

# The Horse Thief

by John Montague

*The thrilling experience that befell a newcomer to a region where short shrift is given to those who can't prove protestations.*

IN the bottom of the cañon he lay, pale and unconscious, his face turned upward and a small stream of blood trickling from his cheek—a cheek which bore the pallor of the East rather than the rugged tan of the West. Near by lay his horse—dead.

Out from a little cabin farther up the gorge ran a frightened girl in calico. She had seen horse and rider take the fatal plunge from the ledge above; with the fleetness of a deer she sped to his side.

Quickly obtaining water from the creek some yards away, using his sombrero as a basin, she bathed his forehead and washed away the stains of blood which were dyeing his blond hair an ugly red. She was thus able to stanch the flow, for the cut was not deep.

Under her gentle treatment the young man soon regained consciousness, and drew a long breath. Then he opened his eyes and looked at his companion curiously.

He saw that she was quite pretty and young—possibly eighteen; that her eyes were darker than her hair, and that her skin betokened invigorating outdoor life. She smiled, and again touched his burning forehead with her dampened palm.

He closed his eyes, and sighed audibly.

“My! but that feels good!”

“Are you hurt?” she asked, still holding his head in her hand.

“Hurt? Why— Oh, yes, now I remember. We took a spill over the ledge, up yonder, didn't we? How's my horse?”

A look of regret stole into her eyes as

they fell on the unfortunate beast, and she replied softly:

“I suppose he is done for. And it's a miracle you escaped.”

“Yes, so it is. I have much to be thankful for; but I always have been a tough customer.

“I feel rather sore and bruised,” he added, rubbing his arms as he rose to his feet, “as if I had been in a railroad wreck. Wonder how long I have been lying here?”

“About ten minutes,” she answered, rising also. “I saw you fall, and ran down to help you. I live in that little cabin up the gorge, my father and I. He is a miner.”

“Oh, he is!” exclaimed the stranger. “Then, perhaps he will know the man I am looking for. My uncle. His name is Playfair. Did you ever hear of him?”

She shook her head.

“He came out when the rush here began. I've had a terrible time the past two days. Got lost on the prairies. Started for Badger, but took the wrong direction. Ran out of provisions, and couldn't find any water. Thought for a while I'd go crazy. As a last resource, I allowed my horse to have his head. I should have done this long before, but egotistic man always thinks he is much wiser than mere beast. Found out I wasn't. I must have lost consciousness, for I don't remember coming into these mountains. The horse smelled the water, I suppose, and in his eagerness to get to it tried to come down over the side, poor fellow. Awfully kind of you to

fix me up this way.”

“When I saw you first,” she said, “you were lying on your horse’s neck as though asleep. But come up to the cabin and have something to eat; you must be famished. Dad will be along pretty soon; it is nearly suppertime.”

The stranger paused only long enough to remove his saddle from the dead animal, and then accompanied the girl up the cañon. He ate like a starved wolf, and she enjoyed his satisfaction as much as he relished the meal.

After she had placed everything on the table she sat down, and they chatted genially together.

They were in the midst of their conversation when a knock on the door was heard.

“Come in!” called the girl.

The door opened, and a short, deeply tanned man appeared. He was dressed as a miner, and a huge black mustache drooped from either side of his upper lip. He bowed to the girl, and then paused, catching sight of the stranger.

“Oh, I didn’t know you had company,” he said, and his face did not brighten.

“That’s all right,” replied the girl. “This is Mr.—”

“Travers,” supplied the visitor, with a smile.

“Mr. Travers, Mr. Ryan,” she finished.

Then she explained how Travers happened to be there.

They were soon joined by the girl’s father, a man of perhaps fifty-four, tall and rugged, with iron gray hair and eyes to match. His face was smooth, and he listened with impassive but respectful attention as his daughter retold the story.

He shook his head when she asked him if he had ever known a man named Playfair, but added that names in the West, at that time, were as easily lost as the proverbial needle in the haystack. He had kept more or less to

himself, prospecting on his own hook, possibly assisted by one or two other men. At the present time, Ryan—or “Red Ryan,” as he was called on account of his hair—was his only employee.

As it was Travers’s intention to become a miner for gold, he accepted Sanderson’s invitation to remain and work with him. His decision was not received with shouts of joy from Ryan, for in the newcomer, he felt instinctively, had come a rival for Sanderson’s daughter, although there were no grounds for this assumption aside from the fact that both were young and he was not.

Days passed, and Travers changed his Eastern garb for the rough jeans of the prospector. His face lost its pallor, but the stamp of the East could not be eradicated. He was a sore spot in Ryan’s daily life, and the latter made no pretense of concealing his enmity.

Then came a morning when old man Sanderson made a great find; gold in abundance was uncovered, and the men were beside themselves with joy.

Back to the cabin they rushed and told the girl the good news. She shared their wild enthusiasm, but with a woman’s keen insight into the future demanded of her father that he file a claim for the ground at the land office in Badger, to protect his discovery from land jumpers. It was determined to do as she suggested at the earliest possible moment.

It lay between Ryan and Travers who would ride to Badger and file the claim, with the decision falling to the latter after a private session between father and daughter. The girl did not share her father’s confidence in Ryan, and persuaded him to despatch Travers on the mission.

When Ryan learned that the younger man was to be sent he was furious. He had counted on spending a night or so at the gambling tables in Badger. He said nothing, but his demeanor was anything but agreeable.

The next morning Travers started away on Sanderson's black mare, a handsome and high-spirited horse. He was cautioned both by the old man and his daughter to tell no one the purport of his journey, nor to allow the news of the discovery to leak out in any way. His duty was to get to Badger with the least possible delay, file the claim, and return.

He promised to carry out faithfully the trust reposed in him, and galloped away, after having given an extra pressure to the little hand that slipped into his own when he mounted the mare.

Ryan was not around at the departure, but no significance was attached to his absence, inasmuch as he often went away early in the morning to prospect by himself. He had not been home all night, but Sanderson and his daughter were not aware of this fact.

Travers galloped on. He was not much used to the saddle, and had all he could do to hold in check the mettlesome animal under him. She had not been exercised lately, and endeavored to bolt at top speed as soon as they reached level ground. Travers held her in, however, for the journey was quite a long one, and he did not want her winded. He had promised to be back the next day.

He had covered possibly twenty miles, when he became aware that some one was galloping in his rear. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a horseman evidently trying to overtake him, and a flash of the sun revealed that he held a gun in his hand.

Travers thought of outlaws and highwaymen, and slid his holster around until the butt of his revolver was within easy reach.

The black mare, hearing another horse thundering behind, strove to strike a faster pace, and Travers was compelled to use both hands on the reins to hold her in. He glanced again over his shoulder, and saw that his pursuer had him "covered," and that he was within easy revolver range.

"Hold on, thar!" the other shouted.

"Where you a goin' with that mare?"

"Badger," Travers called back.

"That's Sanderson's boss or I'm a liar!" continued the newcomer, drawing up abreast of the Easterner.

"Who said it wasn't?" retorted Travers.

"How'd you come by it?"

"I'm a friend of his."

"Never saw you before."

"Never saw you, either."

"Stranger out here, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Been here long?"

"Not very long."

"What's your business?"

"Miner."

The other laughed.

"Them hands of yours looks like a pianner-player's," he said, eying Travers narrowly. "Sure you didn't steal that mare?"

"You have your gun in your hand or you couldn't say that," snapped Travers, laying his hand on his own weapon.

"Stop that!" yelled the other, "or I'll bore you through. I know you stole that mare; I heard early this morning that Sanderson's hoss had been taken. You fit the description of the hoss thief mighty well, too, so I'll have to ask you to stop at Big Bill's shack, down the road, when we get thar."

"Can't stop," replied Travers; "I'm in a great hurry."

"Your kind usually is in a great hurry," sneered the other.

"I'm on an errand for Sanderson; promised him I'd get to Badger as soon as possible; I didn't steal this horse; the idea is ridiculous."

"Well, if you can convince the majority of the boys you didn't you'll be allowed to go, but you can't pull the wool over my eyes. We've had dealings with your kind afore in these parts, and hoss stealing is gettin' to be too blamed popular. So, slow up,

'cause here's Bill's ranch house."

Travers saw how futile argument would be in the face of so much determination, and decided it would be best for him to stop. Several men came out of the shack at their approach, seeing their friend had his gun in his hand.

"What's up, Hank?" asked a big boned rancher as he glanced over at Travers.

"Caught this feller up the road a kiting along on Sanderson's black mare," explained Hank. "He says as how he is a friend of Sand's, but I ain't never seen him hereabouts afore."

"I ain't, neither," confirmed another of the men.

"And furthermore," continued Hank, with evident relish, "I heard this mornin' that this very mare had been stolen, and this feller fits the description of the hoss thief to a T."

"Where you bound for, stranger?" questioned the big boned man, whom the others addressed as Bill.

"Badger," replied Travers, his lips in a line.

"Business?"

"Private."

"Tell us what it is."

"Can't."

The men's faces expressed their disapproval.

"We'll have to hold you till we hear from Sanderson," said Big Bill after a pause. "It's his hoss, and we don't know you. If you stole her, you know what you'll get, I reckon. Bring him inside, Hank."

Hank moved toward the mare, but at the same moment a piece of brown paper was blown out of the cabin. The horse shied and started off at full speed, knocking Hank down in its flight. Travers did not try to rein her in this time, but lay flat on her back.

The ranchmen ran for their ponies and soon were in full pursuit, but the mare had few equals in that region, and kept the lead. They

were afraid to shoot for fear of killing the horse, but they spurred their own beasts to their utmost speed.

So did Travers. He realized that this was his opportunity to escape, and he doubtless would have succeeded had not fate been against him.

The mare stuck her left hoof into a prairie dog hole and sent her rider sprawling. For a moment he lay stunned, and before he could remount he was pounced upon by the bunch of ranchmen and made prisoner.

They bound his arms with a lariat and placed him back on the mare, but this time they took the precaution to hold the reins themselves. Between Bill and another of the band they led him back to the cabin.

Hank came galloping up to meet them, having recovered his senses, and with him was a second person in whom Travers recognized Red Ryan. His heart gave a jump of delight, for now he felt he need have no further concern. Ryan would clear away the suspicion against him.

But in this he was mistaken; he reckoned without full knowledge of his man. Ryan had a grievance against him, and now was his opportunity to get even. He absolutely refused to recognize Travers, saying he knew nothing about him. The younger man's eyes fairly blazed with indignation, but he could do nothing in the face of such odds.

Ryan further stated that Sanderson's mare had been stolen, and that he was on the lookout for the thief.

Travers was stunned with astonishment. The revenge this man was taking on account of petty jealousy seemed hideous. By a word he could have cleared the suspected man, but instead of that word he piled up damaging evidence against him.

"Well, I guess that's all we want to know," said Big Bill after the accusations and denials were over. "You can take the mare back to Sanderson, Red, and we'll do the

honors with this gentleman. Hank, fetch along the rope. We'll utilize the tree out at Baldy Point."

II.

SANDERSON'S daughter was getting herself a bite of lunch, when the door was thrown open and Red Ryan walked in. He had been drinking, and his face was flushed.

"Rose, I want you to marry me, d'ye hear?"

"I hear most things, Red, but not that," she laughed.

"Well, I want you to listen to it," he continued thickly. "I've always loved you, Rose, and I've waited three years for you."

"I never asked you to wait for me, did I, Red?" she asked, drawing some biscuits from the oven.

"No, you didn't," he snapped; "but you never told me not to wait. I'm goin' to be rich some day, and I'm a goin' East; I want to take you along with me. You used to be pleasant enough to me."

"I'm still pleasant to you, am I not?" she inquired, wheeling around.

"Not since that light-headed coyote dropped into the cañon and came to live with us, you ain't," he snarled, coming close to her.

She laughed easily.

"Oh! Why, I think I've been just as pleasant since he came."

"So you have—yes, a darn sight pleasanter—to him. I get left out in the cold. Why didn't your dad send me to file them papers in Badger?"

"You drink, and might have got mixed up in a game, Red," she replied, looking him straight in the eye.

"Well, I'll bet he gets mixed up in somethin' worse than a game," sneered the other, seating himself.

"What do you mean?" demanded the girl, grasping him by the shoulder. She did not

know why, but a premonition of pending danger seemed to possess her.

Ryan was silent. His lips were curled in a cruel smile, and his bleared eyes roved restlessly from one point in the room to another. Suddenly he fastened them on the girl.

"This is the last time I'm goin' to ask you," he said. "I want you to be my wife."

"I couldn't be your wife, Red, if I wanted to," she whispered, her face the color of crimson. "Because I—I promised him to be his!"

The man sprang to his feet as though stung by an adder.

"What!" he cried. "Him! That yellow haired, elegant mannered pup? Don't you tell me that, Rose Sanderson!"

"But I am telling you, Red. He asked me before he left, and I promised him. We're going East in about a year—"

The other man burst into a coarse and cruel laugh.

"East? Ha! He might visit the East in the spirit, but never in the flesh."

"What do you mean?" cried the girl, grim fear now gripping her heart.

"Mean? Why, I mean that your choice is dangling at the end of a rope, or will be in about an hour—as soon as the boys can get him out to Baldy Point."

"What! What for? You lie, Red Ryan! You lie!"

"Well, wait and see if he comes back. They caught him on your father's black mare and thought he stole it. I heard about it a couple of hours ago, but it was none of my affair. Besides, I love you, Rose, and I want you."

And he threw his arms around her.

"You coward! You brute! You cur! Let me go—let me go! Dad! Dad! Let me go, I tell you!"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to ride to Baldy Point!"

Perhaps it isn't too late. Maybe I can get there in time!"

"No, you don't! I won't let you go! It's too late now, anyway!"

He strove to hold her, but he might as well have tried to restrain an infuriated tiger. The blood was fairly boiling in her veins, heated by the hatred for the coward before her, and by the love she bore the man she hoped to save.

"It's no use, I tell you!" shouted Ryan as she dashed out of the door and to his horse at the post. "They've had time to string up twenty like him!"

But his words were lost on the girl. She had sprung into the saddle and urged the horse out of the cañon.

Reaching the plateau above, she headed the animal toward Baldy Point, a distance of twenty miles, mostly over the prairies, but partly through several gullies, deep and treacherous, while a stream would have to be forded.

She crouched as low as possible on the horse's back, so that her body would not act as an impediment in the wind; the tears were blinding her, but her teeth were tightly clenched, and she whispered encouraging words to her mount. Could she make it?

A slight rain began to fall. Mile after mile she covered, the animal bearing up nobly under the fast pace, but when half the distance had been traversed she could feel the heaving sides beneath her knees and knew the speed must be slackened.

Her mind was a turmoil of terror. She began to pray; between her prayers she urged the faithful animal on. But now his step grew less steady, and the girl's tears flowed afresh. She implored, supplicated, and commanded the animal not to fail her. She patted his neck; she leaned forward and kissed his mane; she cried aloud to him.

But the pace had been too hard at the start. The animal began to breathe

ponderously, his legs wobbled, and finally, with an almost human cry, he sank to the ground, completely exhausted.

The girl shrieked in agony. Her hair was disarranged, and her eyes wild with fear.

The fall of the horse bruised but did not hurt her. She sprang to her feet, and tried to urge the animal to do likewise; but nature had been overexerted—the beast lay as though dead, except for the heaving sides.

The girl started to run. She reached the creek, and plunged in recklessly. Up the side of the gully she plodded, her shoes covered with mud, her dress soaked, and her hands and arms scratched by the brambles through which she fought her way.

She prayed aloud, and staggered on, her muscles strained to the utmost. But her will was of iron, and she continued to forge ahead, now sobbing her lover's name in broken tones, now calling on Heaven to provide some delay in the hanging and give her strength to finish her journey.

But there is a limit to human endurance. After tottering forward for another mile Rose Sanderson collapsed and fell in a heap, still calling aloud her lover's name. Then she became unconscious.

### III.

BEFORE the determined cavalcade, their prisoner in the center, had reached Baldy Point they had picked up, en route, seven or eight cowboys and miners who wanted to be in at the finish. They viewed the supposed horse thief with interest, for though he had committed an unpardonable act, he had taken a big risk, and his nerve appealed to them.

Again, he showed no signs of "caving in," but rode with his eyes to the front, his face set, as though carved in stone. His hat was gone, and his hair was tossed by the wind.

He had tried to convince them that his horse had bolted of its own accord, and that he

had had no intention of trying to escape, but his assertions were received with doubting laughs. He could have stopped the animal, but had let it run on.

The Point reached, the horsemen dismounted and waited patiently for the ceremonies to begin. Big Bill was the leader, and took it upon himself to do the talking.

"This community has been afflicted by your kind much too often lately," he began. "Horse stealing has got to stop, and we are going to see that it is stopped. You won't confess that you stole the mare, but we believe Red Ryan before we do you, because we've known him quite a while. You are a stranger in these parts, and the evidence is strong enough against you to do away with ceremonies. But we'll give you five minutes to have your say if you want to talk. Maybe you want to send word to some one."

Travers's arms were bound behind his back. Hank stood by with the noose in his hands, the other end having been thrown over the limb above. The rest of the men had drawn their guns.

The Easterner looked from one to the other, but saw no hope in any face.

"Men," he said in a low, even voice, which trembled, not from fear, but from the injustice of his position, "we all make mistakes. You are making a great big one now. It is true I am a stranger in these parts, but I have my reasons for being here. Sanderson is a friend of mine, and I did not steal his horse. I was on my way to Badger on an errand for him—an errand whose purport I cannot divulge. If I leave any word at all, it is, please to tell him I tried my best to fulfill my promise to him, and would have done so had it not been for Red Ryan. Red Ryan is a liar and a coward, and if I asked a favor before I am strung up it would be to allow me to meet him man to man. But he is not here; he has gone, afraid to face me at the end.

"He lied when he said I stole the horse,

but I will not tell you why. It is a private matter. I wish to leave a written message, if I may. Just a word or two to Sanderson's daughter. She is my sweetheart, and was to have been my wife in a few months."

"What?" exclaimed Big Bill doubtingly.

"I'm telling you the truth," continued Travers calmly. "If you men were not so hasty, and would wait until I could send for her, I could prove I am innocent."

Several of the crowd moved uneasily. The sincerity of the stranger's appeal made them doubt his guilt. Hank, however, remained unmoved, and placed the noose over his head.

"If we wait and give you any more time you'll be apt to try to give us the slip again," he said harshly. "Want to say anything more?"

"Nothing, if you are not willing to give me a little time—say till tomorrow morning."

"What brought you out here?" asked Big Bill, hesitating to give the word to string up the stranger, but still not wishing it to be noticed that he doubted his own convictions.

"I came to find a certain person," replied Travers, "an uncle, who came out here during the first rush to the goldfields. Perhaps some of you men may have heard of him. It may be, however, that he is dead. His name is, or was, Playfair."

"What!"

Big Bill roared the word; his eyes opened wider than his mouth, and with a rush that would have discounted a maddened bull he threw his powerful arms around the stranger's neck and nearly choked him to death.

"What!" he yelled again. "Playfair! Why, I'm Playfair!"

Travers disengaged himself and looked unbelievably at the man before him.

"You?" he gasped.

"Yes. And are you Jimmie Travers, my

sister's boy?"

"Yes. I'm Jim Travers."

The funeral procession was now turned into an hilarious reception to Big Bill's nephew—Big Bill, whose family name had been lost years ago among the mining camps and never found, even when he gave up mining and became a rancher.

Travers was allowed to go to Badger and fulfill his secret mission, but he was accompanied by no less than fifteen of Big

Bill's friends, headed by Big Bill himself.

And the following day the body of horsemen, while making their way back to Sanderson's, came across a badly tattered girl in calico who was still endeavoring to reach Baldy Point, and whose eyes were swollen and red. When she was taken into the arms of Travers words cannot paint the expressions that suffused her face or the feelings that filled her bosom.