Judith's voice as Judith's hand fell upon Bud Lee's shoulder, pushing him aside. "If I couldn't take care of myself do you think I'd be fool enough to take over a job like running the Blue Lake? Now—" and with blazing eyes she confronted Trevors—"if you've got any more nice little things to say, suppose you say them to me!"

Trevors's temper had had ample provocation and now stood naked and hot in his hard eyes. In a blind instant he laid his tongue to a word which would have sent Bud Lee at his throat. But Judith stood between them and, like an echo to the word, came the resounding slap as Judith's open palm smote Trevors's cheek.



"You wildcat!" he cried. And his two big hands flew out, seeking her shoulders.

"Stand back!" called Judith. "Just because you are bigger than I am, don't make any mistake! Stand back, I tell you!"

Bud Lee marvelled at the swiftness with which her hand had gone into her blouse and out again, a small-caliber revolver in the steady fingers now. He had never known a man—himself possibly excepted—quicker at the draw.

But Bayne Trevors, from whose make-up cowardice had been omitted, laughed sneeringly at her and did not stand back. His two hands out before him, his face crimson, he came on.

"Fool!" cried the girl. "Fool!"

Still he came on. Lee gathered himself to spring.

Judith fired. Once, and Trevors's right arm fell to his side. A second time, and Trevors's left arm hung limp like the other. The crimson was gone from his face now. It was dead white. Little beads of sweat began to form on his brow.

Lee turned astonished eyes to Judith.

"Now you know who's running this outfit, don't you?" she said coolly. "Lee, have a team hitched up to carry Trevors wherever he wants to go. He's not hurt much; I just winged him. And then tell the cook about my breakfast."

But Lee stood and looked at her. He had no remark to offer. Then he turned to go upon her bidding. As he went down to the bunk-house he said softly under his breath: "Well, I'm damned. I most certainly am!"



## AND RIDES AN OUTLAW

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Wrinkled, grizzled old half-breed José, his hands trembling with eagerness, stood in the smaller rose-garden culling the perfect buds, a joyous tear running its zigzag way down each cheek.

"*La señorita* ees come home!" he announced triumphantly as Lee drew near on his way to the bunk-house. "*Jesús Maria!* Een my heart it is like the singing of leetle birdies. *Mira, señor.* My flowers bloomin' the brighter, already—no?"

Bud Lee paused. "So you know Miss Sanford then?" he asked.

José threw out his hands and opened his night-black eyes to their most enormous extent. "Do I know God?" he demanded.

"Well," smiled Bud, "as to that. . . "

"But, señor," cried the devout José, "like on holy days I feel that Dios comes to sit down in the corner of my heart, so without seeing *la señorita* I know she ees come home! She ees in the air like the light of sun, like the sweetness of my roses!"

"You've known her a long time, Joe?"

"Seence she ees born!" and José, unashamed, wiped away a tear upon the back of a leathery hand. "Señor Sanford and me, señor, we teach her when she ees so

leettle!" José's shaking hand was lowered until it marked the stature of a twelve-inch pigmy. In all things must the old fellow gain his emphasis by exaggeration which more often than not took the form of plain lying. "Never at all unteel one year ago does she leave us and the *rancho*. We, us two who love her, señor, learn her to walk and to ride and to shoot and to talk. You shall hear her say, '*Buenos días, José, mi amigo!*' You shall see her kees the cheek of old José."

Again his leathery hand was put in requisition, this time to wipe clean the cheek to be honored. "And one theeng I tell you, señor," he added confidentially. "Her papa was a wild devil before her. Her mama ees grow up on the ranch; and when she marry *el señor* Sanford was like a wild boy. And *mi señorita*, she ees the cross be tween a wild devil and a sweet saint, señor *Madre de Dios!* I would go down to hell for her to bring back fire to warm her leettle feet een weenter!"

Lee went thoughtfully on his way to the bunk-house. The cook, an importation of Bayne Trevors, a big, upstanding fellow with bare arms covered with flour, was putting on the breakfast to which a dozen rough-garbed men were sitting down.

"I've got orders for you fellows," said Lee from the doorway. "The boss of the outfit, the real owner, you know, just blew in. Up at the house. Says you boys are to stick around to take orders straight from headquarters. You, Benny," to the cook, "are to have a man's-size breakfast ready in a jiffy."

Naturally Benny led the clamor with a string of oaths. What in blazes did the owner of the ranch have to show up

for anyway?—he wanted to know. He accepted the fact as a personal affront. Who was this owner?—demanded Ward Hannon, the foreman of the lower ranch, where the alfalfa-fields were.

Bud Lee explained gravely that the newcomer was some sort of relative of old Luke Sanford, who had recently acquired a controlling interest in the ranch. Ward Hannon grunted contemptuously. "The Lord deliver us!" he moaned. "Eastern jasper! One of the know-all-about-it brand, huh, Bud? I'll bet he combs his hair in the middle and smokes cigareets out'n a box! The putty-headed loons can't even roll their own smokes."

"Don't believe," hazarded Lee indifferently, "from the looks of our visitor that—that the owner smokes anything!"

"Listen to that!" grunted Ward Hannon.

"Softy, huh?"

"Well," Bud admitted slowly, "looks sort of like a girl, you know!"

"Wouldn't that choke you?" demanded Carson, the cow foreman, a thin, awkward little man, gray in the service of "real men." "Taking orders off'n a fool Easterner's bad enough. But old man or young, Bud?"

"Just a kid," was Lee's further dampening news. And as he nonchalantly buttered his hotcakes he added carelessly: "Something of a scrapper, though. Just put two thirty-two calibers into Trevors."

They stared at him incredulously. Then Carson's dry cackle led the laughter.

"You're the biggest liar, Bud Lee," said the old man good-naturedly, "I ever focussed my two eyes on. I'll lay an even

bet there ain't nobody showed a-tall up this morning."

"You, Tommy," said Lee to the boy at his side, "shovel your grub down lively and go hitch Molly and old Pie-face to the buckboard. That's orders from headquarters," he grinned. "Trevors is to be hauled away first thing."

Tommy looked curiously at his superior. "On the level, Bud?" he asked doubtfully.

"On the level, laddie," was the quiet response.

And young Burkitt, wondering, but doubting no longer, hastened with his breakfast.

The others, looking at Lee's sober face questioningly, fired a broadside of inquiries at him. But they got no further information.

"I've told you boys all the news," he announced positively. "Lordy! Isn't that an earful for this time of day? The real boss is on the job: Trevors is winged; you are to stick around for orders from headquarters. If you want to know any more'n that, why—just go up to the house and ask your blamed questions."

Out of the tail of his eye he saw the swift approach of Bayne Trevors. The general manager's face was black with rage and through that dark wrath showed a dull red flush of shame. He walked with his two arms lax at his sides.

"Give me a cup of coffee, Ben," he commanded curtly, slumping into a chair. "Hurry!"

Benny, looking at him curiously, brought a steaming cup and offered it. Trevors moved to lift a hand; then sank back a little farther in his chair, his face twisting in his pain.

"Put some milk in it," he snarled. "Then hold it to my mouth. For the love of Heaven, hurry, man!"



Then no man there doubted longer the mad tale Bud Lee had brought them. Down from Trevors's sleeves, staining each hand, there had come a broadening trickle of blood. Trevors set his teeth and waited. Benny at last cooled the coffee and held it to his lips. Trevors drank swiftly, draining the cup.

"Get this coat off me," he commanded. "Curse you, don't tear my arms off! Slit the sleeves."

Benny's big, razor-edged butcher-knife cut away coat and shirt sleeves. And at last, to the eager gaze of the men in the bunk-house, there appeared the two wounds, one upon the outer right shoulder, the other upon the left forearm.

It was Lee who, pushing the clumsy cook aside, silently made the two bandages from strips of Trevors's shirt. It was Lee who brought a flask of brandy from which Trevors drank deep.

And then came Judith.

They stared at her as they might have done had the heavens opened and an angel come down, or the earth split and a devil sprung up. She looked in upon them with quick, keen eyes which sought to take every man's measure. They returned her regard with a variety of amazed expressions. Never since these men had come to work for Bayne Trevors had a woman so much as ridden by the door. And to have her stand there, composed, utterly at her ease, her air vaguely authoritative, a vitally vivid being who might, suddenly, have taken tangible form from the dawn, bewildered them. Bud Lee had told of the coming of the Blue Lake owner; he had not mentioned that that owner had brought his daughter with him.

"I am Judith Sanford," she said in her abrupt fashion, quite as she had made the announcement to Lee and Trevors. "This outfit belongs to me. I have fired Trevors. You take your orders straight from me from now on. Cookie, give me some coffee."

She came in without ceremony and sat down at the head of the table. Benny gasped, stood for a moment rooted to the floor, and then, Judith's eyes hard upon him, hastily brought the coffee. From some emotion certainly not clear to him he went a violent red. Perhaps the emotion was just sheer embarrassment. He brought hot cakes with one hand while with the other he buttoned his gaping shirt-collar over a bulging, hairy chest.

Men who had finished their breakfasts rose hastily with a marked awkwardness and ill-concealed haste and went outside, whence their low voices came back in a confused consultation. Men who had not finished followed them. In an amazingly short time there were but the girl, Lee, Trevors and the cook in the room. Then Trevors went out, Benny at his heels. Bud Lee, moving with his usual leisureliness, was following when Judith's cool voice said quietly:

"You, Lee, wait a moment. I want to talk with you."

Lee hesitated. Then he came back and waited.

The men outside naturally grouped about the general manager. His angry voice, lifted clearly, reached the two in the room.

"I'm fired," said Trevors harshly. "As soon as I can get going I am leaving for the Western Lumber camp. Every one of you boys holds his job here because I gave it to him. Do you want to hold it now, with a fool girl telling you what to

do? Do you want men up and down the State to laugh at you and jeer at you for a pack of softies and imbeciles? Or do you want to roll your blankets and quit? To every man that jumps the job here and follows me to-day I promise a job with the Western. You fellows know the sort of boss I've been to you. You can guess the sort of boss that chicken in there would be. Now I'm going. It's up to you. Stick to a white man or fuss around for a woman?"

He had said what he had to say and, cursing when his shoulder struck a form near him, made his way down to the stables. Burkitt was ahead of him, going for the team.

"Well, Lee," said Judith sharply, "where do you get off? Do you want to stick? Or shall I count you out?"

"I guess," said Bud very gently, "you'd better count me out."

"You're going with that crook?"

"No. I'm going on my own."

"Why? You're getting good money here. If you're square I'll keep you at the same figure."

But Bud shook his head.

"I'm game to play square," he said slowly. "I'll stick a week, giving you the chance to get a man in my place. That's all."

"What's the matter with you?" she cried hotly. "Why won't you stay with your job? Is it because you don't want to take orders from me?"

Then Lee lifted his grave eyes to hers and answered simply: "That's it. I'm not saying you're not all right. But I got it figured out, there's just two kinds of ladies. If you want

to know, I don't see that you've got any call to tie into a man's job."

"Oh, scat!" cried the girl angrily. "You men make me tired. Two kinds of ladies! And ten thousand kinds of men! You want me to dress like a doll, I suppose, and keep my hands soft and white and go around like a brainless, simpering fool! There *are* two kinds of *ladies*, my fine friend: the kind that can and the kind that can't! Thank God I'm none of your precious, sighing, hothouse little fools!"

Gulping down a last mouthful of coffee, she was on her feet and passed swiftly out among the men.

"You men!" she cried, and they turned sober eyes upon her, "listen to me! You've heard that big stiff rant; now hear me! I'm here because I belong here. My dad was Luke Sanford and he made this ranch. I was raised here. It's two-thirds mine right now. Trevors there is a crook and I told him so. He's been trying to sell me out, to make such a failure of the outfit that I'd have to let it go for a comic song. He got gay and I fired him. He tried to manhandle me and I plugged him. And now I am going to run my own outfit! What have you got to say about it, you grumbling old grouch with the crooked face! Put up or shut up! I'm calling you!"

The men turned from her to Ward Hannon, the field foreman, who had been Trevors's right-hand man and who now was sneering openly.

"I'm saying it's no work for a kid of a girl," grumbled Hannon. "You run an outfit like this?" He laughed derisively. "It can't be did."

"It can't, can't it?" cried Judith. "Tell me why, old smarty. Spit it out lively."

Jake Carson's shrill cackle cut through a low rumble of laughter. "That's passing it to him straight," said the old cattleman. "What's the word, Ward?"

Ward Hannon shrugged his shoulders and spat impudently. "I ain't saying nothing," he growled, "only this: I got a right to quit, ain't I? Well, I'm quitting. Any time you ketch me working for a female girl that can't ride a horse 'thout falling off, that can't see a pig stuck 'thout fainting, that can't walk a mile 'thout getting laid up, that can't. . . . "

"Slow up there!" called Judith. "Didn't I stick a pig already this morning, and have I keeled over yet? Didn't I ride the forty miles from Rocky Bend last night and get here before sun-up? Listen to me, chief kicker: If you've got a horse on the ranch I can't ride I'll quit right now and give you my job! How's that strike you? I tell you the word on this ranch is going to be: 'Put up or shut up!' Which is it, Growly?"

Again the men laughed and Hannon's face showed his anger.

"Mean that, lady?" he demanded briefly.

"You can just bet your eyes I mean it!"

Hannon turned toward the stable. "All right. We'll see who's going to put or shut up!" he jeered over his shoulder. "You ride the Prince just two little minutes and I'll stay and work for you!"

Bud Lee from the doorway interfered. He was a man who loved fair play and he knew the Prince. "None of that, Ward," he called sternly. "Not the Prince!"

But Judith, her eyes aflame, whirled upon Lee, her voice like a whip as she said: "Lee, you keep out of this. The

sooner you learn who's running things here the better for you."

"Maybe so," said Lee quietly. "But don't you fool yourself you can ride Prince. There's not a man on the job except me that can ride him." It was not boastfully said, but with calm assurance. "He's an outlaw, Miss Judith. He's the horse that killed Jimmy Carpenter last spring, and Jimmy——"

"Go ahead, Ward," ordered Judith. "You don't have to stop every time the wind blows, do you?"

Even Bud Lee smiled. But old Carson spoke up, saying: "Bud's right, miss. And if Ward wants to know, he's a low-down dawg to try to turn a trick like this.... "

"Go ahead, Ward," Judith repeated. "I've got something to do to-day besides play pussy-wants-a-corner with you boys."

Ward went, his eyes filled with malice. Two or three of the other men joined their voices to Bud's and Carson's, expostulating, telling of that fearful thing, an outlaw horse. Judith maintained a scornful silence.

In due time Ward came back. He was leading a saddled horse, a great, wild-eyed roan that snapped viciously as he came on, walking with the wide, spreading stride of a horse little used to the saddle. Judith measured him with her eyes as she had measured the men in the bunk-house.

"He's an ugly devil," she said, and Lee, at her side, smiled again. But the girl had not altered her intention. She stepped closer, looking to cinch, bit, and reins. She commanded Ward to draw the latigo tighter, and Ward did so, dodging back as the big brute snapped at him.

Judith laughed. "Look out, Ward," she taunted him. "He's after your hair!"

Two men held the Prince. At Judith's command they shortened the stirrups and then blinded him with a bandanna handkerchief. Then, moving with almost incredible swiftness, she was in the saddle, the reins firmly gripped. The Prince, a sudden trembling thrilling through him, stood with his four feet planted. The girl leaned forward and whipped the blind from his red-rimmed eyes.

"There's a good boy!" said Judith coolly. "Buck a little for the lady, Prince!"

Slowly the great muscles of Prince's leg and shoulder and flank corded. The trembling passed; he was like a horse carved in bluish granite. He shook his head a little. Judith, her hand tightening upon the reins, held his head well up, the severe bit thwarting the attempt to get his nose down between his forelegs.

Then suddenly, without sign of warning, the horse whirled, leaping far out to the left, striking with hard hoofs bunched, gathering himself as he landed, swerving with the quickness of light, plunging again to the right. And again he stood still. Judith, sitting securely on his rebellious back, laughed. Her laughter, cool and unafraid, sent a strange little thrill through Bud Lee—who, with fear in his heart, was watching her.

"Look out for him now!" he called warningly.

In truth the Prince had not yet begun. He had tried a trick which would have unseated any but one who rode well. He knew that he had to do with something more than a rank amateur.

Now he plunged toward the corral, his purpose plain, the one desire in his heart to crush his rider against the high